

India's tax officials at BBC offices for 2nd day in a row

February 15, 2023

Online Desk: Searches at the BBC's offices in Delhi and Mumbai continued for the second straight day as Income Tax officials investigated UK's national broadcaster, weeks after it aired a controversial documentary on Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the deadly Gujarat riots in 2002. The BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), in an email to employees, urged all but its broadcast department to work from home. "Employees can refrain from answering questions on personal income if asked so. They should answer other salary-related queries," said the broadcaster, advising its staff to cooperate with the officials and "answer questions comprehensively". As the searches raised questions, the US said it was "aware of the survey" but "not in a position to offer judgement".

State Department spokesperson Ned Price said: "We support the importance of free press around the world. We continue to highlight the importance of freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief as human rights that contribute to strengthening democracies around the world. It has strengthened this democracy here in this country. It has strengthened India's democracy." There has been no official response from the UK. Tax officials who started the "survey" on Tuesday morning will today focus on accounts and question the senior management of the BBC, sources said.

Tax authorities are investigating allegations of unauthorized tax benefits, tax evasion, "significant" diversion of profits and non-compliance of rules by the BBC, said the sources. The BBC had been served notices in the past but had been "defiant and non-compliant", they claimed. On Tuesday, visuals showed some employees arguing with the officials, accusing them of barging in without a warrant. The officials used the keyword "tax" to search for information on the desktops after asking employees to log in, a BBC journalist told NDTV.

"The Income Tax Authorities remain at the BBC offices in New Delhi and Mumbai. Many staff have now left the building, but some have been asked to remain and are continuing to cooperate with the ongoing enquiries," a BBC News Press Team tweeted at 10:26 pm last night. "We are supporting our staff during this time and continue to hope to have this situation resolved as soon as possible. Our output and journalism continues as normal and we are committed to serving our audiences in India," the post added. Opposition parties have accused the government of targeting the BBC over a two-part series that was critical of PM Modi's handling of riots that swept Gujarat in 2002, when he was Chief Minister of the state. The government has slammed the documentary as "hostile propaganda and anti-India garbage".

The BBC series, "India: The Modi Question", was taken down from public platforms last month. The Centre used emergency powers under IT Rules to block YouTube videos and Twitter posts sharing links to the documentary. Protesting what they called censorship, opposition leaders and students organised public screenings of the documentary, which led to many campus clashes.

The ruling BJP slammed the BBC for what it called "venomous, shallow and agenda-driven reporting" and said the Income Tax department should be allowed to do its job. "If they have not done anything illegal, then what's the worry?" said BJP spokesperson Gaurav Bhatia. Last week, the Supreme Court rejected a request for a complete ban on BBC in India over the documentary, calling the petition "entirely misconceived".