

SBS bullying allegations spark calls for transparency and ‘justice’



Former SBS reporter Pallavi Jain's lawsuit against the network has resurfaced bullying at the multicultural broadcaster and prompted calls for greater transparency.

By Charlotte Grieve
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An award-winning Australian journalist and prominent Hindu community leader have called on the multicultural broadcaster SBS to release an internal report into workplace harassment, after allegations a former staff member was bullied then sacked.

The Age and Sydney Morning Herald reported on Monday former journalist Pallavi Jain was sacked from SBS in December 2019 after making three bullying complaints against former Hindi program executive producer Kumud Merani. Now, she's fighting to have her job reinstated through the Federal Court.

A number of former SBS journalists went public last year with allegations of bullying at the multicultural network. Among them was award-winning journalist Antoinette Lattouf, who is now a senior reporter at Network 10 and founder of Media Diversity Australia.

Ms Lattouf said she remains traumatised by the treatment she endured 15 years ago as a junior reporter, adding the systems and culture at the network had failed to “protect people with less power”.

“I actually had someone in a very senior position say to me you weren’t the only one [who was bullied] there were many before you and many after you,” she said. “It’s disheartening when an organisation like SBS is fully aware of repeat offenders and yet they stay on and have illustrious careers.”

SBS responded by hiring barrister Deborah Dinner to conduct an investigation into the workplace culture in news and current affairs. More than 20 people were interviewed but the findings have not been made public.

Ms Lattouf said Ms Jain’s case provided an opportunity for SBS managing director James Taylor, who was appointed in 2018 and had apologised personally to her for the bullying, to prove his leadership and called for him to release the report.

“I think we need more disclosure and more transparency,” she said. “A good first step is to release the findings of the internal independent investigation into the bullying and harassment.”

“Until you have a transparent and open conversation and an acknowledgement of wrongdoing, even if it is in the past, only then will it translate to audiences but also former and current employees.”

Multiple former staff have told *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* the review did not encapsulate SBS’ non-English language teams, including SBS Hindi. The former staff have described a “discrepancy” with how these teams are treated, in terms of pay, conditions and culture that has created “second class citizens” within SBS.

Dr Yadu Singh, who is President of Federation of Indian Associations of NSW, echoed calls to release the report but also said Ms Jain should be reinstated. SBS has said it will “vigorously defend” the case beginning this week.

“SBS headquarters should swallow their pride. Pallavi Jain should receive fairness, justice. They should bring her back and cancel the termination,” he said. “There is a problem within SBS. It’s a cultural problem.

“The managing director should be told by the government or Mr Paul Fletcher to fix up the problem.”

Ms Merani declined repeated requests for comment.

SBS declined to answer how much money had been spent on Ms Jain’s case or whether it planned to release the workplace harassment report. A spokesman pointed to a previous statement that denied bullying at SBS.

Communications Minister Paul Fletcher's office declined an interview and a spokesman said: "These are matters for the SBS board and management."