

DON'T LET THEM SILENCE TASLIMA NASREEN - STAND UP FOR THE SAKE OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN INDIA:

An SACW compilation of statements and opinions (27 November – 6 December 2007)

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Indian Express
November 27, 2007

IS THIS A MOBOCRACY?
by Ritu Menon

Taslima Nasreen, it seems, cannot do anything right. Her attackers, however, are deemed to be in the 'right'.

Looking back on the events in Kolkata over the last week, one may be forgiven for thinking that we had stepped right through Alice's looking glass into her topsy-turvy wonderland. A writer, sitting in her home and minding her own business, suddenly becomes the focus of out and out criminal activity on the city streets, ostensibly because of some connection to the goings-on in Nandigram - but nobody quite knows what. To the best of my knowledge, she hasn't opened her mouth on that issue, in fact she has been remarkably low-key for several months now, having earlier been the direct target of a similar criminal attack on her in Hyderabad. Taslima Nasreen, it seems, cannot do anything right, not even if it means doing nothing.

Her attackers, on the other hand, are deemed to be in the 'right', even though they have broken the law, damaged public property, caused grievous losses and wilfully acted against the public good. They remain free to spring yet more violence on the public while Taslima is unceremoniously shunted out of the city because she's a 'threat' to public security and peace.

Yet she has not uttered a single word, let alone cast a single stone. The Queen of Hearts would be well pleased. As are assorted I-told-you-so politicians of various hues in our benighted polity. Like AIDWA's Shyamali Gupta, who sanctimoniously declared, "We respect freedom of expression but one has no right to hurt the sentiments of others. One should exercise restraint." Or, like NCP's Farooq Abdullah who has decreed that if Taslima wishes to stay in the country, she should say sorry. Sorry, India, for being who I am.

These days, one could be forgiven for thinking that the only people whose freedom of expression the state is willing to protect are those who resort to violence in the name of religion - Hindu, Muslim or Christian. (Let's not forget what happened in progressive Kerala when Mary Roy tried to stage 'Jesus Christ, Superstar' at her school. Or when cinema halls screened The Da Vinci Code.) Indeed, not only does it protect their freedom of expression, it looks like it also protects their freedom to criminally assault and violate. Not a single perpetrator of such violence has been apprehended and punished in the last decade or more that has seen an alarming rise in such street or mob censorship. Not in the case of Deepa Mehta's film; not in the attack on Ajeet Cour's Academy of Fine Arts in Delhi; not in M.F. Husain's case; not in the violation of the Bhandarkar Institute; not at MS University in Baroda; not in the assault on Taslima Nasreen in Hyderabad this August. I could list many, many more.

We would do well to remember that the more regressive the state is in response to attacks like this, the more aggressive the mob will become. The simultaneous absence and presence of the state at these moments entrenches the vulnerability of the individual while at the same time ensuring the 'invincibility' of the mob. By their very nature, mobs form and dissolve, disappearing as an entity that can be charged; individuals, on the other hand, are isolated and easily targeted.

Does this mean they should be removed from the scene, like Taslima Nasreen? If say, Mahasweta Devi or Aparna Sen or Sunil Gangopadhyay were under threat, would the West Bengal government have sent them packing? Would we have been told that ensuring their protection is the Centre's responsibility? (We shouldn't be too surprised, though - remember, West Bengal has the dubious distinction of being the only government in a good long while to have actually banned a work - yes, Nasreen's Dwikhondito in 2003).

So what are ordinary people to do, if we cannot depend on the state to protect not only our freedom of expression, but our freedom of movement and of association as well? All three rights are subsumed under the fundamental rights guaranteed in the Constitution, but it seems we will, once more, have to move the courts in order to reinforce them.

In August 2007, Women's WORLD (India), a free-speech network of writers, publishers and critics, and Asmita, a women's resource centre in Hyderabad, filed a writ petition in the Hyderabad High Court against the four MLAs who led the attack on Taslima Nasreen in that city and against the two parties, the Majlis Ittehadul Muslimeen and Majlis Bachao Tehreek. The petition sought the removal of the four legislators and the cancellation of the registration of both political parties with the Election Commission of India. The grounds are misconduct, and the primary issue is the public conduct of elected representatives. The case is being heard, although - and this is a matter of some concern - there is no code of conduct prescribed for elected representatives during their term of office, in India.

The issues before us in this, and every other case of street/mob censorship that has come up in the recent past, are those of public misconduct, vandalism and criminal activity that no government so far, either state or central, has dealt with summarily and effectively.

Rather than safeguarding and upholding the fundamental right to freedom of expression, all of us who try to exercise that freedom are told to mind our language. In much the same way that women who are vulnerable to rape are told to behave themselves, or stay at home.

The writer is a publisher and founding member of Women's WORLD, India

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<http://communalism.blogspot.com/2007/11/denying-taslma-nasreen-refuge-is.html>

DENYING TASLIMA NASREEN REFUGE IS AN AFFRONT TO INDIA'S PLURALIST CULTURE

by Madanjeet Singh [November 24, 2007]

I am shocked and ashamed as an Indian to learn that the Bengali poet and writer, Taslima Nasreen, the living embodiment of secular culture, has been compelled to move out of West Bengal, first to Jaipur and then to Delhi, because of her secular views.

It is deplorable that the authorities and the leading political parties, the Congress, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) and the CPI (M)-Ied Left Front Government are using unfortunate Taslima as the political shuttlecock with their ugly rackets of pseudo secularism. Their perfidious political maneuvers are clearly exposed by the recent violent events in Kolkota, the spark of which was ignited by a small group of protesters led by Ali (full name?), a Congress affiliated All India Minority Forum demanding cancellation of Nareen's Indian visa. The protest turned into a mayhem as the local CPM boss Bimal Bose threw oil into the fire of violence by stating that "Taslima Nasreen should leave West Bengla". Then realizing that this was contrary to the fundamental secular profession of his party, he hit the shuttlecock into the Congress court by explaining that "the state government does not have the authority to grant or cancel visa and only the Centre can do this and therefore let the Union Government take an appropriate decision on his issue." Then BJP, the viciously anti-Muslim organization that demolished the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya, suddenly became holier than thou by seizing upon Bose's comment to drive home that Left's commitment to freedom of expression was fake. "how can you ask her to leave West Bengal when she has been allowed to stay anywhere in India?" asked BJP leader VK Malhotra." Thus in order to gain political mileage, BJP hit the Taslima shuttlecock into the UPA court of both the Congress and the CPI (M)-Ied Left Front Governments by demanding that she be given permanent visa to stay in India, even if the communalists had to cut their noses to spite political adversaries.

The terrorists have arrogated to themselves the role of lawmakers, judges, and executioners of people whom they accuse of blasphemy and go around freely violating the human rights of artists, writers, filmmakers, scholars, and other cultural practitioners. Taslima Nasreen is among the victims. She had no option but to flee her country and take refuge in India, unaware that that the long arm of Al Qaeda network of International Islamic Front (IIF) and its subsidiaries as the Bangladesh-based Huji, Simi and Jamiat, would not spare her even in India. She was threatened by an Indian Taliban, Taqi Raza Khan, the head of the All India Ibtehad Council, who wants her beheaded (qatal) and has publicly offered Rs. Five lakhs to anyone who would carry out the execution because of her secular views. The bigots also passed a resolution to oust Nasreen from India "for her crime in attacking the Islamic Shariah laws."

Taslima Nasreen, was awarded the 2004 UNESCO-Madanjeet Singh Prize for the Promotion of Tolerance and Non-Violence by the UNESCO Director-General Koichiro Matsuura on behalf of an International Jury. The prize was established in 1995, marking Mahatma Gandhi's 125th birth anniversary and awarded on the United Nations' Day of Tolerance on 16 November. Taslima poignantly described her ordeal in the speech she delivered accepting the award at UNESCO headquarters in Paris which received a long and standing ovation: "Bangladesh", stated Nasreen,

"is a nation of more than 133 million, a country where 70 per cent of the people live below the poverty line, where more than half of the population cannot read and write. Nearly 40 million women have no access to education nor do they have the possibility of becoming independent. With the country's strong patriarchal tradition, women suffer unbearable inequalities and injustices. They are considered intellectually, morally, physically and psychologically inferior by religion, tradition, culture and customs. As a result, the fundamentalists refuse to tolerate any of my views. They could not tolerate my saying that the religious scriptures are out of time and out of place. They were upset at my saying that religious law, which discriminates against women, needs to be replaced by secular law and a uniform civil code. Hundreds of thousands of the extremists appeared on the streets and demanded my execution by hanging".

"Humankind is facing an uncertain future. In particular, the conflict is between two different ideas, secularism and fundamentalism. I don't agree with those who think the conflict is between two religions, namely Christianity and Islam, or Judaism and Islam. Nor do I think that this is a conflict between the East and the West. To me, this conflict is basically between modern, rational, logical thinking and irrational, blind faith. While some strive to go forward, others strive to go backward. It is a conflict between the future and the past, between innovation and tradition, between those who value freedom and those who do not. My pen is the weapon I use to fight for a secular humanism."

The Indian government's ambivalent response has emboldened the communal fanatics. Taslima Nasrin was again roughed up in Hyderabad by three legislators of the Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (MIM) and a mob led by them in the Press Club of where she was invited to release her book Lajjai (Shame), translated into Telugu. The book had nothing to do with offending Islam. It describes how the hooligans of Jamat-e-Islami of Bangladesh attacked Hindus and demolished their temples and set fire to their houses in retaliation to the demolition of Babri Masjid by the Hindutva fanatics. She condemns terrorism and tells how some fair-minded Hindus stood by Muslims when Hindu fanatics attacked them in India. And likewise the fair-minded Muslims protected the Hindu and other minorities in Bangladesh.

In Hyderabad, Taslima had just completed her engagement when about 20 MIM activists, led by MLAs Syed Ahmed Pasha Qadri, Afsar Khan and Moazzam Khan, barged into the conference hall. She looked in disbelief as they hurled abuses against her, demanding to know "who had mustered the guts to invite her to Hyderabad." Without further warning, they began throwing books, bouquets, chairs, and whatever they could lay their hands on at her. A number of people sustained injuries in the scuffle including journalists trying to shield her. One of the MLAs threatened that "if Taslima comes to Hyderabad again, she will be beheaded". Nasrin escaped unhurt though she was badly shaken. Later she made a categorical statement that "if Islam stands for such hooliganism I will fight the evil till my death".

The inability of the authorities to apprehend and punish the criminals out to kill Taslima and hesitation in giving her permanent resident in India is not a political issue. It is against all ethical and traditional norms of Indian

morality of protecting a refugee in distress as was done in the case of the Dalai Lama. The expulsion of Taslima Nasreen by the CPI (M)-led Left Front Government from West Bengal (which she calls her second home) is an affront to India's pluralist, secular culture and traditional multiculturalism. It is all the more deplorable if it is true that the decision was taken in consultation with the Central Government which must abide by India's ancient cultural traditions. In the Sibi Jataka, painted in the 2nd - 5th century at the Ajanta Caves, the king of the Sibis offered an equal weight of his own flesh to save a dove that a hawk wanted to kill as its prey.

Excerpts from Madanjeet Singh's forthcoming book, Cultures and Vultures. He is a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador and Founder, South Asia Foundation.

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The Times of India
27 Nov 2007

EDITORIAL: CITIZEN TASLIMA

Those on the look out for ironies in politics would savour this. The BJP, not an unqualified supporter of the right to freedom of expression, is rooting for Taslima Nasreen whereas the CPM, which claims to uphold secular values, wants her to keep off Kolkata.

The BJP wants the government to treat Taslima, on the run from Islamic fundamentalists in Bangladesh and West Bengal, as a political refugee. The CPM would perhaps prefer to reserve its opinion on the matter. The party appears to believe that support for Taslima could lead to a loss of Muslim votes in West Bengal.

All secular-minded people would agree with the BJP in this matter even if the party's decision has a political design to it. Taslima has been living in India since 2004. Islamic fundamentalists hate her and have physically assaulted her many times.

The open display of hostility from the religious right has prevented the government from acceding to her request for Indian citizenship. This should not be the case. Our Constitution gives pride of place to secularism and protects the right to free speech.

Of course, it is not an unqualified right. But fringe radical elements in the society can object to anything and everything. They have low tolerance levels and take the law in their hands at the first instance. More often than not, the Indian state acquiesces to their demands. Such tame surrender by the state has added muscle to their activities and isolated moderate opinion.

The Left Front government in West Bengal has also followed the same pattern and gave in to pressure from Muslim fundamentalists. Unfortunately, such acts give credence to the accusation of the political right that secularism is a euphemism for 'minority appeasement'.

There is every reason now for all secular-minded people to support Taslima's plea for citizenship. That should make it easy for the administration to protect her rights as a human being and a professional writer.

Since the BJP recognises the artist's right to freedom of speech, it should now take the lead to persuade M F Husain to end his exile.

Husain was forced to flee the country after various sangh parivar outfits filed a slew of cases against him for hurting the sensibilities of Hindus, a charge that Islamic fundamentalists have raised against Taslima. Hindu fanatics, like their Muslim counterparts vis-a-vis Taslima, have issued death threats to Husain.

Husain, one of the finest artists of his times, is an icon of secular India. His forced exile is a blot on our secular and liberal credentials. So is the failure to give citizenship to Taslima.

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LET TASLIMA STAY IN INDIA

We uphold Taslima Nasrin's right to speak forthrightly on any subject, including the burqa. It is her fundamental right. Instead of taking her on intellectually, her detractors are using a reprehensible way of suppressing her opinions. They are gathering outside her apartment in Calcutta, and demanding that the government should throw her out of the country. Keeping in mind that her visa expires by next week, this is a clear sign of intimidating her into retracting her views. It would be a shame if we who pride ourselves on our democratic traditions should refuse her asylum on this count. Or at the very least an extension of her visa.

Khushwant Singh, Arundhati Roy, Leila Seth, Kuldip Nayyar, Vijay Tendulkar, Aruna Roy, Shyam Benegal, Girish Karnad, Saeed Naqvi, Y.P. Chibber (General-Secretary, PUCL), Shanker Singh (Mkss, Rajasthan), Nikhil Dey (MKSS, Rajasthan)

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DESAI, PUNIYANI AND ENGINEER: STATEMENT ON TASLIMA NASREEN

The recent agitation in Kolkata demanding that the visa of Taslima Nasreen should be invoked and that she should be asked to leave the country is most unfortunate. Ms. Nasreen has applied for Indian citizenship, and in accordance with the ruling of the Supreme Court, no person can be denied permission to reside while the application for citizenship is pending. Ms. Nasreen has been residing in Kolkata for sometime and felt at home. Ms. Nasreen is a South Asian. Universal Brotherhood and Human rights being our civilizational values, we should allow Ms. Nasreen to permanently reside in India in accordance with Indian law.

A small section of Muslims is agitated that Ms. Nasreen has authored books with text derogatory to Islam while she was in Bangladesh. We recall the story of a Jewish woman who always threw rubbish on Prophet Mohammed whenever he passed her house. When she didn't one day, Prophet Mohammed inquired why she didn't and learnt that she was not well. Prophet went to inquire about her health and wish her well. We note that many Muslim religious leaders had condemned the attack on Ms. Nasreen in Hyderabad.

We, the undersigned, call upon the West Bengal Government to do everything to see that Ms. Nasreen can reside peacefully. The statement of the Chairperson of the Left Front in West Bengal stating that if there was any law and order problem, Ms. Nasreen could be asked to leave her residence in Kolkata is also very unfortunate. We also appeal to the Prime Minister of India to take speedy steps to grant her Overseas Citizenship by virtue of which she will have life time Indian Visa. Stree Sanman is our basic civilizational value.

B.A. Desai,
Sr. Advocate, Supreme Court of India and former Additional Solicitor General of India
Dr. Ram Puniyani,
All India Secular Forum.

Adv. Irfan Engineer

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Dawn
26 November 2007

THE SHAME OF AN ILL-INFORMED DEBATE ABOUT TASLIMA NASRIN

by Jawed Naqvi

For many who have taken sides on the Taslima Nasrin debate she is the author of the novel Lajja, which translates as Shame. The story is made out to be about ill treatment of Hindus in Bangladesh by the majority Muslims, which was enough

for the BJP to get hold of the book, translate it into Hindi and use of it for its narrow propaganda. The slightly more knowing pretenders would add that she is a feminist who provokes controversies. I too hadn't read Lajja till last week even though the book has been lying on my desk for years. But now I have also read a brilliant paper on the Bengali author by Prof Kabir Chowdhury who presented it to me in Dhaka in 1997. Saikat Chowdhury is the co-author of this paper, which I shall share with the readers. But let's discuss the current context first.

Taslima Nasrin has been living in Kolkata for some time now. Her Indian visa expires in February. Rightwing Muslim groups recently threatened to bring life to a standstill in West Bengal if she was not thrown out of the country. What provoked the sudden outburst by the reactionary groups is a mystery. There are rumours that great powers are at work to dislodge the communist government from West Bengal. It is said, for example, that just as Muslim groups were banded together to take on the Russian communists in Kabul, Henry Kissinger, who was in Kolkata last month, prescribed similar methods to evict communists from power there. They had been a thorn in the flesh over the nuclear deal. On its part, the weak-kneed Left Front government, reeling on the backfoot with its culpability in the violence in Nandigram, wasted no time to pack off Ms Nasrin to the BJP-ruled Rajasthan state. Nothing could be more ironical. The spearhead of India's liberal ideals had dispatched a hapless poet and author to the den of rightwing obscurantism. To add yet one more twist to her sad drama, Taslima was soon escorted from BJP-ruled Jaipur to Congress-ruled Delhi.

So, really, none of the three major political parties that claims to swear by India's fairly liberal rulebook, the constitution, has acquitted itself honourably in the testing battle against obscurantism. The BJP today advocates giving asylum to Taslima Nasrin but it can barely hide its glee at the fact that its goons hounded out celebrated painter M.F. Hussain from his own country. Hussain, 92, faces arrest in Gujarat, his home state, over alleged desecration of Hindu sentiments in his drawings. Hindu groups have issued threats to lynch him. To show their clout they had raided an arts college in Gujarat over similar allegations.

The Congress has not fared any better. Even before Iran and Ayatollah Khomeini came into the frame, Rajiv Gandhi had banned Salman Rushdie's Satanic Verses. Later when a group of Muslim intellectuals met Rajiv Gandhi to ask him not to overturn the Supreme Court's verdict in favour of a Muslim divorcee in the notorious Shahbano case, he smiled and gave them tea and biscuits. He was always happy to meet liberal Muslims, he confessed, but he could not do anything because the Muslim Personal Law Board would be offended. It needs to be recorded that the board is not the creature of the Indian constitution but derives its strength from an administrative order passed during the Indira Gandhi period. And now the Left Front has dispatched Taslima Nasrin to the BJP's den. Frustrating times all round.

The foreword to the book, "Taslima Nasrin and the issue of feminism", by the two Chowdhurys was written by Prof Zillur Rahman Siddiqui, the former vice-chancellor of Dhaka's Jahangirnagar University. "To my mind, more important than

Nasrin's stature as a writer is her role as a rebel which makes her appear as a latter day Nazrul Islam," he says.

"The rage and the fury turned against her by her irate critics reminds one of a similar onslaught directed against the rebel poet in the twenties. More than half a century separates the two, but the society, despite some advance of the status of women, has not changed much. The forces opposed to change and progress, far from yielding the ground, have still kept their fort secure against progress; have in fact gained in striking power. While Nazrul never had to flee his country, Nasrin was forced to do so."

Kabir Chowdhury describes in the paper how Muslim fundamentalists in Bangladesh bayed for her blood. A Sylhet-based group of clerics with the high-sounding nomenclature of Bangladesh Sahaba Sainik Parishad gave a fatwa against her in September 1993 and offered an amount of 50,000 taka for her head. But Nasrin refused to be cowed down. She would not recant or compromise. In fact in her poem 'Death Sentence', she wrote about her own cherished dream that people like John Lennon had once dreamt of. She says:

If I asked for a secular world, would you give me that?
Or, if I wanted all the fences of crop-fields, all barbed-wire boundaries...
All walls between countries to be demolished...
What then?

If I wanted a classless society, no discrimination between men and women...
Would you give me that?

If you do, I will smilingly go to the gallows and hang from the noose. The demand for her head intensified after her alleged statement that the Quran was in need of revision, though as Kabir Chowdhury observes, "she repeatedly said that the Islamic law known as Shariah should be revised in order to remove the discrimination between male and female, permitted and encouraged under it." The novel Lajja is not rated as Ms Nasrin's most outstanding work but it deals with a sensitive issue. The book narrates the condition of a Hindu family in Dhaka after the communal flare-up there following violence in Ayodhya where religious zealots had razed a mosque in December 1992. The young daughter of the family is raped and to its utter frustration and dismay the family finds itself deserted even by its secular Muslim friends. A young liberal Hindu is transformed into a fanatic and a communalist. Suranjan was a leftist and a progressive person who was imbued with the ideals of Bengali nationalism. But when he saw all his ideals crumble around him in a maelstrom of communal frenzy his desperate emotion slowly turned him into a communalist.

Says Chowdhury: "The way this transformation is shown in the novel is psychologically valid and contributes in no mean measure to the aesthetic worth of the work. Suranjan, mauled and battered, angry and vengeful, almost rapes a Muslim whore just to prove that Hindus were also capable of raping."

Prof Chowdhury quotes a passage from the novel to make his point. "Many told Suranjan - why did you then demolish Babri Masjid? You! Suranjan was amazed to hear it. You are a Hindu. Suranjan in India and Suranjan in Dhaka are one and same. Is India then the real homeland of Suranjan? Has he been an alien in this country from the day of his birth?" Even as he supports Nasrin's feelings in the novel, Prof Chowdhury seems justified in questioning some of its details. "Nasrin's novel does not give a total picture of Bangladesh," he says. "It gives the impression that Bangladesh is a fundamentalist state where most Muslims are communal and Hindu-haters.

Which is not true. On almost every occasion when communal disturbances broke out in Bangladesh many progressive Muslims organised themselves quickly and stood by the side of the oppressed and harassed Hindus against their frenzied coreligionists."

Prof Chowdhury slams the BJP for seeking to exploit the story of Lajja for its own communal agenda. "Without Nasrin's permission it arranged a Hindi translation of Lajja which sold like hot cake and gave an incomplete and one-sided picture of the state of things in Bangladesh.

Did Nasrin play into the hands of the BJP? If she did it was certainly not done consciously. She stated very clearly: "I am very pained at what is happening with my book in India. I condemn the politics of the BJP and the Jamaat-i-Islami equally and I haven't given permission to any fundamentalist mouthpiece to publish the novel'". It is a shame that the current debate about Taslima Nasrin tends to be ill informed, even prejudiced, because her ideas do not in with the agenda of the main political groups here.

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Hindustan Times
November 24, 2007

DO WE PASS THE TASLIMA TEST?

by Karan Thapar

Democratic we may be, but liberal we most certainly are not. The test is accepting that others have a right to say and do things we don't approve of, consider offensive, or even emotionally and sentimentally hurtful, but which don't actually physically harm us. Voltaire put it most pithily: "I do not agree with a word that you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." However he was French. We're Indian.

Taslima Nasreen may not be a great novelist. She may even be motivated by a quest for publicity. And many say she deliberately and calculatedly compromises

other people by revealing their personal secrets. But those are literary or moral judgements. No doubt each of us will accept or reject them as we deem fit. The question is, do we have a right to silence her voice because of them? I might not like someone criticising my gods or exposing the faults and flaws in my faith. It may even feel like an attack on my identity. But the correct response is to question my intolerance rather than vent my anger on the critic. If the criticism is justified, it can only help. If not, I will emerge stronger for tolerating or, at least, ignoring it. But to ban the critic is to diminish myself. It fails the test of the values I claim to espouse.

Taslima's case is no different to MF Husain, the Baroda University art students, Karunanidhi, Salman Rushdie, Baba Gurmit Ram-Rahim Singh or Gautam Prasad's Youtube Gandhi. Whether the motive is art or literature, satire or politics, the liberal options are to accept, criticise or ignore, but definitely not ban. To do so would be not just intolerant and narrow-minded, but proof of insecurity and self-demeaning. That's why it's wrong. That's why I consider it indefensible.

The argument made in India is that we are an uneducated, deeply-religious, conservative society where faith is an anchor unlike in the West. In such conditions criticism of god or religion can - and often does - provoke violence. To prevent this governments have to censor and ban. At first that may sound persuasive or, at least, sensibly pragmatic. But, I'm sorry, I do not subscribe to this line of thinking. It ignores essential facts. And it's philosophically mistaken.

The truth is that on almost every such occasion when violence has occurred, people have been incited and provoked. Not by the novelist or artist, not by the criticism or the cartoon, but by those who have exploited and manipulated the situation for their own ends. The authority to ban and the power to censor plays into their hands. As long as they exist they will be used. Where they don't, the matter invariably resolves itself peacefully.

But I have a deeper point to make. Why should brute force, which damages property, destroys lives and devastates cities intimidate me? The answer to those who behave unlawfully is not to give in and appease but to stand up and enforce the law. If you love freedom you have to be prepared to defend it. You can't protect freedom by compromise and concession.

After all, freedom is not just the right to be considered if correct, it is equally the right to be heard even if you are thought of as wrong. And in these matters who is to judge right and wrong? Were Buddha, Mahavira and Luther wrong? Were Copernicus, Darwin and even Marx wrong? And who today would maintain that DH Lawrence or Boris Pasternak was wrong?

The India I would be proud of would welcome Taslima Nasreen and grant her sanctuary. It would guarantee MF Husain's return home without fear of imprisonment or harassment. It would hear Karunanidhi, read Rushdie, accept Baba Gurmit Ram-Rahim Singh, even if it does not agree with them. The India I'm

embarrassed by wrecks violence on the streets of Calcutta, vandalises art schools in Baroda and threatens peaceful worshippers in Sirsa. Alas, that is the India I live in.

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The Times of India
26 Nov 2007

MINORITY REPORT

by Harbans Mukhia

The unwillingness to face the challenge of minority communalism is now coming home to roost. An obscure body claiming to speak for minorities has called Kolkata's secular credentials into question. It was more keen to ensure the expulsion of Taslima Nasreen from the city than resettle the displaced refugees of Nandigram.

The West Bengal government and Left parties will explain it away as the work of anti-social elements, if not that of some Islamic militants from across the border. But the fact that a number of people responded to the call and played havoc with life in the city stands out over and above these explanations. We are paying the price for underrating the threat of minority communalism. Now, it has assumed proportions serious enough to pose a threat to government that projected itself as the chief protector of minorities.

"Secular" mobilisation has lent strength to the notion that while all communalism is bad, majority communalism poses a much greater threat to the nation than minority communalism. We are left with only majority communalism as a strong adversary. The "secular" parties' unwillingness to question, challenge and confront minority communalism has thus created a space for it to grow, as its leaders realise the power vested in it as a political force or vote bank. Almost all parties have contributed to this growth: the Sangh Parivar by posing a threat to the physical existence of Muslims, the Congress by playing up this threat, the Left by underplaying minority communalism and the liberal Muslim intelligentsia by harping on the decline of Urdu and safeguarding of Muslim Personal Law and so forth.

There have been voices of dissent within the Muslim community. Rajiv Gandhi's minister Arif Mohammad Khan was against surrendering to the demands of dogmatic mullahs on the Shah Bano case in the 1980s. He even resigned from the government when Rajiv Gandhi decided to go ahead and defy the Supreme Court in the hope of cornering Muslim votes. Khan lost the election.

But these are lone, individual voices, pitted against not only the orthodox leader-ship within the Muslim community but almost every government. In the

absence of a larger social movement, the orthodox leadership's hold on the Muslim community has increased. The expansion of political space for the assertion of communal identity has only helped conservative elements. Secular parties, including the Left, abet such tendencies by their silence.

Given these developments, some of the assumptions of India's modernisation project can be called into question.

Jawaharlal Nehru's enthusiasm for parliamentary democracy based on universal adult franchise was based on his perception that colonial exploitation had left India and its people "backward" vis-a-vis the indices of modernity - industrial economy, education and political awareness. Hence, they fell back upon their pre-modern identities of caste, community and religion.

It was believed that industrialisation, bringing together workers of all religions and castes, will obliterate their pre modern mindset and forge a new collective identity of class. Modern education was expected to raise them above pre-modern identities.

The experience of parliamentary democracy, where each individual is left alone before the ballot box, with the symbolic withdrawal of all extraneous controls - those of the family, the community, and caste - was expected to act as a catalyst for creating modern political sensibilities.

All this has not happened. Casteism, communalism and regionalism have never been stronger as a political force. The clash between secularism and communalism has come to imply multi-community mobilisation as opposed to single community mobilisation.

If the majority and minority communalisms are left to challenge each other, it is hard to imagine a greater disaster awaiting India, for their mutual challenge leads to mutual reinforcement. As a fallout of the happenings in Kolkata, one can visualise one man laughing all the way to his vote bank: Narendra Modi in far off Gujarat.

The writer was a teacher of history in Jawaharlal Nehru University.

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Hindustan Times, November 23, 2007

FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES

By Barkha Dutt

As ironies go, it probably doesn't get any better than this. A panic-stricken Marxist government bundling up a feminist Muslim writer in the swathes of a protective black burqa and parceling her off to a state ruled by the BJP—a party that the Left would otherwise have you believe is full of religious bigots. The veil on her head must have caused Taslima Nasreen almost as much discomfort as the goons hunting her down. She once famously took on the 'freedom of choice' school of India's Muslim intelligentsia by writing that "covering a woman's head means covering her brain and ensuring that it doesn't work". She's always argued that whether or not Islam sanctifies the purdah is not the point. A shroud designed to throttle a woman's sexuality, she says, must be stripped off irrespective. In a signed piece in the Outlook called 'Let's Burn the Burqa', Nasreen took on liberal activists like Shabana Azmi (who has enraged enough mad mullahs herself to know exactly what it feels like) for playing too safe on the veil.

So, does that make some of you feel that she's only got what she asked for? Or do we need to shamefully concede that the public discourse on creative freedom and individual liberties has got horribly entangled in a twisted version of secularism and political hypocrisy?

Nasreen may well be an attention-seeker who is compulsively provocative and over-simplistic in her formulations on Islam and women. Her literary worthiness could be a matter of legitimate dispute and her eagerness to reveal her personal sexual history a complete turn-off. Many of her critics condemn the Bangladeshi writer for her propensity to 'seek trouble' in a country that has been generous enough to offer her asylum.

But when confronted with India's larger claim to being a democratic, free society, none of that is really the point. All great art is historically rooted in irreverence and disbelief. And all open societies must permit absolute freedom to individuals—artists or not—to question and reject inherited wisdom. Nasreen has been reduced to living the life of a fugitive on the run all because some fringe Muslim group decided to mix up the carnage in Nandigram with literary censorship and because the CPI(M) government was too nervous to question the bizarre juxtaposition of the protestors.

The Taslima Nasreen controversy is not as important for what it says about her as it is for what it says about us—as a country and as a people.

We may want to brand Nasreen as an 'outsider' who is not worth the turmoil she causes. But we aren't qualitatively different when it comes to our own people either. Much the same arguments and adjectives (publicity-hungry, insensitive, arrogant, childishly provocative, etc.) were used to justify the forced exile of India's most celebrated painter, M.F. Husain. India's elite may trip over itself to own one of his frames, an aspiring middle-class may invest in him like they once did in gold and starlets may twitter incoherently at the possibility of being immortalised on the great man's easel. But it hasn't moved any of us into campaigning for a 92-year-old man pushed out of his own country.

Joking with me recently, Husain said he was living the life of a global jetsetter-dividing his time between London and Dubai. Then, suddenly, the quivering voice dropped to a faint whisper, as he said, "I don't think I can come back home till the BJP is willing to change its mind."

And so, these are the befuddling contradictions of India's political establishment.

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The Times of India
25 Nov 2007

FALL & FALL OF BUDDHA

by Saugata Roy

KOLKATA: A UN refugee with a valid visa is desperately looking for a home in the city she loves, A panicky government, struts and frets, and finally pushes her out of the state. This is despite its professed love for the underdog - especially if she is facing persecution from fundamentalists. Welcome to the Left-ruled West Bengal where the fatwa rules today, fatwa in any form -religious or political.

Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen today has one thing in common with scores of families in Nandigram. They have all lost their home in a day. Taslima doesn't know how long she will be moving places, hiding her face from the Muslim fanatics who want her scalp, as though she has done something criminal. She is yet to hear from chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee - yesterday's Marxist poster boy and today's run-of-the-mill opportunist politico - who appears to head a mobocracy where numbers matter more than principles.

Bengal is not familiar with this servile face of the Left that didn't hesitate to stand by the Muslim divorcee Shah Bano despite pressures from the Muslim fundamentalists. When the Supreme Court granted alimony to Shahbano in 1985, the Rajiv Gandhi government moved the Muslim Personal Law Bill in Parliament against the court ruling in a bid to make peace with fundamentalists. Buddhadeb and his party at that time stood against the tide. Now, after 30 years of uninterrupted rule, Buddha and his ilk in the CPM have chosen the easy path: either crush dissent, or compromise.

The role reversal didn't come in a day. It began the day when the CM banned Nasreen's novel Dwikhandita on grounds that some of its passages (pg 49-50) contained some "deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any group by insulting its religion or religious belief." What's worse is Buddha banned its printing at the behest of some city 'intellectuals'

close to him. This was the first assault on a writer's freedom in the post-Emergency period. Later, a division bench of the Calcutta High Court lifted the ban.

But the court order was not enough to repair the damage. The government move dug up old issues and left tongues wagging. Soon thereafter, Hindu fundamentalists questioned M F Hussain's paintings on Saraswati. Some moved the court against Sunil Gangyopadhyay's autobiographical novel *Ardhek Jiban*, where he recounted how his first sexual arousal was after he saw an exquisite Saraswati idol. All this while, the Marxist intellectuals kept mum lest they hurt religious sentiments. And when fundamentalists took the Taslima to the streets, they were at a loss. Or else, why should Left Front chairman Biman Bose lose his senses and say that Taslima should leave the state for the sake of peace? Or, senior CPM leaders like West Bengal Assembly Speaker Hashim Abdul Halim say that Taslima was becoming a threat to peace? Even worse, former police commissioner Prasun Mukherjee - now in the dog house for his alleged role in the Rizwanur death - went to Taslima's Kolkata residence and put pressure on her to leave the state. This was before last week's violence in Kolkata. But still, the timing is important. Mukherjee went to Taslima's place when the government went on the back foot after the Nandigram carnage.

The former top cop offered her a shelter in Marxist-ruled Kerala that Taslima reportedly shot down. The purpose seems apparent. Mukherjee perhaps felt that his showing Taslima the door might help his political bosses to assuage feelings of the Muslims, some of whom lost their home and hearth in Nandigram. The flip flop in the CPM and the administration that followed, bears out how the ruling CPM is slowly becoming panicky about its influence over large sections in the peasantry and among Muslims that were earlier solidly behind the party. Hence, it's given to knee-jerk reactions, like turfing Taslima out, after crassly toting up political numbers. This is the way parties that were scorned by the Marxists as being solely governed by electoral considerations, would have perhaps behaved.

But the Marxists themselves? Perhaps unknown to himself, Buddha has been steadily losing his admirers. There was a time - just a few months ago, really - when not just the peasantry and workers but the Bengali middle class swore by him. Today leftist intellectuals like Sumit Sarkar, liberal activists like Medha Patkar are deadly opposed to him and his government. The Bengali middle class, for whom Buddha represented a modernizing force, is today deeply disappointed with him. One thing after another has added to the popular disenchantment. First, there was the government's high-handed handling of Nandigram, then came the Rizwanur case in which the state apparatus seems to have been used and abused to thwart two young lovers, and now the government's capitulation in the Taslima affair before Muslim fundamentalists.

Bengal which prides itself for its liberal and secular ethos, seems shocked that their once-favourite leader is a party to all this. The government seems aware of its steep decline in the popularity chart. Hence it is desperately trying to make up for little losses with huge compromises. The chief minister may be

praying for Taslima's visa to expire on February 17, 2008. But that won't rid his conscience of the fact that he denied a home to a writer in his "progressive" state.

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The Times of India
24 Nov 2007

MUSLIM ACTIVISTS SUPPORT TASLIMA

Avijit Ghosh, TNN

NEW DELHI: Hounded by fundamentalists in Kolkata, forced to leave Jaipur and now someplace somewhere, Taslima Nasreen must be feeling like a vagabond or worse. But on the brighter side, the 45-year-old exiled Bangladeshi writer has found support from several Muslim activists and intellectuals across the country.

Mumbai-based social activist Javed Anand says it is possible to understand why some Muslims are upset with Taslima's writing and that they have every right to protest but in a civilized, democratic fashion. "But fundamentalists are using the threat of violence as a way of bulldozing the government. This is unacceptable. These protestors do not realize the extent of damage they end up doing to the community. Such conduct results in Muslims being seen as intolerant, violent fanatics," says Anand, general secretary, Muslim for Secular Democracy.

The activist adds, "There's every chance Taslima would be killed if she goes back to Bangladesh. India being a democracy, should give her a long-term visa, if she desires." Taslima's visa, renewed by the government in August, expires on February 17, 2008. She was living in Kolkata since 2004.

Hyderabad-based political scientist Javeed Alam says that the Muslim politics on Taslima Nasreen issue is no different from Praveen Togadia's politics. "Both strengthen fascism," says Alam, also a social activist. He wants the government to give Taslima an Indian citizenship. She had applied for it sometime back. Pune-based Razia Patel of Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan too believes that it is possible to disagree with what Taslima says. But she also points out that the writer has a right to express herself. "If the Indian government decided to give her visa, then it is the government's duty to protect her," she says. The view is affirmed by the Hyderabad based poet and activist Jamila Nishad. "Having granted her asylum, the government should ensure that she lives in peace wherever she wants in India," says Nishad of Shaheen, a women's organisation.

In August, Taslima was attacked by a group of Islamic activists while attending a literary function in Hyderabad. Alam points out that in her writings, Taslima has said that there is no scope of emancipation of Muslim women within the

Shariat. "What the Muslims must understand is that there is a difference between criticism and insult," he says.

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The Hindu
Nov 25, 2007

CALL FOR CITIZENSHIP TO TASLIMA HAILED

Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI: Academics and artistes on Friday protested against the rioting in Kolkata by Muslim fundamentalist forces against Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen and her subsequent "externment" from the city.

In a statement issued by the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust, they welcomed the call for giving Ms. Nasreen Indian citizenship in the face of fundamentalism in her country.

At the same time, SAHMAT sought to underline the "unabashed duplicity" exhibited by Hindu fundamentalist forces in this matter when they continued to viciously persecute painter M.F. Husain. Expressing happiness that Left Front chairman Biman Bose had revised his statement asking Ms. Nasreen to leave West Bengal if her presence disturbed peace in the State, the statement said everyone should stand united to defend freedom of expression in an unfettered manner without violence, threat or hindrance from fundamentalist forces and frenzied mobs openly exhibiting extreme intolerance.

"What is particularly frightening is the fact that this is not the first time in recent history that such a situation has been created by sectarian forces and the reaction of the state has been identical. We have had to face almost exactly the same situation in regard to veteran painter M.F. Husain."

The signatories to the statement include Prabhat Patnaik, Ram Rahman, D.N. Jha, Amiya Bagchi, Indira Chandrasekhar, M.K. Raina, Sohail Hashmi, Radha Kumar, C.P. Chandrasekhar and M.M.P. Singh.

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The Hindu
November 23, 2007

Kolkata

OUTRAGE AND INDIGNATION IN BENGAL ON TASLIMA ISSUE

Kolkata (PTI): The intelligentsia in West Bengal on Thursday night expressed indignation and outrage at Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen being taken to Rajasthan following the violence here during a shutdown to demand cancellation of her visa.

Magsaysay Award winning writer, Mahasweta Devi when told that the police had on Wednesday offered to take Taslima to Rajasthan, said "When the police are involved, then the government is also involved. The government has kowtowed to communal pressure. This is very bad."

Writer Sunil Gangopadhyay said, "It's a matter of shame and regret that the unjust demand of fundamentalists has been met. This is improper. Why should the government bow to fundamentalists?"

Poet Shankha Ghosh was also vociferous in condemning Taslima being taken to Rajasthan.

"I do not think this is correct. An unjustified demand has been acceded to at the pressure of fundamentalists. This will embolden fundamentalist forces," Ghosh, an Academy Award winner said.

Celebrated actor Soumitra Chatterjee said, "Taslima had a valid visa for her stay here. She was not staying illegally. She was our guest. She should have been allowed to stay in West Bengal."

"I don't agree with those who are saying that she should not stay here. I also condemn in the strongest terms those who demonstrated on Wednesday seeking cancellation of her visa," said Chatterjee, a pro-CPI(M) actor and Satyajit Ray find.

"But it is not clear to me who took her to Rajasthan and whether she went of her own accord," he said.

All India Minority Forum President Idris Ali, who had called Wednesday's shutdown which spiralled into violence, however, welcomed the development.

"It's good that Taslima has gone from West Bengal. The government was forced to heed to the demand of the people, especially Muslims," he said.

"The government understood there would be serious law and order problem in the state if she remained here," Ali said.

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SOUTH ASIA SCHOLARS ON TASLIMA

[29 November 2007]

We, concerned scholars of South Asia, condemn the attacks on Bangladeshi writer, Taslima Nasreen, by extremist forces in West Bengal who claim to speak for Muslim community. Freedom of speech, dissent and expression must be defended everywhere and at all times by those who are genuinely and consistently committed to these values. The Government of Bengal has, regrettably not fulfilled its obligation to do so even as it disregards the real interests of Muslim communities, forcibly acquiring land for industrial development, much of it from poor Muslims.

We also deplore the hypocritical opportunism of Hindu chauvinist groups, including the BJP, who having themselves participated vigorously in attacking artists and filmmakers such as MF Husain and Deepa Mehta, are claiming to defend Ms Nasreen against Islamists. We call on the Bangladeshi and Indian governments to safeguard Ms Nasreen's rights to dignity and freedom of speech and to ensure that she does not become a pawn in an ugly stand-off between Hindu and Muslim chauvinist forces.

From Cambridge University:

Dr Susan Daruvala, Dr Anuj Dawar
Dr Priyamvada Gopal
Dr Subha Mukherji
Dr Farzana Shaikh

From Oxford University: Professor Barbara Hariss-White

Dr Nikita Sud
University of London
Prof Gautam Appa
Dr Uttara Natarajan
Dr Harsh Pant
Dr Sangeeta Datta

From University of Warwick:

Dr Dwijen Rangnekar
Prof Benita Parry

From University of Minnesota

Prof Keya Ganguly
Prof Tim Brennan

From University of Pennsylvania

Professor Suvir Kaul
Professor Ania Loomba

Aarhus University, Denmark

Dr Tabish Khair

Queens University, Belfast

Dr Manav Ratti

Professor Rajeswari Sunderrajan, New York University
Professor Sabina Sawhney, Hofstra University
Prof Aishwary Kumar, Stanford University

Shashwati Talukdar, filmmaker
Hasan Saroor, journalist

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truthout.org
28 November 2007

EXILED BY BIGOTS' EDICTS

by J. Sri Raman

A woman writer who won literary trophies in her twenties. An aged artist once known and loved for his bare-foot charm and innovative brush. Both are on the run today. And no force in the vast South Asian region, stretching from New Delhi to Dhaka, can help either return home in dignity.

Painfully dramatic events over the past week, involving the persecuted Bengali writer and reminding many of the banished painter, illustrate a major threat to peace in the subcontinent - inside and between its impoverished nations. Competing forces of bigotry, whose edicts have condemned both to cruel exiles, can coexist with each other, comfortably so. But they cannot coexist with enduring South Asian peace.

Forty-five-year-old writer Taslima Nasreen is being kicked around like a football for a week now within India, where she sought asylum 13 years ago. She has been living in Kolkata (once Calcutta), capital of the State of West Bengal, which shares a border and the Bengali language and culture with Bangladesh, despite a religious divide. In this city and State, known for its love of literature and arts, she has seemed happy and at home. Not any more. It now appears doubtful whether she can return to even her first place of exile and resume her life there for long.

Maqbool Fida Husain is more than twice Nasreen's age. The 92-year-old painter, among the best-known artists of India, was forced to flee abroad in 2006. He now divides his time between Dubai and London, telling every interviewer about how much he misses his Mumbai (formerly Bombay) and the country that inspired his canvases. He, too, however, has no realistic hope of returning home in the foreseeable future.

Nasreen's exile within an exile began on November 21. That was the day Kolkata, seat of a Left Front State government, surprised the whole country with a violent agitation demanding Nasreen's expulsion from West Bengal, if not her deportation from India. The Muslims of the city and the State, whom the agitators claimed to represent, had never raised this demand in all these years.

What made the event more intriguing was it came as an unexpected twist to a rally supposedly in solidarity with a struggle of farmers in Nandigram, a far-away village that had witnessed much violence earlier. The farmers were soon all forgotten, as agitators turned the city streets into a battlefield and would not relent until Nasreen's flight became known.

Starting as a physician in a government hospital in Dhaka, Nasreen acquired both fame and infamy as she turned increasingly to writing in the early nineties. It is for literary critics to judge the quality of her works. It was her courage of conviction, as a writer for women's rights at the risk of incurring the clerics' wrath, that won her instant recognition and increasing admiration besides opposition of a most obscurantist kind.

Her strong views on this subject inevitably made her a staunch opponent of politico-religious forces that stood for persecution of the minorities (including the Hindus and Ahmedia sect of Islam) in Bangladesh. In 1994, she came out with her best-known novel titled "Lajja (Shame)," which brought out the sectarian backlash against the minorities following the demolition of the Babri mosque in India's Ayodhya by the far-right hordes.

This brave effort brought her honors abroad, including the Sakharov Freedom of Thought Award from the European Parliament. What followed in Bangladesh, however, was an official ban on the book. The slew of court cases launched against her soon forced her to flee the country with the government encouraging her self-exile.

Husain's troubles also began in the early nineties, which saw the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the political front of the far right, advancing towards power in New Delhi through the Ayodhya agitation. Interestingly, the anti-Husain campaign was initiated with a far-right journal abrupt re-publication of some of his portraits of a Hindu pantheon, dating back to the seventies, and assailing them as a crime against the majority community.

Husain was alleged to have offended "Hindu sensibilities" by painting some of the female deities in an "indecent" fashion. The far-right crusaders for "cultural nationalism" did not even seem to know of the similarly exquisite sculptures of the same deities in shrines where common Indians have worshiped down the centuries without any qualm.

A series of court cases hounded Husain too. When threats to his life made it even worse, Husain left India in 2006.

It is not only opponents of religious bigotry who see a parallel in the two cases of persecution. The tormentors of Nasreen actually cite the two cases together as evidence of even-handedness. Their repeated refrain is they had supported the cause of majority sectarianism in Husain's case and would like the courtesy to be reciprocated.

Some observers point to a certain subtle difference between the two cases. Husain's persecution was a punishment the majority meted out to an offender from a minority. Nasreen's torture, however, was an example of a minority community chastising one of its own. While the observation has a certain validity, it is not as if Husain has been a darling of the obscurantists of his own community. He faced their ire when his experimental film titled "Meenaxi: A Tale of Three Cities" was released in 2004. Clerics took strong exception to one of the songs in the film on the grounds it reproduced words from the Quran and, therefore, amounted to a gross blasphemy. The film had to be pulled out of theaters after a day's showing.

The BJP has not agreed to back the bullying of Nasreen as a quid pro quo for the minority sectarians' support for Husain's banishment. It has, in fact, seized the opportunity to mount an offensive on the Left and the Manmohan Singh government. The episode, the far right claims, exposes the hypocrisy of its political foes and the skin-deep nature of their "secularism."

It is true that often, perhaps too often, parties and forces that claim to fight the BJP and the rest of the far right fail to do so frontally and betray a lack of firmness in the face of a rabble-rousing campaign by religious fundamentalists. This, however, does not make the BJP's allegedly pro-Nasreen agitprop anything but an extension of its anti-minority offensive, which includes demonization of Muslims and Islam as a whole.

The most outrageously funny part of the BJP campaign must be the pro-Nasreen perorations emanating from Narendra Modi. The BJP chief minister of the State of Gujarat, who presided over the anti-minority pogrom of 2002, has offered Nasreen unsolicited protection. He has invited her to seek asylum in Gujarat, if she cannot return to Kolkata. No one has asked him where the thousands of Muslims, who were forced to flee Gujarat and still cannot return home, will find their refuge.

Even as politics rages all around her, Nasreen is being shifted from place to place for "her own safety" as intelligence agencies continue to insist. And, even as his name is being bandied about in the debate over her, there is no word about anyone doing anything to ensure the return of nonagenarian Husain who has brought laurels to his nation as Nasreen did to hers.

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Date: Wed, 28 Nov 2007 15:07:45 +0530

From: "shabnam hashmi"

AN OPEN LETTER TO NARENDRA MODI

Mr Chief Minister,

It is ironical that a Govt which refused to acknowledge the gang rape of more than 300 Muslim women during the Gujarat carnage of 2002 is proposing to give shelter to Taslima Nasrin.

The forces of hatred that you and your government unleashed in the society have caused havoc during your regime against ordinary women of Gujarat. It is a well established fact that there is a direct and deep connection between the ideology of hatred and growing violence against women. If a society allows hatred to breed and spread against any section of the society it ultimately engulfs every other section too and has direct impact on the women in that particular society. The hatred and violence that you unleashed in 2002 against the women from a particular background has engulfed women of all classes, religions, castes and socio-economic backgrounds.

It is shocking every morning to open the newspapers. The news of dowry deaths, female feticide, domestic violence and rape glares at the reader. One wonders if it is the same Gujarat where the Mahatma was born.

A pilot study conducted by Ahmedabad Women's Action Group (AWAG) under the 'Mental Health Care Pilots in Gujarat' project undertaken by the Indian Institute of Management , Ahmedabad (IIM-A) revealed that a whopping 58 per cent of the surveyed women in 'your mega city' of Ahmedabad suffer significant mental distress.

The study revealed horrendous forms of physical violence which include slapping, punching, biting, kicking and even branding with cigarette butts! According to the sample survey 65 per cent women conceded to being abused in public and in front of neighbours! 35 per cent women reported that their children, especially girls, were victims of violence and were physically and verbally abused by the father. 70 per cent reported verbal abuse, threats, 68 per cent reported slapping, 62 per cent reported kicking, 53 per cent reported punching, 49 per cent reported hitting with hard objects, 37 per cent reported biting, 29 per cent reported choking and 22 per cent reported branding with cigarette butts.

It is the result of the hatred which you have sown in the hearts and minds of the people. The men whom you encouraged and sent to rape and kill in 2002 were brothers and fathers and husbands. They were part of this society. Did you expect that they will indict violence on 'other' women and be very nice to women inside their own houses?

Mr. Chief Minister, You could not protect women in Gujarat. It will do you good to first try and put your house in order.

India is a large democracy and Indians will protect and keep Taslima safely.
Shabnam Hashmi
November 28, 2007

1914, Karanjwala Building, In Front of Khanpur Darwaza,
Ahmedabad

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Indian Express
November 28, 2007

CANDLELIGHT SUPPORT FOR TASLIMA

Express news service

New Delhi, November 27 To express dissatisfaction over the hasty transportation of Taslima Nasreen from West Bengal, more than 100 social activists, writers and artists today held a silent candlelight protest at Mandi House.

Holding placards that said, "We stand for freedom of speech and expression," the protesters not only condemned the transportation of Taslima Nasreen but also condemned the violence against artists such as M F Husain, Deepa Mehta, Chandrashekhar and Khooshboo.

"Taslima Nasreen had to leave Kolkata because a handful of fundamentalists committed violence. What happened to the safety that the government had promised her while giving her refuge?" said Kamla Bhasin of Jagori which organised the vigil. She said she felt the need to stage the protest because "everyone was dissatisfied over what was happening to Taslima but nobody was doing anything about it. They needed somebody to take the initiative and here I am". The protesters at the vigil felt that freedom of expression should be irrespective of caste, gender or religion. "As an artist, one should be allowed to express himself or herself and I am all for anti-censorship because that is the basis of a democratic society," said Brinda Bose, who is doing her fellowship at the Nehru Memorial.

Another volunteer Bhupen Singh, a cultural activist, said, "The CPI(M) is presenting its pseudo-secular character by forcing the writer to flee from Kolkata."

When asked whether their candlelight vigil can help the cause of free speech, a majority answered that it is upto the government to decide. "By protesting, we are doing what we ought to do. Now by listening to us, the government should do what it should do," said Anil Chowdhury from Peace.

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Hindustan Times
November 29, 2007

OUR CON ARTISTS
by Sitaram Yechury

The hue and cry being raised by the BJP and other RSS tentacles over the issue of the stay of Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen in India is, indeed, the height of duplicity. Even Narendra Modi, who conducted the symphony of bloodshed in Gujarat in 2002, has jumped on to this bandwagon by offering asylum and protection to Taslima in his state. This effort to project themselves as the champions of 'freedom of expression' does not even serve as a mask to conceal their true intention of seeking to sharpen communal polarisation through such a stand. Given the fact that some sections of Muslims have taken offence to Taslima's writings on Islam and the Prophet Mohammad, the BJP has sprung to her defence. Thus, they are seeking to reinforce their anti-Muslim stance and consequently consolidate the Hindu vote-bank. Nothing else can explain this sudden fondness for Taslima.

The duplicity lies in the fact that the BJP and the saffron brigade continues with its relentless campaign to send 'Bangladeshis' back from the metros of Delhi and Mumbai. In the process, many a genuine Indian citizen, who happens to be a Muslim hailing from West Bengal, have been harassed and hounded. Further, further duplicity lies in their rabid intolerance of any artistic expression that they consider offensive to their religious sentiments. Over the last decade, there have been innumerable instances of brazen attacks on artists of a wide spectrum, the most infamous of them being attacks against Indian painter, M.F. Husain. His house was vandalised, his paintings that sell in international auctions at phenomenal prices were destroyed, and court proceedings were initiated against him at various places. The net result is that one of India's illustrious sons is forced to live abroad virtually in exile. The BJP spokesman in the Lok Sabha says, "Husain is welcome to come back and face charges... We don't stop him from coming and facing the law." Everyone needs to both face and abide by the law. This is not the contentious issue. The same law of the land must also protect the life and properties of the concerned individual. When these are violated with impunity by the saffron brigade, where is the protection?

The concert of noted Pakistani ghazal singer Ghulam Ali was disrupted in Mumbai. The shooting of Deepa Mehta's film, Water, was sought to be prevented. Films like Parzania on the 2002 Gujarat carnage or Fanaa are attacked. In fact, some film-makers needed to take 'permission' for their films to be screened. In May 2007, the saffron brigade ransacked the prestigious M.S. University in Vadodara protesting against an in-house painting of a student for hurting their religious sentiments - the same charge that some Muslim organisations have raised against

Taslima. On May 19, 2007, justifying this attack, the BJP said: "Freedom of expression does not mean hurting religious sentiments." Clearly, the saffron brigade does not accept the saying, 'What is sauce for the goose is also sauce for the gander'.

This list of moral policing being done by the saffron brigade can continue endlessly. However, on the question of Taslima's stay in India, the record must be set right. The question of any foreign national visiting or staying in India is based on the granting of a visa, which is the sole prerogative of the central government. Once this is done, the centre can well prescribe certain conditions as well as locations in India where the person concerned can stay. Wherever the person stays, it is incumbent upon the concerned state government to provide security, given the fact that law and order is a state subject under our Constitution.

The UPA government's statement in Parliament on Wednesday has clearly indicated that Taslima would be permitted to stay in India subject, of course, to the usual conditions that she would "eschew political activities in India or any actions which may harm India's relations with friendly countries." It is also expected that the guest "will refrain from activities and expressions that may hurt the sentiments of our people." For nearly three years, Taslima has been living in Kolkata and the West Bengal government has been providing her the required protection. It is, therefore, not merely unjust and unfair to target the West Bengal government on this score but also an outright political attack to score points.

Returning to Modi's defence of Taslima, a report that appeared in the November 28 edition of this paper is both shocking and revealing. Two survivors of the 2002 carnage have reportedly stated that they will vote for Modi "because I don't know what Bajrang Dal will do to us if he is voted out". This is Abdul Majid, who lost seven family members, including a daughter who was raped and killed and two sons who were burnt alive. The other survivor who echoes this sentiment is Khaliq Noor Mohammad Sheikh. Apart from losing his father and four uncles during Partition, he lost his wife and all five children in 2002. He tells the reporter, "You must have heard of Kausar Bi, the pregnant girl whose baby was ripped out of her. I am her father."

This unfortunately confirms that Machiavelli and his discourses with the Prince suggesting diabolic ways to retain power continue to remain valid even today. One of his dictums was: First demonstrate to the people the worst that you are capable of. Then proceed not to repeat it. The people will then heave a sigh of relief and come to look upon you as a benefactor. Machiavelli probably did not know then that he would find, centuries later, an ardent and sincere disciple in Modi.

Those who in their overpowering desire to belittle, if not eliminate, the present influence of the Left in the country, compare Nandigram with Gujarat are not only belittling the tragedy of the 2002 carnage but are, in fact, extending

support to Modi and giving a degree of legitimacy to the communal carnage. The debate on Nandigram has taken place in Parliament and will continue for sometime to remain in public discourse. We have joined issue and there shall be opportunities to do so in the future as well. Suffice to state here that one cannot afford to allow anti-communist prejudices to lead into positions of support to communal fascism.

Those succumbing to such a proclivity must recollect what the German intellectual Pastor Neimoeller had said at the time of Nazi ascendancy:

"First they came for the Jews
and I did not speak out - because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for the communists
and I did not speak out - because I was not a communist.
Next they came for the trade unionists
and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for me
and there was no one left to speak out for me."
Sitaram Yechury, MP, Rajya Sabha & Member, CPI(M) Politburo

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TASLIMA NASRIN TALKS TO KATHLEEN MCCAUL [November 30, 2007]

<http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,,2219223,00.html>

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TASLIMA WITHDRAWS LINES FROM AUTOBIOGRAPHY (NDTV)

Friday, November 30, 2007 (New Delhi)

Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen has withdrawn controversial lines in her autobiographical book Dwikhandito.

The move comes just two days after the Centre said it would continue to shelter the exiled author but she had to refrain from hurting religious sentiments. Speaking to NDTV from the undisclosed safe house where she has been kept under the Centre's care, the author said "I am withdrawing the controversial lines from my book Dwikhandito. The book was written in 2002 based on my memories of Bangladesh in the 1980s during which time secularism was removed from the Bangladesh constitution."

"Because I value secularism I wanted secularism to remain in the Bangladesh constitution. I didn't write the book to hurt anybody's sentiments. Some people claim that sentiments have been hurt. It was not intended. I hope there will be

no controversy anymore and I will be able to live peacefully in India," she said.

Senior left leader Gurudas Dasgupta said that Taslima had taken the correct step, which will help facilitate her return to Kolkata.

[. . .]

<http://www.ndtv.com/convergence/ndtv/story.aspx?id=NEWEN20070034420&ch=11/30/2007%204:43:00%20PM>

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INTERVIEW WITH ARUNDHATI ROY ON TASLIMA NASRIN CASE

IBN Live, Dec 2, 2007

Hello and welcome to Devil's Advocate. How do India's leading authors respond to the treatment given to Taslima Nasreen over the last 14 days? That's the key issue I shall explore today with Booker Prizewinning novelist Arundhati Roy.

Karan Thapar: Arundhati Roy, let me start with that question. How do you respond to the way Taslima Nasreen has been treated for almost 14 days now?

Arundhati Roy: Well, it is actually almost 14 years but right now it is only 14 days and I respond with dismay but not surprise because I see it as a part of a larger script where everybody is saying their lines and exchanging parts.

Karan Thapar: She, I believe, has been in touch with you . What has she told you about the experience that she has been through?

Arundhati Roy: Well I have to say that I was devastated listening to what she said because here's this woman in exile and all alone. Since August she's been under pressure, she says, from the West Bengal police who visit her everyday saying, "Get out of here. Go to Kerala, go to Europe or go to Rajasthan. Do anything but get out of here. People are trying to kill you," not offering to protect her but saying get out. On 15th November when there was this huge march in Calcutta against Nandigram, they said, "Now you're going to be killed so we're going to move you from your flat to some other place" and they did it but they withdrew most of her security which is paradoxical because on the day when she was supposedly the most under the threat, she had no protection. A few days later they gave her a ticket and pushed her out of the state.

Karan Thapar: Listening to the story she told you about herself, do you believe that the West Bengal government's behaviour has been unacceptable?

Arundhati Roy: Well it has been utterly, ridiculously unacceptable. I mean, what can I say? Here you have a situation where you're really threatening and coercing a person.

Karan Thapar: Far from protecting her, they were threatening her?

Arundhati Roy: Absolutely.

Karan Thapar: What about Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee? He is a poet, he is an author; how does he emerge from this story?

Arundhati Roy: He emerges from the story, as far as I am concerned, as the principal scriptwriter who managed quite cleverly to shift all the attention from Nandigram to Taslima and Taslima is not the person who is displacing the poor peasants of Nandigram. She is not the person who is robbing people of their daily.

Karan Thapar: So he used her as a pawn to take the pressure off himself in terms of Nandigram?

Arundhati Roy: I think very successfully because we are discussing her and not Nandigram right now.

Karan Thapar: So he's failed to stand by any of the constitutional duties that as a Chief Minister he should have upheld?

Arundhati Roy: I should say at this point that we do not have the constitutional right to free speech. We have many caveats between us and free speech so maybe he has upheld the constitutional rights to us not having free speech.

Karan Thapar: On Friday, Taslima announced that three pages from her autobiography Dwikhandito, which allegedly had given offence to critics, are to be withdrawn. Do you see that as a sensible compromise or a mistake?

Arundhati Roy: Well, neither. She does not have any choices. She is just like a person who has now got the protection of the mafia which is the state in some way. She has nowhere to go. She has no protection. She just has to blunder her way through this kind of humiliation and I really feel for her.

Karan Thapar: You used an interesting phrase. You said she has to blunder her way through this humiliation. Was withdrawing those three pages, admittedly under pressure, a blunder?

Arundhati Roy: I don't know. Honestly, we can all be very brave in the security of our lives but she has nobody to turn to and nowhere to go. I don't know what I would have done in that situation.

Karan Thapar: She had no other choice, perhaps.

Arundhati Roy: She really is in a mess. I think it is a reflection on all of us.

Karan Thapar: Let's come to the issues and the principle that underlie what I call the Taslima Nasreen story. To begin with, do you view freedom of speech as an absolute freedom, without any limitations or would you accept that there are certain specific constraints that we all have to accept?

Arundhati Roy: It is a complicated question and has been debated often. I personally, do view it as something that should have no caveats for this simple reason that in a place where there are so many contending beliefs, so many conflicting things, only the powerful will then decide what those caveats should be and those caveats will always be used by the powerful.

Karan Thapar: So you're saying that given the fact that many people are vulnerable, freedom of speech for them should have no caveats, it should be absolute and that's their only protection?

Arundhati Roy: I think so because if you look at the facts, you have outfits like VHP or the Bajrang Dal or the CD that the BJP produced during the UP elections, you see that they do what they want to do. The powerful always do what they want to do. It is the powerless and the vulnerable that need free speech.

Karan Thapar: Let's explore the position that you're taking - free speech is an absolute freedom and there should be no limitations on it. What about the view that by criticising Islam, Taslima has offended beliefs which for tens of millions of Indians, maybe for hundreds of millions are sacred? These are beliefs that underlie their dignity and their sense of identity. Should freedom of speech extend that far as to threaten people's sense of themselves?

Arundhati Roy: I don't believe that a write like Taslima Nasreen can undermine the dignity of ten million people. Who is she? She is not a scholar of Islam. She does not even claim that Islam is her subject. She might have said extremely stupid things about Islam. I have no problem with the quotations that I have heard from her book. Dwikhandito has not been translated into English but let's just assume that what she said was stupid and insulting to Islam but you have to be prepared to be insulted by something that insignificant.

Karan Thapar: Let me quote to you some of the things that she said, not from Dwikhandito, but from an interview she gave to Anthony McIntyre, The Blanket in 2006. She says, "It's not true that Islam is good for humanity. It's not at all good. Islam completely denies human rights." Elsewhere she talks about what she calls the venomous snake of Islam. To me that sounds as if it goes perhaps beyond a simple critique and into deliberate provocation.

Arundhati Roy: It sounds like Donald Rumsfeld or some Christian fundamentalist.

Karan Thapar: And you would rile at him so why not rile at her?

Arundhati Roy: Yeah, but I wouldn't say ban him or kill him. I would say what a ridiculous person. What a ridiculous thing. How can you start reacting to everything like that? We have an infinite number of stupidities in the world. How can you start having your foundations rocked by every half-wit?

Karan Thapar: Let's put it like this, does freedom of speech necessarily include the right to offend?

Arundhati Roy: Obviously it includes the right to offend otherwise it wouldn't be the freedom of speech.

Karan Thapar: But is that an acceptable right in India?

Arundhati Roy: One person's offence is another person's freedom.

Karan Thapar: That maybe so in England and America where Western levels of education have allowed people to hear something offensive without reacting violently. In India, where the education levels are so disparate, where religion is so emotionally and passionately held, then if you have the freedom of speech merging into the right to offend, you end up provoking people often to violence, sometimes to death.

Arundhati Roy: First of all, I think we have to understand that education is a very loaded term because modernity is what is creating some of this kind of radical fundamentalism. And it's not like traditional India anymore. In fact, if you look at any studies that have been done, actually communal riots have increased.

Karan Thapar: Aren't you evading my point? You're questioning what is meant by modernity and education but you and I know that the levels of sophistication in terms of being able to handle offence to your religion or criticism of your God vary hugely.

Arundhati Roy: What I am saying is that level of sophistication is far better in rural areas than urban areas.

Karan Thapar: You mean that rural Indians are better able to take criticism of Ram or Allah?

Arundhati Roy: If you look at the kind of riots in rural and urban areas, you'll see that, historically.

Karan Thapar: Let me give you a specific example. If criticism of Islam by Taslima Nasreen leads to a situation where people come out and riot on the streets and there is a real genuine threat that innocent people could end up killed, what in that circumstance should be the government's priority - to defend freedom of speech or prevent the loss of human lives?

Arundhati Roy: I don't think that's a choice. I think they have to protect freedom of speech and do everything that they can to prevent the loss of human life because here what is happening is that this kind of right to offend or 'my sentiments have been hurt' have become a business in democratic politics. Let's say the political parties are engineering these situations which lead to a loss of life otherwise why should it be that Dwikhandito has been on the bestseller list for four years in West Bengal and nothing has happened and suddenly when there's a massive march and a massive mobilisation against the CPM, the book suddenly reappears as insulting people's faith?

Karan Thapar: So you're saying mischief makers, manipulators whipped up sentiments four or five years after the book was published, to deliberately try and corner Taslima and to create an atmosphere that perhaps worked in some peculiar way to the advantage of the West Bengal government?

Arundhati Roy: Look at who's benefiting from it. All the anger about Nandigram has now suddenly turned to us asking the same state that criminally killed people in Nandigram to now protect Taslima Nasreen.

Karan Thapar: Are you trying to suggest that perhaps that the West Bengal government was in some way involved in engineering this incident to deflect attention from Nandigram to Taslima?

Arundhati Roy: I would say that it would have had a lot to do with it and I am saying that it is so easy to do these things.

Karan Thapar: When the situation happened, it would have perhaps been judged as Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee's dilemma. Perhaps as a poet and author he felt a need to defend or desire to protect the freedom of speech. As a Chief Minister, undoubtedly he knew that he had the duty to stop and prevent the loss of human life. If therefore, by putting pressure on Taslima Nasreen to leave the state for a while, he was able to save ten or fifteen lives that would have otherwise been lost on the streets of Calcutta, did he not do the right thing?

Arundhati Roy: No, I don't think so. I think that's the game that they would like us to play. 'I did it in order to defend innocent lives.' But I think there's a deeper script in the understanding of what is known as the deep state. I think that this was a provocation that actually could have ended up creating a loss of lives because, I want to go back to it, why should it be that for four years that book was on the market and no lives were lost. Everything is in the timing.

Karan Thapar: So you really do believe, when you use phrases like the deep state that there was a conspiracy, even though we don't fully understand it, to deflect attention from Nandigram to Taslima and to perhaps put her in a position where under pressure she was forced to leave and the government didn't actually have to physically throw her out?

Arundhati Roy: I wouldn't use the word conspiracy because that sounds like an intelligence operation and I don't think that something like this needs to go as far as a conspiracy but I would certainly say that you need to examine the timing of this because that's all we are ever left in India. No one ever gets to the bottom of anything. It is always like, who benefits, why did this happen now. I would like to know, why it happened now.

Karan Thapar: So you're saying something that's pretty fundamental. You're saying that far more simple -as you did at the beginning- that the West Bengal government behaved unacceptably.. Now you're saying that there was almost

Machiavellian intent, not a conspiracy but a Machiavellian intent behind the way they have played this game out?

Arundhati Roy: You are making it sound like I have a very deep insight.

Karan Thapar: No, you have a deep distrust and a huge suspicion.

Arundhati Roy: That's true but I also know that this is the word on the street. You don't need a rocket scientist to figure this out. It is something that we have seen happening over and over again. It is nothing new or amazing that's happening.

Karan Thapar: Let's turn to the Central Government's response to Taslima Nasreen. Speaking in parliament on Wednesday, Pranab Mukherjee said that India would continue extend protection and sanctuary to Taslima Nasreen and then he added that it is also expected that guests will refrain from activities and expressions that may hurt the sentiments of our people. How do you respond to that?

Arundhati Roy: It is like being sentenced to good behaviour for the rest of your life which is a death sentence for a writer. If I had to live somewhere in those conditions, I would become a yoga instructor or something. I would give up writing because this is such a nasty thing to do. Here is a woman who is a Bengali writer. She can't function outside. It's a question of principle anyway. It is not about her, it is about us. What kind of society are we creating? Sure it's tough to take the kind of things she said about Islam but she should be put in her place, intellectually and otherwise. Not like this where she will become a martyr to somebody else.

Karan Thapar: When Pranab Mukherjee says that it is expected that guests will refrain from activities and expressions that may hurt the sentiments of our people, is he in a very real sense giving Muslim fundamentalists a veto, both over what Taslima can write and say and therefore whether she can stay in Calcutta?

Arundhati Roy: Who does he mean when he says 'our people'? Am I included for example? Because by saying this he certainly hurt my sentiments. You can't really match people's sentiments.

Karan Thapar: You are quite right. 'Our people' includes the whole range of people but I suspect that when he says our people he had those who we were protesting against Taslima on the streets of Calcutta in mind. Has he, therefore, given them a veto over what she can write and say, and therefore a veto over whether she can continue to live in Calcutta?

Arundhati Roy: It is not her. He has taken a veto over all of us. I mean I have also been told by the Supreme Court that you will behave yourself and you will write how we ask you to write. I will not. I hope that is extended to everybody here.

Karan Thapar: Given that Taslima's case is not a unique case, you've suffered as you said at the hands of the Supreme Court, M F Hussain has suffered, art students in Baroda have suffered, even people doing cartoons and satires of Gandhi on YouTube have suffered, are we an intolerant people?

Arundhati Roy: We're just messy people. Either we have the principle of free speech or you have caveats that will fill up this whole room and we will all just be silenced. There will be no art, there will be no music and there will be no cinema.

Karan Thapar: Are you moving in that direction where caveats to free speech are becoming so many that there is no freedom to be artistic?

Arundhati Roy: What I am saying here does not matter. I might believe in this but I know that tomorrow I have to deal with the thugs of the government, courts of the fundamentalist and everybody else. In order to live here you have to think that you are living in the midst of a gang war. So what I believe in or don't believe in is only theoretical. However, how I practice is a separate matter. How I survive here is like surviving amongst thugs.

Karan Thapar: But then the corollary to what you're saying is very important. You're saying that artists, particularly those who see things differently, particularly those who are stretching out and wanting to be new and avant-garde, have to contend with the thugs, as you call them, with the government and the majority that's trying to push them back.

Arundhati Roy: We do and we will. The thing is that I also don't expect to be mollycoddled. I know that we have a fight on our hands and how do we survive in this gang war. The state is just another gang, as far as I am concerned.

Karan Thapar: So you're saying that it is not easy to be different in India?

Arundhati Roy: Well, it's challenging and we accept that challenge.

Karan Thapar: What's your advice to Taslima Nasreen?

Arundhati Roy: I really don't have any advice. I feel very bad for her because, let me say this, her's is actually the tragedy of displacement. Once, she has been displaced from her home. She has no rights. She is a guest and she is being treated very badly. She is being humiliated.

Karan Thapar: Arundhati Roy, it was a pleasure talking to you on Devil's Advocate.

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The News International
December 01, 2007

UNFORTUNATE WITCHHUNT

By Praful Bidwai

West Bengal's left front government has earned yet more embarrassment for itself after Nandigram by throwing Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen out of Kolkata. Nasreen has since been forced into an insecure nomadic existence. Neither the concerned state governments, nor the Centre, are defending her right to live with dignity and without fear anywhere in India.

The Centre is reportedly 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 a Nasreen admirer 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 expelled Nasreen one day after a violent rally held by the All-India Minority Forum, once a Congress-backed organisation. Yet, some Left Front leaders claim she left Kolkata of her own will.

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

Bose hastily retracted the statement. But meanwhile, reports the media, the Kolkata police asked two businessmen to "facilitate" her exit to Rajasthan, which they did. She discovered she was headed for Jaipur only when a police officer handed over the ticket to her. Nasreen's move was certainly not voluntary. She's clear she wants to return to Kolkata.

The CPM kept its Left Front allies in the dark about its decision to expel Nasreen. The allies have termed the decision "shameful" and "another blot on our name".

The CPM is hard put hard to deny that it was rattled by the ferocity of the AIMF rally, held to protest Nandigram and demand that Nasreen's visa be revoked. The AIMF tried to give the Nandigram 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 organisation. The AIMF's ire was directed at Nasreen because of her past writings, which it terms "anti-Islamic".

The CPM hasn't come out of the episode smelling of roses. Secular principle dictated that it shouldn't cave in to mob pressure for censorship, or try to guard its "Muslim vote" by expelling Nasreen. It didn't obey that logic.

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 hold an appalling 2.1 percent of government jobs. (The respective ratios even for Gujarat are 9.2 and 5.4 percent). Instead of remedying this failure of inclusion through affirmative action, the Front resorted to gimmicks, which it criticises other parties for, including pandering to religious bigots.

However, the left's timidity in the face of religious hardliners pales beside the breath-taking duplicity of the Bharatiya Janata Party and its allies. The BJP now parades itself as a defender of free expression and Nasreen's saviour. But the sangh parivar is merely exploiting the fact that Nasreen's adversaries are Muslims; and that she wrote a novel on the persecution of Bangladesh's Hindus following the Babri mosque demolition. This gives the parivar a chance to indulge in Islam-bashing by claiming it's uniquely, incorrigibly intolerant.

The parivar vilifies Islam. It has 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 Vishva Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal goons, but even the BJP's most respectable parliamentary leaders are censorship-oriented and prone to demand bans on anything they don't approve. If the government doesn't ban the books, paintings or films they label "anti-Hindu" or "anti-national", the parivar itself terrorises the concerned writer, artist or filmmaker.

This happens frequently and almost predictably 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 varied themes.

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

The parivar imposes its fanatical will upon every performing art and form of cultural expression. It often succeeds in bullying the state into abdicating its responsibility to protect the life and limb of 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 from self-imposed exile in Dubai and London and live in freedom from threats to his life by Hindutva bigots bent on misrepresenting his work. Husain is a victim of mob censorship and the state's cowardice in the face of communal bullies.

True, it's not only Hindu fanatics 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 granted them the "right" to vandalise works of art and criminally assault writers. The cases of Salman Rushdie, The Last Temptation of Christ and The Da Vinci Code are instances of this.

All such groups exercise veto power over society 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 aptly put it

This is not the sign of a maturely democratic society, which genuinely respects difference and the right to dissent.

Of course, some books or works of art do hurt and upset holders of particular beliefs. But banning them is incompatible with their authors' freedom. If they are indeed scurrilous or defamatory, the remedy lies in filing lawsuits, which would lead to appropriate penalties.

Private groups or individuals have no right to usurp the courts' functions in deciding what's permissible and what's gratuitously offensive, vulgar, egregiously scandalous, or calculated to incite, insult or humiliate.

Private censors impoverish social life by regimenting it and imposing conformity. They 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. This means accepting the unusual, the irreverent, the

if one finds 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!

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outlookindia.com

web feature
December 06, 2007

A Forgotten History

by Priyamvada Gopal

In 1932, a young woman named Rashid Jahan was denounced by some clerics and threatened with disfigurement and death. She and three others had just published a collection of Urdu short stories called *Angarey* in which they had robustly criticized obscurantist customs in their own community and the sexual hypocrisies of some feudal landowners and men of religion. The colonial state, always zealous in its support of authoritarian religious chauvinists over dissenting voices, promptly banned the book and confiscated all copies under Section 295A of the Indian Penal Code. Rashid Jahan, as a woman, became a particular focus of ire. A doctor by training like Taslima Nasreen, she too had written about seclusion, sexual oppression and female suffering in a patriarchal society.

What has changed in three quarters of a century? Periodically, we witness zealots of all faiths shouting hysterically about 'insults' to religious sentiments and being backed by the state while little is done to address more serious material injustices that affect members of their community.

But in the light of the Taslima Nasreen controversy, the *Angarey* story has particularly ironic resonances. For Rashid Jahan and two of her co-contributors, Mahmuduzzafar and Sajjad Zaheer, were members of the Communist Party of India who would go on to help found the Progressive Writers Association (PWA) in 1936. The PWA was to be a loose coalition of radical litterateurs, both party members and 'fellow travelers', who would challenge all manner of orthodoxies and put social transformation on the literary map of India. Unsurprisingly, many PWA-linked writers had run-ins with the law, constantly fending off charges of obscenity, blasphemy and disturbing the peace. Challenging these attacks with brave eloquence, they defended the task of the writer as one of pushing social and imaginative boundaries. The then beleaguered undivided CPI too faced constant attacks, including censorship, trials and an outright ban.

Today, heirs of that same Communist party, the CPI(M), find themselves on the same side with the state and religious orthodoxies whose excesses they once challenged. Their actions shore up anti-democratic authoritarianism, whether this takes the form of corporate land-grabbing, the suppression of popular protest, or religious chauvinism. In response to criticism from progressive quarters, they invoke the subterfuge of 'left unity' which forbids criticism because this will provide grist for the opposition's mills. A pro-CPI(M) statement signed by the likes of Noam Chomsky and Tariq Ali (with, one can only presume, the airy historical carelessness that even the best intellectuals in the West are sometimes prone to) warns against 'splitting the left'. With the unmistakable timbre of a Party pamphlet, it goes on to suggest that all is now

well in Nandigram and 'reconciliation' with the dispossessed is fast being effected. (How do they know?). Meanwhile, many CPI(M) leaders parrot the conservative statist line that Taslima is free to stay in India if she behaves herself and refrains from 'hurting religious sentiments'. But those oppressed by religious orthodoxies, like women and Dalits, often have no choice but to speak of how those very sentiments are used against them.

Although laden with irony, this sorry state of affairs is not an altogether unexpected development in the cultural history of the official left in India even if it is less shocking than the thuggish assistance provided to big global corporations in Singur and Nandigram by the leaders of the proletariat.

As the PWA gained strength and became one of the most influential cultural movements of its day, a rift developed between increasingly authoritarian Party members like Sajjad Zaheer and writers like the doughty Ismat Chughtai and maverick, Saadat Hasan Manto, neither of whom would ever agree to have their imagination and critique constrained by a party line.

Both Chughtai and Manto insisted on intellectual independence and the continuing need to address gender and sexuality, subjects which the Party began to frown upon. Accordingly, they found themselves attacked not only by the state but also by hardliners in the PWA who dutifully denounced the 'perversions' of writing about the body and its desires as well as prostitution and sexual violence. Justifiably annoyed, Manto (who fought five cases on 'obscenity' charges) wrote an essay sharply titled 'Taraqqi-Pasand Socha Nahin Karte' [Progressives Don't Think] in which he deplored the unthinking adherence to prudish literary categories which allowed him and others to be denounced as 'individualists' and 'pornographers.'

Of obscenity charges Chughtai asks: 'Don't you see that the writer himself is trembling fearfully and is terrified of the world's obscenity? All he's doing is converting events that are taking place in the world into words.'

Today, this unwillingness to examine received ideas emerges in party leader Sitaram Yechury's firm endorsement of 'certain conditions' on Taslima if she is to stay, including 'refraining from...activities and expressions that may hurt the sentiments of our people', whatever 'our' means in a remarkably heterogeneous society that can take pride in allowing dissent. The obviously opportunistic attack from the BJP allows more relevant criticism of the CPI(M) from progressive people and the broad, non-party left to be ignored, all of it thrown into the same basket of 'belittling...the present-influence of the Left in the country.' Used in this self-exculpatory way, 'anti-communist prejudice' is no more meaningful a mantra than 'anti-American' enabling all criticism to be dismissed as malicious. This denigrates not only those on the left who are unwilling to countenance the CPI(M)'s recent betrayals of humane values and social justice goals, but also older communists like Rashid Jahan who came under vicious attack precisely for speaking their mind against injustices, including those inflicted by religion. However much we may deplore the BJP's obvious

hypocrisies in denouncing 'pseudo-secularism', the fact remains that the actions of the CPI(M) serve to undermine the credibility of those who have stood up more consistently for pluralism and secularism. Moreover, the depredations of the right-wing should not serve as an alibi for misconduct by those who rightly oppose them.

These are difficult times for progressive people who are aware of the ways in which Islam and Muslims are under siege both from Hindu majoritarianism and Bush's 'War on Terror'. Confronted with a similar colonial situation and accused of betraying their community, Rashid Jahan and her comrades maintained that criticism and self-criticism could not be shunted aside in the name of battling a greater enemy; the two are not mutually exclusive. Mahmuduzzafar, another communist and contributor to Angarey, refused to apologise for the book and wrote that he and his co-authors, all Muslim, chose Islam 'not because they bear it any 'special' malice, but because, being born into that particular society, they felt themselves better qualified to speak for that alone.' Taslima Nasreen is exercising a similar privilege.

There's an odd kind of condescension in maintaining that some sentiments are more fragile than others and that some forms of belief are less resilient and, therefore, beyond questioning. Critique and dissent are essential, particularly when they come from those most affected by particular forms of religious and political practice.

When CPI(M) leaders commend the withdrawal of passages from Taslima's book and insist on the objectionable nature of some of her writing, they would do well to remember that a good many people in this world claim to find communism profoundly objectionable, even deeply offensive to their most cherished sentiments. The right of the left more generally to articulate critique and opposition has been hard won and remains under siege in many parts of the world.

India needs nothing more than a genuine and strong left. But this will not be forged by dishonouring one's own more radical past, covering up mistakes and rewriting recent history. In a second, modified statement, Chomsky et al have qualified their support for the CPI(M) and indicate that they were simply exhorting the left in India to 'unite and focus on the more fundamental issues that confront the Left as a whole'. In theory, this is a goal devoutly to be wished for. And yet, it is not one that can be accomplished at the cost of self-criticism and silence. We can do no better than to follow the principle always advocated by the late Edward Said, a left intellectual and activist of the highest integrity in these matters: 'Never solidarity before criticism.' It is only in so doing so that we honour the history of genuinely oppositional movements in India and elsewhere.

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INTERVIEW

'I Am No Religious Expert, But I Can't Tolerate Inhumanity In The Name Of Religion'

SHEELA REDDY INTERVIEWS TASLIMA NASREEN

Five days on the run have done little to persuade the fiery Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen out of speaking her mind to Sheela Reddy in a sealed wing of Rajasthan House in Delhi. Some excerpts:

You have been a writer who has courted controversy even before Lajja was published. What made you take on the fundamentalist Islamists head on?

I was a newspaper columnist writing on women's issues. Whenever the fundamentalists didn't like what I wrote, they showed their anger. I got a lot of support and my writing was very popular. Readers liked the way I wrote, maybe because what I wrote shook them up.

But the fundamentalists were much more angry with me because I wrote about women. Because when I wrote about women's rights, I also wrote against the fundamentalists. Women's rights and fundamentalism can't go together; the latter are against liberal thought and equality.

What is it like, living in exile, living mentally out of a suitcase, for 13 years?

I had to live in exile from 1994 onwards. When my father was ill, I wanted to return to my country, but I wasn't allowed. I wasn't allowed to come to India even, from 1994-99. I lived abroad for six years. That felt like exile...more like a foster home. I visited almost all the European cities, but I never felt mentally at home anywhere. Then I started coming to West Bengal as a tourist. I had friends there, I used to come almost every year. In 2004, I was given a resident's permit, renewable every six months. Now I just love to be in Calcutta, to be in my own home. It's the only home I've had since I left Bangladesh. I had to fight for my own home in Bangladesh. And just when I did manage to get a home for myself in Dhaka, when I decorated it and moved in, I could live in it only for a few months. Then I had to leave.

Now I have a home, and it is in Calcutta.

But don't you think you were better off abroad—at least you could speak your mind without fear of your life.

I was an outsider there. But wherever I go in India, I look like an Indian—a Bengali, a Rajasthani, a Malayali, I look like everyone else. I feel at home. What I am realising now is that it's no different here from Bangladesh. But I know whatever is happening is political because I am sure that those people who burnt those trucks and shops in Calcutta have never read my books. I am sure they were told I was against Islam. This is a total lie and it's political.

You are not against Islam?

Women do suffer because of religious laws as well as customs and cultural traditions. My intention is not political, or to hurt anybody's feelings, religious or otherwise, but to stand up for human rights and secular humanism. I believe in democracy and freedom of expression.

But freedom of expression at what cost? Does it give you the right to hurt religious sentiments?

True, I don't have religious sentiments. But when the West Bengal government banned the third volume of my autobiography, *Dwikhandito*, it wasn't because Muslims were angry with the book. No Muslim had demanded the ban. The state government's argument was that something might happen. So if you ban a book because some problem might happen, then the problem happens after that. If the book had not been banned, I don't think anything untoward would have happened.

That book was banned in 2003, why the problem now?

Because they couldn't find anything else. I didn't write anything about Islam. Nothing. So they found one line in the book I wrote four years ago. Actually, the people who demonstrated on the streets didn't know what book I wrote, hadn't read anything I've written. Some religious leaders exploited their ignorance because they need to win votes.

Islam is being used politically.

It is a fact of life, isn't it, when you choose to write about a subject such as religion, you are going to raise hackles?

I did not choose to write about religion or religious politics. I think I've written very little about religious traditions under fundamentalism. Most of my books are about women and women's rights. If you go through all of them, you'll find no more than a few pages where I comment on religious laws or traditions.

My subject is human rights. If human rights are violated in the name of religion, then I have to write about religion.

My subject is not religion; I am not a religious expert. But if I see a woman is being beaten to death because she had relations with a man, and some mullah decided it was un-Islamic, then I won't remain silent. I can't tolerate inhuman behaviour in the name of any religion.

Why then do you have Muslims gunning for you?

If anyone else had written about religion, they could have said much more and nothing would have happened. Because they have already branded me as anti-Islam, they attack me even if I don't open my mouth. I am a victim of this politics. Even if I don't ever mention the word religion or Islam, they will still try to kill me because they want to gain popularity. I am now a pawn in their political game. I never imagined that what happened in Bangladesh could happen in a secular democracy. I thought something like this could happen in countries like Saudi Arabia or Iran, but not in India. I thought I could live peacefully here because this is a secular country with so many languages and religions. It came as a huge shock, especially because I never imagined it could happen in this part of Bengal, which is so liberal. I always say I will fight for my right to go back to Bangladesh, but I don't think I would like to live there, because I feel more at home with the culture and literature of West Bengal.

What do you feel about the fatwa against you?

After what happened in Hyderabad, there was a fatwa against me. The way they issued a fatwa against me was not just illegal in a democracy, but even under Islam; not anyone can issue a fatwa like they did. But they were not punished or arrested. There have been fatwas against me, a price on my head, since 1993. This is my life. I don't blame those who want to kill me—they don't have a secular education, they are only schooled in blind faith. They think that if they kill me, they'll get some money and go to heaven.

You say you are a victim, but you seem to enjoy taking on the fundamentalists. Why?

Maybe some people like to compromise, but I think that if something is true, why should I be silent? It's good for society and women's liberty, so why shouldn't I speak? If what I write annoys you, then we can have debate or dialogue. But I don't want you to kill me.

But you know very well that your opponents are not rational, and yet you took the risk of being labelled as anti-Islam.

It's a label they gave me; it's not a label I chose. I have no wish to be anti-Islam, I hate that label. I am not anti-Islam.

You may be stuck with an anti-Islam label, but isn't that what has brought you fame?

There are always people who will say that I invited the label to attract attention, but I know what I have faced, the trauma I am going through.

Didn't you try to set up a secular organisation for Muslims in Calcutta recently?

Yes, educated and conscious Muslims got together to start an organisation against fundamentalism. Muslim fundamentalists are considered to be representatives of the Muslim community. But there are many educated Muslims who believe in democracy, and they should be considered the representatives instead. There are already 200 members, and more want to join. I heard they all stood on the streets of Calcutta holding placards saying, "We want Taslima back."

Update: added by outlookindia.com: After we had gone to press, came this public statement from Taslima:

"I am withdrawing controversial lines in Dwikhandita, written in 2002 with the memory of Bangladesh in the 1980s when military threw out secularism in the country. I wrote the book in support of the people who defended secular values. I had no intention to hurt anybody's sentiment. Now since some people in India claim that it hurt their sentiments, I am withdrawing some lines in the book. I hope that from now on, there would be no controversy and I'll be able to live peacefully in this country. I have already asked the publisher of the book, People's Book Society, not to circulate copies of the book which are in their possession. I have asked my publisher to bring out the next edition of the book deleting those controversial lines (about Prophet Mohammed)".