

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Asia > India > Fundamentalism, communalism, extreme right, secularism (India) > **Shameful Attack On Artistic Freedom : Stop hounding Taslima**

Shameful Attack On Artistic Freedom : Stop hounding Taslima

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See also, in the section "The Left": [A Forgotten History – From Rashid Jahan to Taslima Nasreen, the CPI \(M\)](#)

West Bengal's Left Front government, already reeling under the ignominy of Nandigram, has earned yet more embarrassment by throwing Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen out of Kolkata. Tossed since from Jaipur to Delhi to Haryana, Ms Nasreen has been forced into an emotionally insecure nomadic existence even as the sangh parivar cynically tries to exploit her plight to its narrow advantage.

Neither the state governments involved, nor the Centre, seems inclined to defend Ms Nasreen's right to live with dignity and without fear anywhere in India. There are reports that the Centre is discreetly nudging her to leave India-at least for awhile. Although Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee says India will give her shelter, the offer comes with a gracelessly stated condition: she must do nothing to "hurt the sentiments of our people"-whatever that means.

The episode raises serious questions about artistic freedom, fundamental rights of belief, expression and association, and the state's duty to protect them. One doesn't have to be an admirer of Ms Nasreen to defend her rights. This writer is aware that she's considered mediocre and often writes provocatively. Yet, banning her work or banishing her is not the solution.

The West Bengal government wants to minimise its role in expelling Ms Nasreen from Kolkata, one day after a violent rally held by the

little-known, but originally Congress-backed, All-India Minority Forum, which brought the army to the city for the first time since 1992. Some Left Front leaders claim she left Kolkata of her own will and is welcome to return.

This just won't wash. Ms Nasreen's departure from Kolkata followed an unambiguous statement by CPM state secretary Biman Bose that the LF had welcomed her because two Central ministers pleaded for her, but that her presence has since created law-and-order problems, and hence she should leave West Bengal.

Mr Bose hastily retracted the statement, but meanwhile, reports The Indian Express, the city police had asked two businessmen belonging to the Rajasthan Foundation (HM Bangur and Sandeep Bhutoria) to "facilitate" her exit, which they did. She discovered she was headed for Jaipur only when a police officer handed over the ticket to her. Ms Nasreen's move was certainly not voluntary. She's clear that Kolkata is her home and she wants to return there.

The CPM kept its own Left Front allies in the dark about its decision to expel Ms Nasreen. The allies have termed the decision "shameful" and "another blot on our name". The CPM will find it hard to deny that it so decided because it was rattled by the ferocity of the AIMF rally, held as a protest against the Nandigram violence and to demand that Ms Nasreen's visa be revoked. The AIMF used Nandigram as a cover and tried to give the issue a communal twist by claiming that CPM cadres had specially targeted Muslims there.

This was a canard. More than half of Nandigram's victims were indeed Muslims. But then, two-thirds of Nandigram's population is Muslim too. Muslims lead both the CPM and its rival, Bhumi Ucched Pratirodh Committee. The AIMF's real ire was directed at Ms Nasreen because of her past writings, some of which it terms "anti-Islamic"-although it's unlikely that many Front members have read them.

It's easy to deplore the AIMF. But the CPM doesn't come out of the episode smelling of roses. It speaks poorly of its adherence to secularism and other Constitutional values that it should cave in to mob pressure for censorship,

or that it should bend over backwards to guard its “Muslim vote” by expelling Ms Nasreen. Muslim opinion has been moving away from the LF since disclosures by the Sachar Committee about the community’s abysmal status in West Bengal, and because of the Rizvanur Rehman case (which exposed class and religious biases in the police).

Muslims form more than 25 percent of West Bengal’s population, but their representation in government employment is an appalling 2.1 percent. (The respective ratios even for Gujarat are 9.2 and 5.4 percent). Instead of remedying this failure of inclusion through purposive affirmative action, the Front resorted to gimmicks of the kind that it itself criticises other parties for, including pandering to religious bigots.

However, the Left’s timidity in the face of religious hardliners pales in comparison beside the breath-taking duplicity of the Bharatiya Janata Party and its allies. The BJP parades itself as a saviour of Ms Nasreen and a defender of the freedom of expression. It even demands that she be granted refugee status because she’s fleeing persecution by religious fanatics.

In reality, the sangh parivar is merely capitalising on the fact that Ms Nasreen’s adversaries are Muslims; and that she wrote a novel on the persecution of Bangladesh’s Hindu minority following the Babri mosque’s demolition. This gives the parivar a chance to indulge in Islam-bashing by claiming that that faith is uniquely, incorrigibly intolerant.

However, the parivar vilifies Islam. It has nothing but contempt for the right to free expression, in particular, artistic freedom. It is inherently suspicious of originality and creativity, and of bold experimentation with art-forms that delve deep into the human or social condition. It fears freedom and rational inquiry.

Not just the parivar’s goons in the Vishva Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal, but even the BJP’s most respectable parliamentary leaders are instinctively censorship-oriented and prone to demand bans on anything they don’t approve. If the government doesn’t ban the books, paintings

or films and plays they label “anti-Hindu” or “anti-national”, the parivar itself terrorises the concerned writer, artist, playwright or filmmaker.

This has happened so often to distinguished artists like M. F. Husain, filmmakers like Anand Patwardhan and Deepa Mehta (of Water and Fire fame), to authors of countless books pertaining to Shivaji, and to exhibitions on historical or contemporary themes, that it has become an inexorable, entirely predictable, pattern.

Students like Chandramohan and scholars like Shivaji Panikkar of MS University in Baroda, and actresses such as Khushboo, have been victims of the same phenomenon. So have publications like Outlook, Mahanagar and Deccan Herald.

The parivar has not only imposed its fanatical will upon every performing art and every form of cultural expression. It has often succeeded in bullying the state into conceding its demands to the point of abdicating its responsibility to protect the life and limb of its citizens.

Husain’s case is a painful reminder of the Indian state’s failure to provide security to a 92 year-old painter so he can return home from self-imposed exile and live in freedom from threats to his life by Hindutva bigots bent on misrepresenting his work, and questioning his deep respect for all faiths, based on spirituality. Husain is a victim of mob censorship, as well as the state’s cowardice in the face of communal bullies and religious bigots.

True, it’s not only the Hindu fanatics of the parivar who demand censorship and bans. Groups that claim to be speaking in the name of Sikhs, Muslims, Christians or Jains also do the same. Typically, the state yields to them; indeed, it acts as if it had granted them the “right” to vandalise works of art and criminally assault writers. The cases of The Last Temptation of Christ and The Da Vinci Code, or Salman Rushdie and the Dera Sacha Sauda are instances of this.

All such groups effectively exercise veto power over society and the state by invoking the “hurt sentiments” of a particular community. So we end up defining tolerance as the sum-total of different intolerances, as Amartya Sen so aptly

put it. This is not the sign of a deeply democratic, mature and balanced society which genuinely respects difference and the right to dissent.

Of course, some books or works of art do hurt, upset or even scandalise holders of particular beliefs. But banning them is generally incompatible with their authors' freedom of belief and expression. If they are indeed scurrilous or defamatory, the remedy lies in filing civil and criminal lawsuits, which would lead to appropriate penalties-including a ban in the exceptional case.

In any case, private groups or individuals have no right to usurp the functions of the courts in deciding what is permissible and what is impermissible by virtue of being gratuitously offensive, vulgar, egregiously scandalous, or calculated to incite violence or to insult and humiliate. Such groups only impoverish social life by regimenting it and imposing conformity or homogeneity on it. They simply have no business to dictate uniform norms, whether in respect of sexual preference, dress, religious practices or social behaviour.

Societies greatly enrich themselves if they respect difference and celebrate diversity-as India did during the best, most tolerant periods of its history. This means accepting the unusual, the irreverent, the quirky-even if some of us find it distasteful. In the last analysis, we don't have to read the books we don't like, or eat things that we find "impure" or "bad", but others relish. Let a thousand flowers bloom!

P.S.

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