

Censorship as Politics

In August 1993, SAHMAT came out with an exhibition consisting of different panels that dealt with the geographical, historical, religious, architectural and cultural history of Ayodhya and the Ramayana called “Hum Sub Ayodhya”. The subject of the exhibition was researched and put together by a team of distinguished historians including K.N.Panikkar, Irfan Habib, Sushil Shrivastava, Ravinder Kumar, V.N.Jha, Athar Ali, Suvira Jaiswal and P.K.Shukla. The exhibition included a presentation on the different versions of the Ramayana, one of which was the Buddhist text Dasaratha Jataka. This ancient text depicts Rama and Lakshmana as the brothers of Sita.

The last mentioned panel was used by the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) and the Sangh Parivar (the family of Hindu fundamentalist organizations) to attack the exhibition and subsequently get the exhibit banned in India. When the Members of the Parliament who attended the session which called for banning the exhibit were questioned, it turned out that no one had actually seen the exhibition. Nevertheless, the particular panel was asked to be removed, and SAHMAT is yet to be allowed to show that panel as a part of its exhibit.

The last laugh, however, was that of the secular forces. It was discovered a few months later that in a book published by the Vivekananda Rock Memorial Committee in 1970, entitled “India’s contribution to World Thought and Culture”, the ideological forefathers of the BJP, the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), had not only endorsed this version of the Ramayana, but also exulted in it as an example of Hindu tolerance. The difference between then and now, of course, was not any change in the content, but in a change of circumstances. In 1970, the RSS was nowhere near coming to power. In 1993, the Sangh Parivar was much closer to power, the power to impose its version of the Ramayana, history and culture. In part, it is this hegemonic notion of history and culture that SAHMAT seeks to challenge, not by imposing its own versions, but simply by letting people experience for themselves the composite culture of India.

Like all censorship, the irony is that the very act of censorship served to inform a much larger number of people about the exhibition. Since the ban, many have come to see the exhibition.

The ban on the SAHMAT exhibition, was not the first, nor, unfortunately, the last time that groups have resorted to censorship for political reasons. While India does boast of a relatively free press and media, the Indian State has, on numerous occasions, pandered to fundamentalists of all shades and put limits on people’s right to express themselves. Banning books like “The Ramayana according to Aubrey Menen” and “The Satanic Verses” upon the advise of fundamentalists who presume to speak on behalf of the whole community only serve to illustrate this tendency.

More recently, the Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Mr. Manohar Joshi, transferred Mr. Gowind Swarup, a senior IAS official, for describing Mohammed Ali Jinnah as a freedom-

fighter. The remark was deleted before being broadcast on the Doordarshan, the national television network on August 9, 1997, the anniversary of the Quit India Movement.

Besides the State itself, political parties have also indulged in attacks on artistic freedom and people's right to free expression. In October 1996, members of Bajrang Dal, the militant wing of the Sangh Parivar, destroyed several priceless works of art by M. F. Hussain, arguably the most famous Indian painter today. His crime: in the seventies, he had painted a picture that reportedly depicted the Hindu Goddess Saraswati without any clothes. Again, it is important to note the timing of the attack. It was not when the painting was first painted, or displayed, but much later, when the BJP was in power in several states.

Sanjay Nirupam, editor of Shiv Sena's paper, Saamna, and a member of the Indian Parliament wrote, "Do not forget Hussain's crime! He is not to be forgiven at any cost. When he returns (from his exile in London) to Mumbai he must be taken to Hutatma Chowk and be publicly flogged until he himself becomes a piece of modern art. The same fingers that have painted our Mother naked will have to be cut off".

Earlier, the Shiv Sena, currently the party in power in Maharashtra in alliance with the BJP, had targeted Salman Rushdie's novel, "The Moor's Last Sigh", and an advertisement for shoes featuring two nude models. In the former case, it was because of an alleged resemblance of one of the characters in the novel to the Shiv Sena supremo Bal Thackeray; in the latter case, they were upset that fellow Maharashtrians were posing in the nude and diluting what the Shiv Sena considered Hindu standards of propriety.

It is necessary to be watchful and protest these incursions into the freedom of individuals to express themselves. More generally, it is important to ensure that the complex culture of India be appreciated as such and that it not be subjected to one group's hegemonic notions of what Indian culture is. Likewise, pandering by the Indian State to fundamentalists of all shades should also be opposed. Last, but not least, two wrongs do not make a right: banning a book or work of art due to pressure from fundamentalists of one community, or in one country, does not justify banning another book or work of art.