**National Press Release – to be released across India**

*6 November 2016 – for immediate release*

**Swarna Bharat Party asks Mr Modi to abrogate all unnecessary free speech restrictions in India**

Mr Sanjay Sonawani, President of Swarna Bharat Party, India’s only liberal party, said that the NDTV incident will signal to the world that India does not respect freedom of speech. The incident is, however, symptomatic of a strong anti-free speech bias found in many Indian laws.

The Cable TV laws under which the 1-day suspension has been meted out to NDTV do not have well-considered options to address any genuine national security concerns. Instead, the law gives the government broad ranging powers to punish a cable TV organisation.

The Modi government, at a minimum, should provide for independent judicial review over any punitive decisions taken under the *Programme Code under Cable TV Network Rules, 1994*,before such decisions are implemented. In any event, there are many other targeted ways to deal with genuine security concerns, such as identifying and prosecuting specific individuals.

A key concern is that the *Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act of 1995* and the *Cable Television Network Rules, 1994* (both created by the Congress) provide excessive powers to interfere in speech. The purpose of such laws (even assuming these are necessary) should be limited to essential technical matters and consumer protection. While there can be some regulation regarding classification of programs and providing information to parents to guide their children’s viewing, this goal can be achieved through light touch co-regulation. The cable industry can be asked to supply rating standards and operate within its own agreed code of conduct.

Mr Sonawani called upon Mr Modi to abrogate free speech restrictions not just in cable TV laws but across the board, as detailed in the SBP manifesto. Such laws have infantalised India and curtailed critically needed debate and education. They have set India on the path to becoming a banana republic. India now ranks 133 out of 180 – well below Bhutan, Nepal, Afghanistan, Zimbabwe, Indonesia and Palestine – in the latest World Press Freedom Index released by Reporters Without Borders.

A free country deserves absolute freedom of speech. India should lead the world and make India a Heaven of Freedom that Tagore wrote about a hundred years ago. Let India become a free country. It is not good enough to just be an independent country.

Mr Sonawani added that it is hypocritical for the Congress to make noises re: the NDTV issue for it has led the charge against free speech since 1950, including by truncating essential protections in the Constitution. Let the Congress also commit to supporting the removal of all unnecessary restrictions on speech.

*End*

**Notes for Editors**

SBP is India’s only liberal party, committed to defending liberty and promoting prosperity.

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