

Govt Bans Popular Toon Porn Site Savitabhabhi.com; Mounting Concern Over Censorship

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India's government has banned popular toon porn site Savitabhabhi.com. According to documents seen by contentSutra.com, the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) of the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, has asked all Internet Service Providers to block the website in a communication dated 3 June.

The Controller of Certifying Authorities (CCA), a government agency under the Department of Information Technology, is the agency that is entrusted under the IT Act to block websites. N. Vijayaditya, of the CCA, confirmed the development. "There were several complaints against the site. We have taken action under the relevant sections of the IT Act and blocked the site," he said. When asked if the agency will give a chance to the owners of the site to defend themselves, he said nobody has come forward so far with such a request. He said he could not say if the agency will pursue legal action against the operators of the website.

There has been mounting concern over upcoming amendments to the IT Act that gives the government absolute powers to block any website without a hearing or assigning any reasons. In a recent column in The Hindu, **media critic Sevanti Ninan laid down several concerns** arising from the absolutist rules that will soon have the power of law. "What about a right to be heard before the blocking? There is none," she wrote.

Launched in March 2008, Savitabhabhi.com is an adult cartoon strip featuring a married Indian woman's sexual adventures. Bhabhi is Hindi for sister-in-law. It quickly acquired a cult following with its funny plot lines and the uniqueness of having an Indian setting in a porn strip. The strip received much press last year, from Indian (**Mint**, **Tehelka**) and international (**The Telegraph**, **The Independent**) media outlets. **According to Alexa.com**, Savitabhabhi is the 82nd-most-visited Indian website, attracting more visitors than Bseindia.com, the website of the Bombay Stock Exchange. In February, when Mint interviewed the anonymous creator of the strip, the site ranked 45th in India.

The site's popularity did not come without its perils. The portrayal of a married Indian woman as wildly promiscuous raised the hackles of many in a largely conservative nation. One of them, Bangalore-based N. Vijayashankar, who describes himself as a "techno-legal information security consultant", waged a sustained campaign against Savitabhabhi, complaining to the government's Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-IN) as well as the Director General of Police in Karnataka in October last year. "Cartoons are a more participative medium. Videos don't do as much damage. When a child is watching a cartoon, he imagines himself as the character. This has a deeply corrupting influence on our youngsters. This, apart from the fact that an Indian name was being used in such an obscene cartoon, is what led me to make the complaint," Vijayashankar said. "A child will see a Savitabhabhi among his relatives." When asked if there was any scientific basis to his thesis that pornographic cartoons did more damage to young people than pornographic videos, he said that was his own psychological interpretation. (Vijayashankar has no training in psychology.)

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The law could come to Savitabhabhi's rescue, according to Pawan Duggal, cyber law expert and an advocate at the Supreme Court of India. "Under Section 67 of the IT Act of 2000, publishing or transmitting obscene electronic information is punishable with up to five years' imprisonment and Rs1 lakh in fine. The creators of Savitabhabhi can challenge the ban, arguing that it is an expression of their thoughts and what is expressed is not lascivious. When there is so many explicit pornographic content easily available, why should they be singled out?"

"It is a cultural cum legal issue. The courts will have to decide whether Savitabhabhi is a lascivious site or not. Kamasutra and the sculptures of Khajuraho are far more explicit but not considered obscene. So they do have an argument," Duggal said.

The creators of Savitabhabhi are known only by their screen names. In an email interview with contentSutra, the main brain behind the site, who goes by the handle Deshmukh, said they were exploring legal options. "We are talking to our lawyers and trying to figure out our options. The initial reaction is since the site does not pose any threat to India's national security and is not illegal, it must be against some international treaty to block it. However, we are still working on the legal angle." Deshmukh said the creators of Savitabhabhi were based in the European Union and had not received any communication about their site getting banned. The domain is registered in the US, Deshmukh said. The site used to get more than a million visitors every week before the ban, he added.

"Wow, India has now joined the elite club of China, Iran, North Korea and suchlike in the area of Internet censorship," said graphic novelist Sarnath Banerjee. Efforts to reverse the ban have already sprung up on the Internet. A website, Savesavita.com, attempts to channelize support and action against censorship.

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