

Degenerated press club invites unwanted controversy



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A recent controversy erupted following a social media post by a television journalist, associated with Gauhati Press Club (earlier Guwahati Press Club) in northeast India, brought many questions for the media body, which invited a minister in Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's cabinet for a cultural program, but shockingly 'faced derogatory comments'. The particular post was generated by the journalist working for a satellite news channel owned by the CM's family, and his outburst that the State health & family welfare minister Ashok Singhal disrespected a delegation from GPC, was taken seriously. According to the journalist, the GPC delegation went to invite Singhal for a forthcoming Bhaona performance in the city. During the brief interaction, the minister allegedly questioned the necessity of a press club to organise a Bhaona. Moreover, the minister termed the native traditional performing art-form as not being secular in nature.

The issue suddenly had gone viral as many individuals, outfits, media outlets and opposition political leaders started making a hue & cry demanding an apology from the minister. Some even termed Singhal as a 'non-Assamese' who has no idea about the religious performing art form (Ankiya Bhaona), developed by the sixteenth century Vaishnavite saint, scholar and philosopher Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev and his prime disciple Madhavdev to enact plays primarily with mythological characters. However, CM Sarma opined that he did not believe Singhal could make such an immature comment. It was followed by a formal clarification from Singhal denying the allegation that he made such derogatory remarks regarding the Bhaona.

Later in a social media post, Singhal stated that it was completely ‘false and fabricated’ after acknowledging that a group of scribes visited him to invite for the cultural program, but a fictitious story was generated by a particular journalist. Singhal tendered an apology citing the reason that he did not want any unnecessary debate over the matter, but he stuck to his stand that he never made any derogatory remark on Bhaona. The issue should have been resolved after the minister’s apology and the GPC was seemingly happy with the development (though it was half-hearted), but soon the city press club made a puzzling statement that the meeting with the minister was not prescheduled. A statement in Assamese language, endorsed by GPC president Susmita Goswami and general secretary Sanjay Rai, claimed that they came to know about the meeting with Singhal from social media only.

The social media users questioned why the particular minister was invited even though he is not in charge of IPR or cultural ministry? Moreover, why did the GPC delegation approach the concerned minister at his residence in the evening hours (but not in the Secretariat)? More precisely, why would a minister make derogatory comments just to receive an invitation for any event? Was there any instigation and it was none other than a demand for some hefty donations from the minister, but somehow it was materialised? Why the GPC committee will not apologise to the media fraternity for the mess as the Bhaona titled ‘Gandharir Abhishap’ was already supported by the North East Zone Cultural Centre under the Union Ministry of Culture, New Delhi?

The media club, currently functioning illegally from Ambari archaeological site, claims that it has nearly one thousand members, but many city-based scribes publicly stated that they are not associated with the GPC. The club, which celebrated the golden jubilee year of its existence in 2022, but its closing function is yet to be organised. Many conscious citizens now demand to relocate the press club so that the rich archaeological site could be preserved for research works. The archaeology department claims that the ruins of Ambari reflect the period of Sunga-Kushana dynasty. So the Ambari site, which attracts daily visitors from different parts of India, needs to be made encroachment-free, with no sympathy to the illegal occupiers including the press club.

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