

Indian media's high and mighty on wrong side of scam

2G spectrum scandal has become too hot to handle for the journalists themselves as it allegedly involves two of their own.

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- Published: 00:00 November 23, 2010

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New Delhi: It's all in the open as the Indian media runs for cover. The 2G spectrum scam, which till now was restricted to politicians and businessmen, has become too hot to handle for the journalists themselves as it allegedly involves two of their own.

The Open magazine has put the audio recordings and transcripts of conversations between corporate lobbyist Nira Radia of Vaishnavi Communications and her friends in the media on its website. Radia was known for her closeness to the sacked telecom minister, Andimuthu Raja.

The transcripts feature *Hindustan Times* editorial director Vir Sanghvi and NDTV's group editor, Barkha Dutt, who can be heard promising to fix things politically for Radia and her corporate clients, as well as her political cronies.

Sanghvi, who pens a weekly column for the Sunday edition of the *Hindustan Times*, allegedly took notes from Radia on what to point out in his column, even as she asked him to write against Anil Ambani, chairman of the Reliance Group and the high court decision on the gas pricing controversy.

Portfolio discussions

On the other hand, Barkha Dutt assured Radia of getting Gulam Nabi Azad, the Congress party's general secretary in charge of Tamil Nadu, to talk to Muthuvel Karunanidhi, the chief minister of Tamil Nadu, to get the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam portfolios in the cabinet fixed according to the wishes of his daughter Kanimozhi.

In a major triumph for the IT department, Radia's phone lines were kept under surveillance for a few months between 2008 and 2009. The excerpted portions, which have now been made public, were recorded between May 11 and July 11, 2009.

The contents have not only embarrassed the media, but have also exposed how frequent hobnobbing with influential politicians gives journalists a taste of power and often gets them seats of influence.

There are several journalists-turned-politicians or journalists-cum-politicians who are active in the media. The names that instantly come to mind include Chandan Mitra, the managing director of the English daily, *The Pioneer*, who is an elected Rajya Sabha MP from the Bhartiya Janata Party. Rajiv Shukla, also a Rajya Sabha MP from the Congress, writes columns for newspapers. Similarly, several regional parties have editors and journalists 'placed' in the right precincts.

The transcripts of conversations between Radia and the journalists are damning proof that they're not above using their clout with lobbyists or to assist them. The sleazy cosiness suggests that everyone expects favours to be returned. These favours come in various forms and sizes, from free trips abroad, to free stays at presidential suites in swanky 5-star hotels. Also in some cases politicians help out visiting journalists, along with their families, by providing government guest houses at very low rates. Others dole out free all-expenses paid holidays to writers and campaigners.

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