

Some published articles

On oust Operation Taslima on 22nd of
November, 2007

Let Her Be

EDITORIAL

In response to demands from a few religious fundamentalists, India's democratic and secular government has placed a writer of international repute under virtual house arrest. Shorn of all cant, that is what the Centre's treatment of Taslima Nasreen amounts to. She was forced into exile from her native Bangladesh because of the books she had written. Now it looks as if the UPA government is about to repeat the same gesture by placing intolerable restrictions on her stay in India.

She is living under guard in an undisclosed location. She will not be allowed to come out in public or meet people, including her friends. Without quite saying so, the government is clearly sending her a message that she isn't welcome in India and ought to leave. Earlier, she was turfed out of West Bengal by the state government. It's not quite clear who's ahead in the competition to pander to fundamentalist opinion, the Centre or the West Bengal

government. Earlier, Left Front chairman Biman Bose had said that Taslima should leave Kolkata if her stay disturbed the peace, but had to retract the statement later. Now external affairs minister Pranab Mukherjee echoes Bose by asking whether it is "desirable" to keep her in Kolkata if that "amounts to killing 10 people". In other words, if somebody says or writes something and somebody else gets sufficiently provoked to kill 10 people, then it is not the killer's but the writer's fault.

That is an astounding statement for the foreign minister of a liberal democratic state to make. The Greek philosopher Plato thought that artists were dangerous people and exiled them from his ideal Republic. But such views can hardly be reconciled with modern democracy, which survives on tolerance. Democracy also accords a valuable place to the arts, where boundaries are pushed and new thinking becomes possible. Taslima's views on women's rights may seem threatening from the point of view of patriarchal codes governing society. That would explain why the animus towards her is not confined to Muslim conservatives, but includes Congress and Left luminaries.

The ministry of external affairs must think through the implications of what it is doing. If it forces Taslima out of the country, India will be placed on the same platform as Bangladesh, which is close to becoming a failed state. At a time when India's image is ascendant in world affairs the

official guardians of that image must not act like weaklings who cave in to every illiberal or fundamentalist threat to this republic's constitutional values.

The Times Of India/22 Dec

SELECTIVELY VIRTUOUS

Ramachandra Guha

The Taslima controversy will test the integrity of the Left intelligentsia.

A mail arrived in my inbox last week, as part of a circular sent to many people with some connection to the press. Addressed to "The Chief Editor/ Photographer", it read: "We request you to cover the demonstration that AIDWA is organizing against the violence perpetrated on a (sic) tribal women in Assam at 1.30 pm near Jantar Mantar". Signed by the general- secretary of the organization, it then went on to say that "AIDWA condemns the public stripping, beating and near-lynching of a tribal woman in broad daylight in Guwahati during clashes that erupted between members of tea-tribes demanding ST status and members of the public.

We have demanded exemplary punishment of the perpetrators, and full support to the traumatized woman.”

My first thought on receiving this mail was a malicious one. Why had the All India Democratic Women’s Association not organized a demonstration to protest the externment from the state of West Bengal of the writer Taslima Nasreen, where it could have demanded “exemplary punishment of the perpetrators, and full support to the traumatized woman”? The thought was malicious but not, I think, wholly unfair. For AIDWA is an organ of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), and like all bodies or individuals associated with that party, it has a highly selective attitude towards suffering and discrimination. It was surely moved by the brutal beating of a poor tribal woman in Guwahati (as any sensitive human would be); but its sympathy and indignation were not entirely uninfluenced by the fact that the state government in Assam is run by a party other than its own.

As editorials and essays in this newspaper have pointed out, the incidents at Nandigram have once more exposed the hypocrisy of the organized Left. Violence is bad, if committed by parties or cadre of the Right or the Centre. It is excusable and even legitimate if it is the handiwork of the cadre or leaders of the CPI(M) and its allies. In some respects, however, the reaction to Taslima Nasreen’s predicament has been even more hypocritical. For in Nandigram there were, and are, two sides to the story. Over

the past year or so, the activists of the Trinamul Congress and of the Bhoomi Uchchhed Pratirodh Committee have not exactly shown an exemplary commitment to democratic procedure. Harassment and intimidation, arson and beating, were elements in their armoury of violence, as they were in the armoury of the CPI(M) cadre who 'recaptured' the territory. In that respect, and that alone, the chief minister of West Bengal was correct when he spoke of the protesters being "paid back in their own coin". That said, the CPI(M) and the Left Front are far more culpable than the BUPC rebels — for, they represent an elected government that has a greater responsibility to work within the law.

The case of the Bangladeshi novelist is more straightforward. Forced to flee her native land, she was living quietly in Calcutta. She had not used violence or even harsh words against anyone in the city. Then a group of Muslim extremists held a rally protesting her presence; the rally turned violent, and the army had to be called in to restore the peace. The Left Front government immediately capitulated to the extremists' demands. The next day Taslima Nasreen was put on a plane to Jaipur.

As it happens, I was in a meeting in Chennai when the decision was taken in the Writers' Buildings to, as it were, throw a writer out of the state. I had not watched television the whole day, and was thus alerted to the developments by a former teacher of mine in Calcutta. Although of north

Indian extraction, she married a distinguished Bengali statistician and moved to his native city. She has lived there now for more than four

decades. Despite her origins, she is, for all intents and purposes, a member of the *bhadralok* intelligentsia. She speaks fluent Bangla, and endorses and indeed embodies the progressive, liberal, cosmopolitan views associated —or once associated?— with that particular social class.

Speaking over the phone, my teacher was clearly very deeply moved. That a city identified with art and culture and literature and ideas — a city she had thought was her city— had now so callously treated a writer was bad enough. What was worse was where the state government had sent Taslima Nasreen. “She is going to Rajasthan”, my teacher informed me: “So Rajasthan is considered progressive nowadays”.

The irony in her voice was palpable. For Calcutta was the home of the Bengali Renaissance, which — or so we were once told — brought to the Indian subcontinent progressive and humanist ideas that were to bear fruition, in time, in the democratic and egalitarian ideals of the Indian Constitution. On the other hand, Rajasthan was notoriously backward, a state steeped in feudalism, which — so it was said — had never produced a writer or scientist of note, and where women were particularly badly treated. As recently as in the Eighties, Bengal was the land of Satyajit Ray, while Rajasthan

was the land of Roop Kanwar. Now, two decades later, a writer felt safer there

rather than here. What could be more ironical, more bizarre, more shameful?

I think the Taslima Nasreen case has tested, and will test, the integrity of the Left intelligentsia even more than Nandigram. After the latest outrage in Nandigram, CPI(M)-affiliated academics such as Prabhat and Utsa Patnaik, Irfan Habib and the like issued a wishy-wishy statement that, in effect, excused and condoned the violence. This was followed by a statement signed by CPI(M) sympathizers living abroad — Noam Chomsky and Tariq Ali among them — which suggested that to criticize the party's doings in Nandigram was to play into the hands of the American imperialists.

On Taslima Nasreen's expulsion, however, the fellow travellers, both *desi* and foreign, have thus far been silent. As intellectuals and writers themselves, they should not have such a selective approach to the issue of freedom of expression. They protest when the Bharatiya Janata Party or the Shiv Sena bans a book or intimidates an artist; should they not do the same when the CPI(M) does likewise?

It was speculated — probably rightly — that the Left Front's decision to send Taslima Nasreen away was prompted by the fear of losing the minority vote as a consequence of

Nandigram (where the vast majority of the victims of the latest

round of violence were Muslims). Will the opinion polls that show a vast majority of Calcutta residents wanting to have Taslima Nasreen back in their midst cause them to rethink? Or will Narendra Modi's cleverly brazen invitation to the writer to take refuge in Gujarat embarrass the CPI(M) into rescinding the expulsion order? Or will these facts and provocations be disregarded and the fundamentalists win after all?

As this column goes to press there are no clear answers to these questions. My own hope, naïve as it is, is for the government of West Bengal to invite Taslima Nasreen back to Calcutta, and then follow it up with a comparable invitation to M.F. Husain (an artist who certainly would not be welcome in Modi's Gujarat). That would redeem not just the credibility and conscience of the Left, but the credibility and conscience of Bengal itself. Can a land which has long thought of itself as being in the cultural vanguard allow its history and heritage to be so brutally vandalized by a bunch of fundamentalists and bigots?

The Telegraph / 08 dec

Taslima Nasreen's Agony Must Come to an End

Muchkund Dubey

Speaking to a group of reporters who managed to sneak through the tight security cordon around her in the Rajasthan House in Delhi on November 25, 2007, the famous Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen said:

What crime have I committed? Is it that I write about women's rights and my life is dedicated to upholding secular humanity and human rights?

This reminds me of one of the poems written by the great Russian novelist and poet Boris Pasternek. When after winning the Nobel Prize in Literature, he was harassed and persecuted by the Soviet authorities, he wrote:
Is there some ill I have committed?
Am I a murderer, miscreant?
For, I have made the whole world weep
Over the beauty of my land.

Since she was hounded out of her flat in Calcutta, Taslima has been going through one of the most traumatic

experiences of her life. She had virtually to keep awake on the night she was flown from Kolkata to Jaipur. During the next three days, she was moved from place to place, none of which were of her own choosing. And after that, she is held in virtual custody by the Central Government in a secret place. If this would have happened to an Indian citizen, this would have been a clear case of abduction, kidnapping and forced detention. Taslima, in fact, deserves a better treatment than that accorded to an Indian citizen, because she is a single woman, she is our honoured guest and she has a claim to all the fundamental rights that accrue to a person by virtue of her being a human being.

Taslima's continued custody is a shame for India. More than any other event in recent years, it has made us smaller. The famous economist and one of the fathers of Western liberalism, James Stuart Mill, had said something to this effect: If any innocent person in a country is held in prison, the right place for all other persons of that country, is also prison. Besides, Taslima is bound with us by the thread of common humanity. Therefore, her agony and trauma is shared by the millions of Indians who believe in secularism and fundamental rights and who are moved by the feeling of common humanity.

A few incontrovertible facts stand out from the welter of apparently contradictory and patently false statements made by leaders of political parties and high government officials regarding the circumstances in which she was bundled out of her flat in Kolkata and thereafter moved from place to place. Firstly, there is no doubt that she was pressurised, if not forced, by the police of West Bengal to leave the State against her will. She had been under their pressure for several months when high level police officers summoned her and brandished various kinds of threats, including likely attempt by Islamic extremists to kill her, the State Government's inability to provide security to her and the possibility of the cancellation of her visa.

Secondly, this despicable and illegal action by the West Bengal Police officials was taken at the behest of the ruling CPM for its electoral purposes. In any case, there is no difference between the dominant ruling party, that is, the CPM and the government in West Bengal. After sensing that their support among Muslim voters has been dented because of the Nandigram incidents and Rizwanur Rehman's case, they wanted to retrieve the ground by pandering to the whims of the religious extremists among a section of the voters. And poor Taslima became an unwitting victim of this political ploy. The meanest part of the whole episode is that in compelling her to move out of Kolkata, the West Bengal Government took advantage of her

vulnerability—the fact that she is a single women, that she is on an exile from her country, that short of living in Bangladesh, West Bengal is the only and logical place for her to stay and work and that her applications for both the extension of her visa and grant of citizenship are pending with the Government of India.

Thirdly, the various explanations given by a CPM Polit-Bureau member as to whose responsibility it was to issue or extend Taslima's visa and provide security for her at the place of her stay, were inane, redundant and deliberately designed to divert the people's attention from the real issue. The fact is that she has a valid visa to stay in India till mid-February 2008 and that she is staying in West Bengal where the State Government has been giving security coverage to her. How do then the questions as to who will issue visa to her and who will provide security arise at this stage?

Fourthly, the statements made, soon after her eviction from Kolkata, by West Bengal and the Central Government officials that she was free to return to Kolkata if she wanted to do so were the unkindest cut of all. The State Home Secretary is reported to have said on November 23: "She is a free person and as such she won't come and go according to our dictate." He is also reported to have said: "Nasreen could return and there are security arrangements for her." The Chief Minister of West Bengal is reported to have said on November 25 that she was free to return to the State

whenever she liked and the State Government would make all arrangements. These statements came soon after West Bengal CPM supremo Biman Bose's outburst at the height of the flare up in Kolkata that Taslima should leave West Bengal," if her continued stay disturbs the State's peace". This pronouncement of Biman Bose turned out to be an informal order to the West Bengal Government to get rid of Taslima. All the statements made to the contrary were lies and a cover-up for an operation planned and carried out meticulously. This is vouchsafed, among others, by the statement of the Rajasthan Government officials that when in the morning after her arrival in Jaipur, they made arrangements for her flight back to Kolkata and informed the West Bengal Government accordingly, the latter "simply refused to countenance the idea". Moreover, if the West Bengal Chief Minister and police officials meant what they said, then why are they still not agreeing to Taslima's return even after her agreement and instructions to her publishers to delete the objectionable pages from her book *Dwikhandita*? The utter cynicism behind these statements is also brought out by the fact that they were made in spite of their knowledge that the only State where Taslima wanted to live was West Bengal and the only city, Kolkata . Taslima has not left a shred of doubt on this score. She has said: "I do not want to leave India for any other country" and that she would like "to live in India till her death". She has also said that "Kolkata is where my heart lies".

THE BJP's role in the Taslima affair has been equally, if not more, opportunistic, hypocritical and callous. On the one hand, they claimed credit for the BJP led Rajasthan Government having received her in Jaipur and provided facilities for her stay in the Rajasthan House in Delhi. But, on the other hand, it was clear that they had no intention to give her shelter in Rajasthan. In fact, they did everything possible to ensure that the responsibility for looking after her was transferred to the Central Government as soon as possible. Their alacrity in this regard was at least partly due to the threat held out by the All India Milli Council to hold demonstrations in case she was allowed to stay in Rajasthan. The argument given by the BJP leaders for getting rid of Taslima as soon as possible was not at all convincing. For example, a prominent BJP leader in Parliament said on November 24 that the BJP Government in Rajasthan could not keep Taslima in Jaipur or elsewhere in Rajasthan because she was sent without the Rajasthan Government being informed. That leader stated: "It is a matter of propriety that the Union Home Minister first take the Chief Minister concerned into confidence." Apparently, for them propriety takes precedence over humanity.

In a resolution adopted at a meeting of the BJP office bearers on November 26, 2007, the party demanded "that Taslima Nasreen be treated as a political refugee in India

with a right to live with dignity and security". By taking such a stand on Taslima's status in India, the BJP's aim clearly was to politicise the whole issue. This stand also has the effect of complicating the case of Taslima's continued stay in India. Taslima is by no means a political refugee like the Dalai Lama. She has not left Bangladesh because of any political reason nor has she any political agenda. Her desire to move to India is motivated by her belief that this country, by virtue of its commitment to secularism and freedom of expression and because of the affinity of language and culture, is the safest place for her to stay and provides the best environment for her creative work. If at all a comparison is needed, she should have the same status as was accorded to the scientist J.B.S. Haldane who stayed in India to pursue his biological research. Finally, as has been widely commented, considering the stand that the BJP has taken on some of the paintings of M.F. Hussain, on the archeologists who regard the Ram Setu as a natural phenomenon, and on several other similar cases, its ostensible solidarity with Taslima's cause cannot be taken at its face value.

I am not familiar with most of Taslima's work. But I have read in original Bengali, her Novel *Lajja* and a few collections of her poems, particularly her *Selected Poems* published in Calcutta in 1993. I have also followed her beleaguered but brave career as a writer and a fighter for women's rights. To the best of my knowledge, Taslima's focus in her literary work

is not Islam as a religion. But she is an inborn rebel and a crusader against patriarchy and all other forms of exploitation of women. She is also deeply committed to secularism and human rights. Moreover, she has an extraordinary courage of conviction and an ability to make sacrifices in an attempt to live up to her convictions. Taslima's disdain of patriarchy is expressed succinctly in the Dedication of the Selected Poems:

I have torn asunder the shackles
I have jettisoned from the betel leaf I chew,
the lime of tradition.

The helplessness in which a woman finds herself in our society is powerfully brought out in the following two simple lines of her poem "Frontier" (Seemanta):

I know how to swim,
Therefore they will not let me swim.

The same sentiment is expressed more elaborately in the following lines of the poem "Fear" (Bhoy):

Nobody is allowing me to cross the field;
Each time I try to run,
Half way they pull me back suddenly by my frock,
They frighten me.

This theme is reflected in a more profound sense in the following stanza from her poem "Pride" (Obhiman):

Bearing the cross of life, and the sin of talent,
I walk, daily removing the stones fixated in my path
Drowning I sink in the deep sea of prohibitions
Who is mine except me alone.

Taslima's poems while depicting her helplessness, also bring out her resolute determination and infectious optimism to be able to dismantle the barriers of tradition and patriarchy, as reflected in the following lines from the poem "Frontier":

I want to dance; one day I shall also dance,
I shall return dancing.

Taslima's *Lajja* was a phenomenon in Bengali literature in Bangladesh. Until this novel came out, periodic atrocities against the Hindus, though a reality, were discussed by the Bangladeshi elite and the so-called secularists only in their drawing rooms. Only a few of them would, on rare occasions, own these up as a national shame. Then came Taslima who wrote a novel graphically and forcefully depicting this national shame or *lajja*. There is nothing against Islam as such in this book and yet the Islamists of Bangladesh banded together to get it proscribed and mullahs issued a fatwa giving the call for her killing. The Bangladesh authorities instead of taking action against them framed Taslima in law courts under the charge of blasphemy, thus forcing her to go into exile.

The elite and the so-called secularists of the country were in no position to deny that atrocities against Hindus were being committed periodically. Therefore, they resorted to the device of characterising Lajja as a mere reportage and branding Taslima as an inconsequential writer. For, they knew that there is nothing more demoralising for a writer than being reduced to the category of the inconsequential. Some of the well-known writers of West Bengal also joined this chorus for their own ulterior purposes. And unfortunately in the context of the current controversy surrounding Taslima, a section of the Indian media has also tried to stick this label on her.

I am not a literary critic by profession and in any case my reading of Taslima's work is very limited. Therefore, I am not in a position to pronounce on Taslima's standing as a writer. However, Taslima's poems that I have read cannot by any stretch of imagination be regarded as ordinary. They have at the same time depth, force, elegance and striking originality. Lajja may not be a great novel; but it is by no means an ordinary novel. In the context of Bangladesh, its theme is daringly unconventional. It is both moving and fascinating. Its reportage style adds strength to its narrative. It is, therefore, not surprising that it was a best-seller in West Bengal for quite a long time.

Moreover, compared with the novel Pak Sarzamin Saadbad by Humayun Azad which deals with the related theme of the

perfidy of the religious extremists in Bangladesh, and their sinister conspiracy to turn Bangladesh into Pakistan, Lajja uses language which is proper and restrained. Pak Sarzamin Saadbad, on the other hand, is full of expletives and is highly repetitive in the typical surrealist style which, of course, I find fascinating. The Bangladeshi elite and intellectuals simply cold-shouldered Humayun Azad's novel; but they derided and tried to run down Taslima's Lajja. However, most unfortunately, the Islamic extremists did not spare Humayun Azad who became a victim of their bullets and, in all probability, later succumbed to the resultant injury.

That Taslima is a widely read and popular writer is adduced by the fact that she has got published more than two dozen books of poetry, novels, short stories and essays and her work has been translated into many foreign languages. Not only Lajja but a number of her other books have also been on the best-seller list. She has achieved all this when she is still barely at the half-way mark of her literary career. She has still a lot more contribution to make to Bengali literature. Who knows how she would be judged by the end of her career and by the posterity? But it is a fact that she has already carved out a distinguished niche of her own in the world of literature, not only for what she has written but also for the causes she champions and the courage she has displayed in doing so.

THE leaders at the highest level in the government and the Congress party are maintaining a studied silence on Taslima's plight. In order to remain in power at the Centre as long as possible, they have decided to leave behind the baggage of moral conscience, constitutional values and basic principles of governance. At the Cabinet level, Pranab Mukherjee made a strange statement in Parliament on Taslima's status in India. The statement implied that Taslima was undertaking political activities in India, harming India's relationship with friendly countries and indulging in activities and expressions which may hurt the sentiments of the Indian people. The statement was inept and uncalled for, apart from being devoid of grace. Moreover, it was non sequitur as none of the conditions spelt out by him applied to Taslima. Her behaviour during her stay in India has been exemplary. She has not undertaken any political activity. She has not done anything which can harm India's relations with a friendly country, which in the present context is Bangladesh. The novel *Lajja*, which drew the ire of the Bangladesh Government, was written some 15 years ago and Taslima got permission to stay in India after this fact was taken into account. She has not written or said anything recently which "may hurt the sentiments of our people". *Dwikhandita* is her only novel containing a few passages to which some sections of our people have found objection. But *Dwikhandita* was also written quite a while ago. Besides, it has stood the test of India's laws as the Calcutta High Court

after hearing all sides of the case ordered the withdrawal of the prohibition imposed on the book. One may, therefore, ask Mukherjee: What was the provocation for such a statement?

The issue before the government is not Taslima's conduct but to deal with religious extremists who resort to unconstitutional means to express their point of view and who wantonly violate laws and indulge in acts of violence. They come from amongst both Hindus and Muslims, both the Left and Right of the political spectrum. The tragedy is that these obscurantist and extremist groups have vote-banks on which the ruling parties both at the Centre and in States are dependent for remaining in power. Some of these groups are a part of the ruling coalition as was the case with the MLAs who recently attacked Taslima in Hyderabad. No action or only token action has been taken against these groups. Whenever religious extremists, on whose votes the government relies, hold out threats to kill or actually kill innocent persons and indulge in other acts of violence, the government promptly folds back the Constitution and suspends the rule of law. The law of the land would warrant that the religious extremists who have indulged in violence should be in jail, and Taslima a free person. She does not pose threat to anyone except those who regard the Indian Constitution, particularly its provision on secularism and freedom of expression, as a threat to their religious bigotry and obscurantism. The

government and the people of India should realise that these religious extremists are only superficially against Taslima, but in the real sense they are against the Indian Constitution and against the ethos of the Indian state. We will have to come to terms with this reality and deal with it effectively.

This process of opportunistic pandering or surrender to religious extremists, of both Hindu and Muslim varieties, must stop. Otherwise India, like Pakistan, will become a failed state. We have already come to a pass where a Muslim boy is killed supposedly with the connivance of senior State Government officials because he wants to marry his Hindu girl friend, a great painter like M.F. Hussain prefers to exile himself rather than face the ire of Hindu zealots in India, an archeologist cannot say that the legendary Ram Setu is only a natural feature, and a writer like Taslima who has been given permission to stay in India is uprooted from her place of residence with the apparent connivance of the State, because a minor group of Islamic extremists decide to take out a procession in Kolkata shouting slogans against her and demanding her expulsion.

We seem to have regressed from what we were even in the 15th and the 19th century. In the 15th century, the great saint poet Kabir admonished the mullahs for shouting loudly from the tower of the mosque and sarcastically asked: "Has your God become deaf?". In the 19th century, another saint poet

Lalan Shah Faqir wrote: "If circumcision can make one a Muslim, then what do you prescribe for a woman?" Both Kabir and Lalan have been hailed during their lifetime and till now as great reformers. But in the increasingly intolerant Indian society of the 21st century, indulgent to religious extremism of the worst variety, their writings may very well be declared as blasphemous.

Taslima has suffered too much and has gone through prolonged distress and agony. This must be brought to an end without delay. She should also, without much ado, be allowed to return to Kolkata, her preferred place for stay. Moreover, she should be granted Indian citizenship before her current visa expires so that her creative work does not suffer and she is never again rendered fugitive and stateless. The award of citizenship would also make it easier for her to protect her rights. In urging this, I am not alone; hundreds of millions of Indians desire likewise.

The author is a former Foreign Secretary of India who served as India's High Commissioner in Dhaka for several years.

The statesman/09 nov

Do you pass the Taslima test ?

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 wreaks 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.

Hindustan Times /nov24

Exit The Author

Arindam Ghose-Dastidar

The system of thirty years' standing has cowed in the face of fanatics, fanatical fury. The moral defeat is the State's

I have no place to go. India is my home and I would like to keep living in this country until I die. –taslima nasreen

There is a sense of stark irony in Taslima Nasreen's shift to Jaipur. Just as the Bengal Left had sheltered Qutbuddin Ansari, the Gujarat tailor who had become the icon of the 2002 pogrom, so too did the Rajasthan Right provide refuge to an almost permanently aggrieved feminist writer from Bangladesh. Virtually on landing did the Bharatiya Janata Party's chief minister, Vasundhara Raje, assure her of round-the-clock security, emerging as a saviour in the process. But after one night in Jaipur, the government has been

unnerved by the purported threat of further violence. Taslima's predicament deepens as she is now reduced to a nowhere person in what they call the National Capital Region.

It is the Communist Party of India (Marxist) that has once again suffered a battering under a state secretary whose foot-in-the-mouth ailment has assumed near-chronic proportions. A day after the fundamentalist fury, Taslima was packed off to Jaipur. Even 48 hours later, there has been no official version on the move. Well may both the party and government ~ rather smugly ~ rest assured that the vote-bank has not been rocked. But the party has decidedly emerged as a bundle of contradictions. Having declared at the height of Wednesday's violence that Taslima should leave West Bengal "if her continued stay disturbs the state's peace", it took Mr Biman Bose barely 12 hours to effect a swingback and plead that "I revise my earlier statement". In attempting to justify the flip-flop, he could have spared us the knowledge that "the state government doesn't have the authority to grant or cancel visa and that only the Centre can do this". His initial bow in the direction of the fundamentalists has doubtless been reinforced by the manner and alacrity with which she has now been shown the door. Despite Mr Bose's somersault, there is little doubt that the government has accorded precedence to the minority card over freedom of speech and expression. It isn't exactly clear whether the West Bengal government

has acted at the prodding of the Centre. The Chief Minister has been tightlipped since Wednesday as he invariably is in the wake of a controversy. Yet both he and the Centre need to come upfront on a matter of tremendous public import. The authorities would hate to admit as much, but it is pretty much obvious that the government has buckled under fundamentalist pressure. It would be no exaggeration to suggest that the administration has virtually surrendered to the demand of the Islamic fringe who think the Taliban and Al Qaida are jolly good chaps. And who are potentially lethal enough to bring Kolkata to its knees in a couple of hours. Even the assembly Speaker, Mr Hashim Abdul Halim, has gone on record with the statement that Taslima's stay in the city had "created problems". Still more alarming are the facts exposed by the Dainik Statesman in the piece titled Byapika Bidai (23 November 2007). A section of the police brass, including the previous Police Commissioner, had reportedly told her to her face that she had become a "security threat" and ought to leave the city. She was even threatened with withdrawal of security. The compulsion is only too perceptible: ahead of the panchayat elections, the government can hardly afford to alienate the minorities further, given the twin disasters over Rizwanur Rehman and Nandigram with a predominantly Muslim peasantry. In a sense, Taslima was in thrall of a bullying police. The feedback of the Special Branch couldn't have been so inadequate, after all. Of course, it had erred on the scale

and intensity, but the provocation wasn't wholly unexpected. The Centre's refusal to renew her visa only served to lend the spark. This is confirmed, if confirmation were needed, by the assertion of the president of the All-India Minority Forum that the "protest" ~ a breathtaking expression of understatement ~ was against Taslima's prolonged stay in Kolkata. In the manner of Biman Bose, Idris Ali has also effected a turnaround, stoutly denying that the violence was no less a reaction to the Nandigram issue. Double-think runs wild from moment to moment. Both Taslima and Nandigram were very much on the streetfighters' agenda on Wednesday and it has taken the Forum 24 hours to realise the thoughtlessly reckless disconnect. To an extent, the violence was arguably an offshoot of the intra-community struggle for prominence, notably between Ali and Sidiqullah Chaudhry of the Jamait Ulema-e-Bengal, the former shrilling for Taslima's exit and the latter buttressing the interests of the Nandigram peasant. This becomes fairly obvious from the appeal issued by at least one imam to both sides not to merge the two wholly unrelated issues. The mayhem was centred around an address in that amorphous locality referred to as south of Park Street, not for the cause of the landless or/and homeless in the backwaters of Purba Medinipur.

The sponsors of the demonstration must have known that they were playing with fire for dubious political ends. And the possibility of Ali ~ who represents the Congress with his own

brand of machismo ~ facing party action is substantial. Secularism or religious tolerance or for that matter literary dissent does not mean putting up with calculated irresponsibility. It is fervently to be hoped that sense will yet prevail upon men and organisations who place politics above humanity.

The lumpen vandalism, therefore, falls into a pattern confirming the government's perception that an individual had become a security threat. Indubitably was the violence a siren call for action against Taslima, and for the government to be decisive. In effect the system has been cowed. Verily has it served to hasten her exit. That forced exit in burqa and without police escort is arguably a logical corollary of the Marxist government's earlier ban on her book, *Dwikhandito*. The army may have restored order over a four kilometre radius, a fairly routine task one should imagine for the police but which proved to be hopelessly beyond its wherewithal. Eloquent protestations on the freedom of expression and liberal thought will now ring hollow. As must be the liberal pretensions of Kolkata and the state's culturally virile Chief Minister. Taslima's novel was banned by his dispensation, after all. The city owes a collective salute to Johnny Gurkha for having come to its rescue. Nonetheless, the system of thirty years' standing has cowed in the face of fantastic, fanatical fury. The moral defeat is the state's as it is for Taslima Nasreen.

The Statesman/25 Nov

Walking in Prophet's Footsteps: Indian Muslims Hound Taslima

Alamgir Hussain

Last week, Muslim mob in India, seeking Taslima Nasrin's blood for her writings critical of Islam, hounded her out of Calcutta. With assistance from police, she escaped from Bengal and is now hiding somewhere in Indian capital. She had to flee her home country Bangladesh when militant Islamic mob pursued her in 1994 in similar fashion on the same charges. She found a home of some sort in West Bengal, where people speak the same language she speaks and writes in. But now, Taslima has nowhere to go. She may well forget about her writing career altogether.

The mission of Muslims in life is to emulate Prophet Muhammad's life in meticulous detail to gain access to Paradise. Slightest deviation from it will land Muslims in hell for some time to be roasted there in the terrible fire, before getting access to Paradise. Bravo Muslims of India, you are trying to emulate the Prophet. Let us go back 14 centuries to the time of Prophet Muhammad.

Prophet Muhammad's 13 years of preaching Islam in Mecca yielded only about 150 converts in all. By 620, his mission in Mecca had come to a standstill. Open preaching among

Meccan citizens had become banned. In 620, he secretly started preaching to pilgrims from Medina during the Hajj pilgrimage at the idol-temple of *Ka'ba*. Six Medina pilgrims converted to Muhammad's faith. Next year during Hajj, another six joined to give allegiance to Muhammad's creed. The pilgrims returned with a disciple of Muhammad named Musab to instruct the converts of Medina in Islamic creed.

Musab turned to be an able preacher; and came back with 75 converts during the following Hajj season in March 622 to meet Muhammad at a secret meeting at Akaba near Mecca. Obviously seeing the great success of his creed in Medina even in his absence, the Prophet sought to move there with them. In urging their support for his protection if move there, Muhammad said: "I invite your allegiance on the basis that you protect me as you would your (own) women and children." The Medina converts replied: "By Him (Allah) Who sent you with the truth we will protect you as we protect our women. We give our allegiance and we are men of war possessing arms which have been passed on from father to son" (Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, Karachi, p204).

Muhammad was all set to move to Medina. He ordered his disciples in April to relocate there. Over the next two months, all Muslim converts left for Medina in small batches except Muhammad and Abu Bakr and their families plus Ali still left behind. It was time for Muhammad to leave; and in the company of Abu Bakr, Muhammad set off for Medina. Ali

and females of Abu Bakr's and Muhammad's families, including Prophet's child-wife Aisha, were still left behind. They set off for Medina after a few more days like nothing had happened (Ibn Ishaq, p219-221).

The departure of the Muslim community from Mecca was completed. Muhammad arrived in Medina on 21 June 622 CE to a hero's welcome from his eagerly awaiting disciples, from Mecca and Medina combined.

Muhammad took about six months to build a communal abode for his community. Once his community comfortably settled, there came time for revenge against the Quraysh for rejecting his faith. Quraysh's rejection of Muhammad's creed, as described in the Quran—"to prevent access to the path of Allah, to deny Him, to prevent access to the Sacred Mosque, and drive out its members"—became tantamount to "Tumult and oppression," which in turn was "worse than slaughter" (Quran 2:217).

Thereupon, Allah sanctioned Jihad or Holy war upon the Muslims to "fight them (Quraysh) on until there is no more Tumult or oppression (ie, rejection of Islam & practice of idolatry), and there prevail justice and faith in Allah" (Quran 2:193). Muslims must "slay them (Quraysh idolaters) wherever ye catch them, and turn them out from where they have turned you out" (Quran 2:191). In other words, Muslims must

take upon a mission exterminate the idolater Quraysh from Mecca once and for all.

For those Muslims, who did not like fighting as it involved violence and even bloodbath—they still had to fight, because: “Fighting (Jihad) is prescribed for you (by Allah), and ye dislike it. But it is possible that ye dislike a thing which is good for you, and that ye love a thing which is bad for you. But Allah knoweth, and ye know not” (Quran 2:216).

Having Jihad made an obligatory duty on all Muslims; Prophet Muhammad started sending his armed comrades in search of trade-caravans from Mecca to plunder them. Prophet himself pursued a few caravans; but they escaped before the messenger of Allah could be there on time. The first success came in January 624 at Nakhla, 9 days’ way from Medina and only 2 days’ from Mecca. In the attack, one of the Quraysh attending the caravan was killed, two taken captive and another managed to flee. The raiders returned to Medina with the rich booty and two prisoners. The latter were ransomed bringing more revenue for the Prophet.

But, it was the sacred month of Rajab in which fighting was prohibited in Arabian tradition. This bloodbath, therefore, created unhappiness among the people of Medina and the region, including among Prophet’s disciples. Allah made this illegal holy-month attack and bloodbath justified claiming

that the 'Tumult and Oppression' (ie, the rejection of Allah's religion) committed by the Quraysh was "worse than (the) slaughter," which his henchmen committed at Nakhla:

"They ask thee concerning fighting in the Prohibited Month. Say: "Fighting therein is a grave (offence); but graver is it in the sight of Allah to prevent access to the path of Allah, to deny Him, to prevent access to the Sacred Mosque, and drive out its members." Tumult and oppression are worse than slaughter" (Quran 2:217).

In a couple of months, the Prophet pursued another huge caravan returning from Syria under the care of Quraysh leader Abu Sufyan. This led to the bloody battle of Badr, in which the Quraysh got defeated. Some 50 Quraysh were slain and similar number captured, while Muhammad's side lost only 15 Jihadists.

Muhammad's violent plundering raids one after another and such bloodbaths, rather uncommon in Arabia, enraged some conscientious intellectuals of Medina. There was among them the first Taslima, named Asma bte Marwan – a poetess. She composed poetic verses disparaging Muhammad's heinous acts and railed the men of Medina for allowing such as a bloodthirsty person settle in their community, who had no regard for life whatsoever even of his own kinfolk of Mecca.

As her verses spread quickly, an exasperated Muhammad said: "'Who will rid me of Marwan's daughter?" Umayr, a disciple of Muhammad, took up the job of finishing Asma off. On one night, Umayr stealthily entered Asma's apartment, when she was deep asleep with her suckling baby on her bosom. Umayr removed the child quietly and plunged his sword into her breast with such force that it got stuck onto the couch. The next day at the mosque prayer, the Prophet thanked Umayr: 'You have helped God and His apostle, O 'Umayr" (Ibn Ishaq, p675-6).

Umayr belonged to Asma's clan and when he was returning from upper Medina and passed by Asma's sons burying their mother—they accused him of killing her, to which he responded that "if they dared to repeat things such as she had uttered, he would slay the whole clan of them" (William Muir, *The Life of Mahomet*, London, p240).

The next intellectual to be in line to embrace the same fate was another poet, 120-year old Abu Afak. Horrified by the bloodthirsty zeal of Muhammad's followers in the name of their God and religion—he wrote verses condemning his actions. He even wrote a poem to incite the Quraysh to take revenge against Muhammad's Badr massacre without regard for kinship whatsoever. The prophet sent another disciple, named Salim, to finish him off (Ibn Ishaq, p675).

There started Islam's journey of Holy terror or Jihad against the intellectuals, critical of Islam. Six years later when Muhammad conquered Mecca in 630 CE, he ordered death penalty of 10-12 people, who had criticized, strongly opposed, or, apostatized from, his creed. Those belonging to influential families were spared upon reconciliation achieved by lobbying from their families. Finally, four persons were executed, among whom were two singing-girls, who had composed songs ridiculing Muhammad (Muir, p392-3).

Four centuries later, we meet great blasphemous thinker Ibn Sina, who considered that Greek Philosophy was revealed truth, not the Quran; and that Aristotle and Plato were greater than Muhammad. Enraged by this, the jealous Sunni and barbaric invader of India, Sultan Mahmud ordered hunting Ibn Sina down. To save his life, Ibn Sina fled to Egypt to take refuge under the deviant (Ismaili) Fatimid rulers. Some two centuries later in 1190s, the great thinker Ibn Rushd, a commentator on Aristotelian philosophy, got banished from Spain for his heretical views. French author, Renan writes, "Not a Musalman philosopher and scholar escaped persecution... who passed half their life in prison, in forced hiding..." (Ibn Warraq, *Why I am Not a Muslim*, p274).

Continuing in Prophet's footsteps, we witness his steadfast followers putting his writ into action in India. The Prophet must be delighted sitting among at least 72 celestial virgins in Paradise. However, the Muslims in India deviated a little from

Prophet's protocols by alerting Taslima beforehand, saving her from embracing the fate of Asma. Muhammad sent his assassins to Asma and Abu Afak quietly without altering them. Muslims in India have failed to emulate Prophet's example in meticulous detail. Infidel observers may see this as a sign of their progress towards civility. But Allah and His Prophet may not be all too happy by this lapse of theirs.

Islam watch, 28 Nov, 2007

Trite and evasive : Forces of change & continuity

Editorial

The Chief Minister has been diplomatically evasive in his first public comments since the 21 November violence in Kolkata. While addressing a captive audience of the West Bengal Minorities Development and Finance Corporation, he offered a fairly stiff dose of homilies

that are valid for all time. Thus was he able to skirt the issue on which West Bengal has been expecting to hear from him for more than a week. His response to the topically critical issue of the communal violence and Taslima Nasreen's exit from the city remains muted. Hence the continuing speculation on a hugely sensitive matter ~ whether or not the government was privy to her departure; the reported differences between the Police Commissioner and the author; and now the attempt by the previous incumbent to pass the buck onto the home secretary. As the Chief Minister of a state that played host to Taslima as long as it did, Mr Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee owes a clarification to civil society on an issue of national import. He owes an explanation too on last week's violence that stranded hundreds of thousands, notably school children. His remarks on "violence in the name of religion" were generic, trite and somewhat out of place considering that the forum consisted of meritorious Muslim students who had been invited to receive loans. Equally irrelevant on the occasion was the suggestion that "those trying to fan such violence should be driven away". Tough talk indeed on the part of a Chief Minister whose government capitulated last Wednesday in the face of fundamentalist fury.

What Mr Bhattacharjee had to say on advancement of learning wasn't convincing either. Much as he wants to modernise the madrasa syllabi, the fact remains that there has been considerable opposition from within his party to the proposal, notably from the former school education minister, Kanti Biswas. The Chief Minister has drawn parallels with Indonesia and Pakistan. He ought to acknowledge that Parvez Musharraf has at least been able to make registration of madrasas mandatory. Here in Bengal, the government has been pretty much helpless in the face of the mushroom growth of such centres of unaffiliated instruction. And it is a tall order if he expects the kids to balance the "study of religious literature" with knowledge of "modern things like computers". They may turn out to be the victims of the clash between the forces of continuity and the forces of change.

The Statesman/29 Nov

Authoring a bungle

Kuldip Nayar

IT was a case of political asylum. The government of India bungled it because of the fear of fundamentalists. It could not take the stand that a democratic, secular country would, not bow before their demand to oust Taslima Nasreen, an intrepid author of Bangladesh.

She was living in Kolkata with a visa till Feb 17, 2008. She wanted a permanent residence or citizenship. (The government has moved her to some place beyond the public gaze.)

In fact, all political parties, except the BJP, have more or less rejected an asylum for her. Even the Left has not supported her case. The BJP has done it to exploit the situation. Put M.F. Hussain, the world famous painter, in place of Taslima, the party's stand stays exposed. Its foot soldiers have threatened to kill him if he returns to India. His paintings of Hindu goddesses irritate the fanatics who have filed dozens of cases against him.

Both instances when boiled down relate to freedom of expression which has been threatened. That it should happen in India which is proud of its ethos of pluralism is a point of concern. Fundamentalists in every religion want to open the door for communalism.

Yet, once they find it ajar, they would even break it. India faces the same dilemma. It should not compromise on principles. But the erosion is already visible.

Great Britain, with all its racial prejudice, has proved to be far more liberal than India. Hussain is living in London which has become a Mecca for dissenters and conscientious objectors. I had imagined that India would one day be a rendezvous of revolutionaries and others who raised the standard of revolt against their autocratic regimes.

I even thought that leaders from Pakistan and Bangladesh would come to Delhi instead of going to London, Dubai or New York.

One other instance which has dismayed me is the centre's attitude towards a leading editor who was harassed by Bangladesh. I tried my best to fix his interview with officials in key positions in the government. He wanted to stay in Delhi. But none met him.

The government was afraid of Dhaka's reaction. India, under Jawaharlal Nehru, was a different country. He had a vision and could see the country becoming a meeting point of different ideologies and people from different climes. He welcomed the Dalai Lama at a time when he required the best of relations with China.

Yet he preferred Indian values to Beijing's threats. In contrast, the Manmohan Singh government led by the same party, the Congress, issued instructions to its ministers not to attend the felicitation ceremony of the Dalai Lama.

Therefore, it was not surprising to see the centre quibbling over the status of Taslima. It was just scared lest the asylum should annoy Indian Muslims.

This is unfair to them because they are not a community of obscurantists. Nor is Islam against a liberal approach. But my great disappointment is over the reaction of leading Muslim organisations in the country.

The All India Milli Council which often holds seminars on pluralism says that she had "not behaved as a gentle lady of an international dimension".

The Jamiat-i-Islami which supports a secular front expressed its regret that the violence in Kolkata was not a sudden

outpouring of anger but the demand by several Muslim organisations for revocation of Taslima's visa for many months. Jamiat Ulema-i-Hind, very close to the Congress, says: "Let her not stay in any part of the country. Send her back. You cannot put the entire country at stake for her sake."

I wish these organisations, honourable as they are, would tell me what she said against Islam. Her first book, *Lajja* (shame) was no piece of literature but described vividly the anti-Hindu riots in Bangladesh after the demolition of the Babri masjid.

The 1993 writing is still haunting her. The protesters against Taslima in Kolkata do not realise that they have communalised the whole issue of Nandigram.

Already, the BJP is pointing out at its poll meetings in Gujarat how "intolerant and fanatic" Muslims have turned out to be in their reaction to Taslima.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) has been most disappointing. It has taken an anti-Taslima stand. I have always heard Brinda Karat, the politburo member, taking up the cause of women. But when it came to Taslima she was just silent, not even seen anywhere.

Her party's key functionary, Sitaram Yechuri, said that the West Bengal government did not force Taslima to go from Kolkata while the fact was that two officials of the state government put her in a flight to Jaipur despite per protests.

It has come to light that the administration was badgering her for a long time to leave Kolkata. The CPM which claims to protect democratic and secular forces has surrendered before fundamentalists for the sake of votes.

The emerging third alternative, swearing by secularism, has said that Taslima must apologise. What is her fault? Is it because she has written in favour of the afflicted women in Bangladesh?

In fact, what is visible is minority communalism. The recent blasts at Varanasi, Azamgarh and Lucknow have pointed a finger at it.

Two years ago, I would say that Muslims in India did not go to Afghanistan when there was a call for jihad. They did not go to Kashmir to fight because they were aware of the country's sensitivities.

I cannot say that now because it is clear to me that a soft kind of parochialism has infected Indian Muslims.

Whether the Al Qaeda or the Taliban have infiltrated the country is not as relevant as the fact that terrorists get logistic support from within India and are given shelter here.

The justification given for this are the riots in Gujarat and the destruction of the Babri masjid in Ayodhya which are like a millstone of guilt around the nation's neck.

Yet, there have been vehement criticism of the happenings and till today there is no slackening of the anger in the media.

Responsible for the two tragedies, BJP lost the government at the centre because of them. The common man is tolerant and believes in the tradition which is secular in content. But what should he do? His life revolves around daily living and he mixes with different communities in the process.

He has been conscious of Hindu fundamentalism for some time because of the BJP, the Shiv Sena and the Bajrang Dal. Now he also has to reckon with Muslim fundamentalism which he suspected to be there but has not seen it in concrete form. He is insecure. Yet his antenna tells him that the country's soul is intact, although many Hindus and many Muslims have got contaminated.

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Dawn/30 Nov, Gulf News/1 Dec

Secularism is not about appeasing terrorists

Bhaskar Roy

the Taslima Nasreen issue is no longer about the writer. It has revealed a much larger conspiracy in the making.

In a surprising decision, the Marxist government of West Bengal literally bundled out progressive Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen from the State on November 22. Visibly agitated, senior CPM Minister Biman Basu sharply told the media that if Taslima Nasreen's presence was causing disturbances, she must leave the State immediately.

The State government's action sent shockwaves across the nation, particularly among the secular Indian diaspora. West Bengal has been one of the most secular and non-communal states in the country. It has been ruled by the Communists -- who proudly tout their secular ideology -- for 30 years without a break. The Marxist ideology as protectors of the have-nots helped the CPM get a captive vote-bank. The mass migration of Muslims from Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) form a sizable chunk of this vote-bank. Most of these refugees have acquired Indian citizenship through illegal means, helped by CPM cadres. While Hindu refugees who fled communal persecution in Bangladesh may not have become supporters of the CPM as a whole, the Muslims have generally remained loyal to the party.

Taslima Nasreen was hounded out of her country by Muslim fundamentalists, who announced a fatwa on her head. A sensitive and liberal woman, Taslima's fault was writing a novel about how Hindus were attacked, and particularly women were raped and pillaged by her Muslim countrymen in reaction to the Babri Masjid demolition and the Bombay

riots in India. She was incensed by the Bangladeshi government's impotence, as it stood by without taking any action against these barbaric acts.

Most of the people who accuse Taslima Nasreen of insulting Islam and the Prophet Mohammed have not read her book *Lajja* (Shame). There was no such intention on Taslima's part. She was trying to expose the vicious socio-political issue created by Islamic fundamentalists in Bangladesh to expand their grip on society and the government. Fundamentalist parties like the Jamaat-e-Islami, Islamic Oikyo Jote and others were in the ascendancy when the protests against Taslima erupted in Bangladesh in the 1990s. It was the period when both the BNP (1991–1996) and the Awami League governments (1996–2001) were wooing the Islamists for votes. Taslima Nasreen was dispensable.

The rise of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism under government patronage in Bangladesh since then has been obvious on both sides of the Indo–Bangladesh border. There is a connection between Bangladeshi terrorism and the demand of the fundamentalists in Kolkata during the November 21 bandh, which took on a communal hue.

The Nandigram issue was deliberately mixed up with protests against Taslima's stay in Kolkata. Unfortunately, the Trinamool Congress and the Congress used this for petty political

mileage against the CPM, not caring that it furthered and encouraged an anti-national fundamentalist threat.

The violent protests in Kolkata on November 21 were well choreographed in advance. Disturbances were engineered in specific areas to enable hit and run tactics, and target the CPM offices. The Taslima Nasreen issue did not come in accidentally. It was part of the plan.

The All India Minority Forum (AIMF), a little known organisation, spearheaded the protests. What contacts does this group have within and outside the country? Similar questions need to be raised about Jamaat-e-Ulema-e-Hind. For years, the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) was wooed by political parties for vote, until its diabolical anti-national nature was exposed.

The fundamentalists had been pressuring the West Bengal authorities to expel Taslima for quite some time. There were some small, scattered protests. But attempts to get her books banned were quashed by the High Court. By ignoring the decision of the court, the Muslim fundamentalists are rebelling against the Constitution of India.

The West Bengal government made a show of rehabilitating Kutubuddin Ansari, a tailor who was a victim of the Gujarat riots. He was the famous face of the Muslim victims. But today, these protectors of secularism decided to throw out Taslima Nasreen, following pressure from Islamic

fundamentalists. Whether the CPM government in West Bengal has realised it or not, by expelling Taslima from Kolkata they have succumbed to the fundamentalists in the state, who have links with the Islamic fundamentalists and terrorists in neighbouring Bangladesh. This expulsion would further encourage the rise of Islamic terrorism in the state, which will then flow into other parts of the country.

Intelligence agencies have evidence linking Bangladesh with a number of terrorist attacks in the heartland of India – from the attack on the STF headquarters in Hyderabad, on the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, and on Sankatmochan Temple in Varanasi among others.

The border area of West Bengal with Bangladesh, especially the Murshidabad belt, has been used for safe houses for these terrorists who are primarily funded by Pakistan's ISI through Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi Islamic terrorist organisation, the Jamaatul Muslim Bangladesh (JMB), established its first 'foreign cell' in Murshidabad.

Bangladesh based terrorist organisations like the JMB, HuJI, Ahle Hadis Bangladesh are increasingly active in areas bordering West Bengal. Their major arms training is, however, in the hill tracts of Chittagong and Sylhet. All these organisations are linked to Pakistan's ISI, the al Qaeda and its International Islamic Front (IIF). Islamists have suborned large

sections of the population in West Bengal, specially in the border areas.

A lot of time has been lost, but the moment has come to pull down the shutters firmly on vote politics and ensure the security of the country.

Secularism is not appeasing fundamentalism and terrorism. The November 21 incidents could have led to communal riots in Kolkata. Fundamentalism, whether Muslim or Hindu, is a challenge which must be taken very seriously. The Taslima Nasreen issue is no longer about Taslima Nasreen the writer. It has revealed a much larger conspiracy in the making.

It was a test case, and the CPM's decision has conveyed to the Islamic fundamentalists that they have won round one.

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Sify.com/ 01 Dec

The Taslima Controversy

Vir Sangvi

I knew, last week, that I would be expected to write about the Taslima Nasreen controversy. I chose not to for a variety of reasons, the most important of which was exhaustion.

How many times can one make the same points again and again? How many times will readers be expected to read more or less identical liberal-outrage pieces on Taslima, all of which make roughly the same points? Frankly, there's not much left to say on this subject that I haven't said already or that others haven't written on these pages.

But because the Taslima controversy refuses to go away, I'm going to have to devote this week's Counterpoint to the subject. You will forgive me if I don't rehash the usual free-speech-is-a-basic-right arguments all over again. For the record, yes, I believe in freedom of expression, in the fight against religious fundamentalism and all the other worthy values that we are expected to subscribe to, so you can take those as a given.

My concern this Sunday is less with the actual controversy than with the manner in which all of us and especially the intellectual establishment have reacted to Taslima's enforced flight from Calcutta and to what it says about the current state of the liberal consensus.

I have very little patience with people who act as though they always regarded free speech as an absolute value. I am something of an uncompromising fundamentalist on the subject of freedom of expression but let's not forget that no matter what they say now, Indian liberals have traditionally been willing to trample on free speech in the name of religious sensitivity.

Most of you will remember the fatwa against Salman Rushdie over *The Satanic Verses*. What you may have forgotten is that even though Ayotollah Khomeini signed the death warrant, he was provoked not by the book itself — which he had never read — but by the actions of educated Indians.

It happened like this. Penguin was supposed to publish the Indian edition of *The Satanic Verses*. The manuscript went to Khushwant Singh, then Penguin's consulting editor, who read it and pointed out that Muslims would find the book incredibly offensive. Khushwant's views were communicated to the Penguin management who decided not to publish *The Satanic Verses* in India for the fear of provoking riots.

Shrabani Basu, then the London correspondent for *Sunday magazine*, went to interview Rushdie and asked him about Penguin India's reservations. In a now-famous remark notable for its mixture of hubris and ignorance, Rushdie responded, "It is a funny view of the world to think that a book can cause riots."

When Shrabani's interview appeared in *Sunday*, along with a piece outlining the contents of *The Satanic Verses*, Syed Shahabuddin demanded a ban on the book. The matter was referred to the then home minister Buta Singh. He promptly decided to forbid the sale of *The Satanic Verses*.

Even though the book had been banned, various Muslim organisations in India and Pakistan then took it upon themselves to demonstrate outside British Council offices and to burn cars — apparently to register their outrage that such a book had ever been written. Ayotollah Khomeini saw one such demonstration on TV and issued his fatwa.

The most notable aspect of the genesis of the fatwa is that nobody who called for the ban had read the book, except for Khushwant Singh — and he was ambivalent. Shahabuddin went by the Sunday piece. There is no evidence that Buta Singh knows how to read. And by the time the demonstrations began, the book was unavailable for the protestors to read, anyway.

How should liberals react to a demand for a ban from people who haven't even read the book? Judging by the current public response to Taslima, we should have all spoken up for free speech then. In fact, we did no such thing.

Khushwant Singh's view became the prevailing consensus and the widely-accepted liberal argument was that as regrettable as it is to ban a book, it is far better to impose such a ban than to risk riots and public disorder. No book is worth the loss of lives.

It intrigues me that many of the same people who cheerfully acquiesced in *The Satanic Verses* ban are now singing a different tune. Could it be that the liberal consensus has shifted? Have we all changed our minds on where to draw the line restricting freedom of expression? Or do we just have double standards?

Another interesting aspect of the Taslima controversy is the extent to which it has become an exercise in Left-bashing.

State governments ban books all the time. A Congress government prevented the distribution of a scholarly book on Shivaji in Maharashtra, for instance. The BJP's record is especially shameful. Sangh Parivar thugs prevented Deepa Mehta's *Water* from being shot in Banaras while the government did nothing to protect the unit. And, of course, the Husain controversy is still fresh in our minds.

So, why has the Left received so much flak? Writing in the *HT* on Friday, Sitaram Yechury suggested that we were being unfair to the CPM by looking at the Taslima controversy in isolation. Of course, he's right. But the Left has painted itself into a corner. Every time there's an attack on Husain or on a cinema hall showing *Fire*, assorted fellow travellers and crypto-Communist 'secular' organisations march in the streets in favour of free speech.

The truth, of course, is that only in India do we make a bizarre association between Communism, a totalitarian ideology that has little respect for human rights and whose leading lights have murdered millions of people, and liberal freedoms. But because the Left has rushed in to occupy this space, it is judged on different standards from other political parties. And so, the liberal outrage is greater when Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee behaves in a manner that we might expect from, say, Murli Manohar Joshi.

Plus, I have a growing sense that the liberal consensus has turned against the Left. There are many reasons for this shift, including the rising prosperity of the liberal elite. But, the most obvious ones include the spoilt-child behaviour of the CPM as a constituent of the UPA, the suspicion that the opposition to the nuclear deal was motivated by patriotism on behalf of China rather than India, and anger over the coup staged by CPM cadres in Nandigram.

Much of the outrage over Taslima has nothing to do with her. It's just become another stick to beat the CPM with. And I also think that Sitaram is right when he says that it's silly to compare Bengal with Gujarat. As much as I disapprove of how the Left has behaved, I do not see how comparisons to mass murder can be sustained.

And finally, the Taslima controversy shows us how much Indian liberals have matured in our understanding of secularism. *The Satanic Verses* controversy demonstrated our double standards in the 1980s — Hindus should learn to take it on the chin but we must be very careful not to offend Muslims.

My sense is that we are now much more even handed in our approach to religious fundamentalism.

I sensed this first in the manner in which we regarded the Muslim political leadership's attempts to turn the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad into a domestic

political issue in India. There's no doubt that pious Muslims would have found the Danish cartoons deeply offensive (if they had seen them; most people know they exist but have never actually seen the cartoons themselves), but liberals felt that a) there's no reason why non-believers should consider their freedoms circumscribed by the standards of pious believers, and b) that even if some Scandinavian had insulted the Prophet, this had very little to do with us in India.

It's always dangerous to draw broad general conclusions from a single event so I will be careful in claiming that I detect a tectonic shift in the liberal consensus. But even so, it does seem to me that we now regard free speech as more important than we ever have, that the Left has lost its status as the favourite party of the well-meaning but moderately-informed artist and intellectual, and that we are finally treating Muslim communalists with the firmness that we previously applied only to Hindu fundamentalists.

Regardless of how things turn out with Taslima, these are still positive steps and genuine gains for Indian liberalism.

Hindustan Times/ 01 Dec

Competitive Intolerance

Editorial

For all but the most fanatical, Bangladesh writer Taslima Nasreen's announcement that she would remove from her book *Dwikhandita* the portions critical of Islam that were regarded as objectionable should bring to a close the controversy that sparked violent protests in Kolkata and earlier in Hyderabad. Her decision itself was a pragmatic concession to the intolerant who would seem to be beyond reason. It was preceded by some deft handling of the situation by Union External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee. His statement on the issue made in Parliament was categorical that Ms Nasreen would be unconditionally permitted to live in India and provided security. This was followed by pronouncements in the nature of advice that guests in India were expected to refrain from political activities and from making statements that would hurt the sentiments of the people. It was heartening to note the widespread support Ms Nasreen obtained when Islamic extremists represented by the All India Minority Forum in Kolkata and the MIM in Hyderabad launched their attacks

on her. Not to be missed, however, was the hypocrisy of some Hindu extremist forces who rushed to her defence. These very forces were at the forefront of the campaign against the renowned artist M.F. Husain for his depiction of Hindu deities, a campaign that included vicious street demonstrations and dozens of court cases and virtually forced him to flee the country. Similar protests followed Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi's disputing the existence of an ancient bridge between India and Sri Lanka across the Palk Straits as described in the Ramayana, and earlier Deepa Mehta's film *Fire*. It needs to be emphasised that freedom of expression is indivisible and if it applies to Ms Nasreen's critical references to Islamic figures and doctrine, it should apply equally to criticism of other religions, including Hinduism, Christianity, and Sikhism.

It is to ward off the charge of double standards that religious establishments the world over, who should be placing their faith in the strength of their doctrines rather than in the sanctions of the criminal law, are united in their demand for legal protection and immunity for all religions from criticism. Yet in most democracies there is an increasing realisation that legal mechanisms are inappropriate for dealing with matters of faith. Nowhere is this more marked than in the United States where the Supreme Court has declared unequivocally: "It is not the business of government in our nation to suppress real or imagined attacks upon a particular

religious doctrine...” In the United Kingdom, the blasphemy law that affords protection only to the doctrine of the Church of England is rarely invoked and there have been only two prosecutions since 1922, the last in 1977. It needs to be noted that criticism, however strong, does not curtail the religious rights of others — for in a democratic and pluralist society what any religious group can demand is respect for its right to practise its religion, not respect for its doctrine to the extent of curtailing the freedom of expression of others. On the other hand, in the interest of maintaining harmony and public order, the state ought to curb hate speech that targets a religious group and incites discrimination and violence against it.

It is ironic that in India hate mongers who foment disaffection and violence among religious communities go unpunished, while a writer, an artist, or a film-maker making critical references to a religion, at times even unwittingly, is often harassed through criminal cases. The Indian Penal Code contains extensive provisions that penalise offences against religion and religious groups. Some — such as the one barring the promotion of “disharmony or feelings of enmity, hatred or ill will” between religious groups (Section 153A (1)) and the one that deals with disrupting worship and ceremonies in a place of worship (Section 153A (2)) — are intended to safeguard public order and protect the religious rights of others. On the other hand, Section 295A, which is

perhaps the most extensive blasphemy law applicable to all religions, provides for three years' imprisonment to anyone who, with the "deliberate and malicious intention of outraging the religious feelings" of any class of citizens, "insults or attempts to insult the religion or the religious beliefs of that class."

It is this omnibus section that has turned into an instrument of harassment of writers, artists, and film-makers. In justification, it is argued that given the intense, and often violent, reaction that any attack on religious beliefs provokes, it is necessary to bar speech that offends religious sentiments. However, as the European Court of Human Rights pointed out, freedom of expression extends not merely to ideas that are received favourably or are inoffensive but also to those that "offend, shock or disturb the State or any sector of the population" — a position that has been endorsed by the Supreme Court of India. As for the hostile audience problem, the Supreme Court declared categorically in the case of the film *Ore Oru Gramathile* (S. Rangarajan v P. Jagjivan Ram) that if speech cannot be constitutionally restricted on any of the grounds specified in Article 19(2), "freedom of expression cannot be suppressed on account of threat of demonstration and processions or threats of violence." Since what is insulting or offensive is judged on a religion's own terms, orthodox and fundamentalist groups within every religion are allowed to arrogate to themselves the right to set the parameters of

public discourse. The increasing use of Section 295A in the recent period has underlined the dangers of competitive intolerance curtailing the space available for freedom of expression. The section is clearly not in consonance with democratic and constitutional values and it is time it was removed from the statute book.

The Hindu / 05 Dec

'If treated like Taslima, I'd give up writing'

Arundhati Roy/Karan Thapar/ interview

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 Prize- winning 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. 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 bread.

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 writer like Taslima Nasreen can undermine the dignity of 10 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.*

CNN-IBN/ 02 Dec

Wonder that was India

Pranab skirts the critical issue

Editorial

Taslima Nasreen's decision to delete the controversial portions from Dwikhandito is clearly intended to mollify the fundamentalists. Yet for all the proud boast of India's "civilisational heritage", Mr Pranab Mukherjee's statement in Parliament skirted the most critical issue concerning the feminist author from Bangladesh ~ whether the Government of India will extend her visa. On that singular issue will depend whether or not she will be able to stay in this country and, equally important, whether the fundamentalists will be restive again. As the minister for external affairs, which sets the visa guidelines, the immediate conclusion must be that

he doesn't seem to have an answer just yet. Short of such an assurance his statement is wholly inadequate, almost perfunctory. The author has been in the limelight since 1994 owing to a controversy too many. She has been asked by the minister to "hold her tongue", a caveat that has been applicable to Dalai Lama as well. It must be conceded that in the recent past, she has not indulged in any activity that "might harm India's relations with friendly countries". It is a different matter that Bhutan is the only country that fits into that category. The indirect message is that Taslima's stay in India has been made conditional, a matter of subjective reflection on the part of the government, Centre or state. Was Mr Mukherjee attempting a renewed discovery of what AL Basham called The Wonder that was India ? If the "civilisational heritage" was indeed so vibrant and intact, Kolkata would not have witnessed the kind of violence that it did on 21 November. Still less would it have allowed Taslima to be shown the door. If the Bengal Left has deliberately ignored that heritage, so too has the Rajasthan Right. The compulsion for both is identical ~ it would be dangerous to upset the electoral applecart.

Mr Mukherjee's statement in both Houses was the first Central version on the controversy. And yet there was no explanation as to why Taslima had to leave Bengal or why she has had to move thrice from city to city in the span of a week. Clearly, he didn't want to ruffle feathers within the CPI-M when there is life yet in the debate on the nuclear deal.

Notably, he has left the Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee administration out of the discourse although the author's exit has raised the question of literary freedom in a communist state. Well may the Bharatiya Janata Party cavil that the statement is "meaningless and incomplete". It might as well have added that the discourse on India's cultural history was irrelevant.

The Statesman/02 Dec

Taslima and the Bengali literati

Bikas Basu

It's not difficult to see that West Bengal's present Left Front government considers Taslima Nasreen's hasty exit from Kolkata "a good riddance". The government's role in the affair, both overt and covert, though not unexpected, is worth analysing. To sum it up in one word, the reason why she had to go was ~ vote. It is a truth, acknowledged across the country, that to stay in power here one cannot ignore the minority votebank (27 per cent of the total electorate).

Another unpleasant but more or less uncontested truth is that the votebank in question is not as a whole as it used to be after Nandigram and the murky events surrounding the death of Rizwanur Rehman. So, the question of giving asylum to a writer who was a foreigner (so what if her humanism and secular stance are exemplary?) at the cost of losing precious votes does not arise.

There is nothing much to discuss on the issue of Nasreen vis-a-vis the state government. We are aware of the government's political compulsions. It was because of these constraints that the state government was forced to ban *Dwikhandito* (Split), a volume of her autobiography. The ban had been set aside after a court ruling. As a minor writer who lives and works in this state, I feel for Nasreen.

After Nasreen was packed off to Rajasthan following mob outrage demanding her ouster and given temporary asylum, courtesy the Rajasthan government, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Bengal's celebrity litterateur, told a TV channel: "Taslima is helpless". How safe and naïve a comment to make in response to a development that signifies an existential crisis for writers! I would like to ask if the writers and intellectuals of this state have taken any effective step that would end the state of helplessness that an honest and intrepid writer like Nasreen is in.

The spontaneous participation of writers and intellectuals in the *mahamichhil* to protest against the massacre and rampage at Nandigram made an impact. At least, it made the rulers realise that lawlessness cannot prevail at all times and that justice will catch up. If the men who run this state were not so shameless, we would have a more civil administration by now.

The mockery of democracy in Nandigram warranted a protest rally as huge as it got. It's a grave issue. One can, at least, hope that the crisis at Nandigram will, eventually, be resolved. The fundamentalist rage and attack on Nasreen is being sustained over the years. It is free speech that is under threat here, it has been made a victim of orthodox beliefs and prejudice. It's a trend that has surfaced time and again, in different forms. A more sustained campaign against such misdirected fundamentalist anger was perhaps the need of the hour. But most of the intellectuals in West Bengal seem to have done their bit by giving television bytes. Does the well-thought-out silence and inaction on the part of her fellow writers surprise Nasreen? Probably not. When her book *Dwikhandito* banned, after the chief minister had supposedly talked it over with 40 intellectuals who endorsed the decision, Nasreen had probably sensed a class difference between herself and her fellow writers on this side of the border. She did not really belong to the charmed circle. (Immediately after she chose to set up home in Kolkata, I wrote to her that her dreams may soon come to nought. *Dwikhandito* was banned in the state soon afterwards.)

Not too many writers on this side of the border have the kind of honesty and courage that Nasreen has shown. A novel like *Fera* (*The Return*) ought to have been written by a writer who had experience of migrating from East Bengal to West. But, apparently, few of them have the honesty, courage and

respect for truth, that Nasreen has. A lot of writing by present-day writers has been translated from Bengali to English and other European languages, but none had an impact across the world as big as Nasreen's.

The reason was because these writers did not write with the kind of conviction that Nasreen did. I do not know of any writer in Bengali who has written anything as incisive and brilliant as Salman Rushdie's *The Prophet's Hair*. A super blend of fantasy and satire, the story is an artistic critique of religious bias and blind faith that unfolds in the few days between the imaginary disappearance and return of the Prophet's lock from the Hazratbal shrine. It takes a gutsy writer to attempt the unsparing and powerful criticism of Islamic fundamentalism of Nasreen or Rushdie. No present-day writer in the Bengali language has dared so far.

The Bengali intelligentsia is practically rather insensitive when it comes to freedom of expression. In the span of a few years, Cuba was twice the focal theme country at the Kolkata Book Fair, the same country where books have to be approved by the government to be published. It didn't seem to bother any of the litterateurs here. No one said a word. It's a bit foolhardy to expect these writers to now stand by the exiled writer and make sure that she is brought back with appropriate security arrangements.

They seem content with paying lip service to her. Nasreen was perhaps mistaken here. She thought she was safe in a land where people spoke her own language. But this is a different Bengal, miles away from what Rabindranath Tagore called, "Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high." Nasreen's literary "friends" would rather follow what the poet Sankha Ghosh once mockingly called, "Line-ei chhilam Baba. (I am toeing your line, Boss.)"

Let me share an example. The last time Nasreen was physically attacked by the Islamic fundamentalists in Hyderabad, the poet Subodh Sarkar told a TV channel, "Taslima is free to live in India. But let her be shanto (calm) while she is here." In other words, be a good girl while you are in India. Nasreen is determined not to give up being bad. She will keep writing what she believes is true. Let Sarkar continue to be "good", "proper" and "politically correct" when he is writing, Nasreen is incapable of such correctness. The secular establishment, comprising secular snobs of West Bengal, are at a loss when it comes to Nasreen.

While the author, a relentless crusader of human rights, cutting across race and religion, feels a free discussion of Islam is warranted, even indispensable, her fellow intellectuals on this side of the border see it as taboo, or, as they would put it, "sensitive matter". Their support towards Nasreen is not unconditional or at the cost of offending the Islamists.

During the time Nasreen had found asylum in Europe, she would often touch down on Kolkata just to breathe and feel the Bengali language. This was compensation for not being able to visit her home in Bangladesh. Like her Hindu heroine in *Fera*, there was no way she could set foot on her homeland. That's when a heavyweight intellectual from West Bengal cautioned her, "Don't come here so often." Is the West Bengal government so weak that it cannot protect a writer from Islamic fundamentalists?

Immediately after Nasreen was hounded out of her country following the controversial *Lajja* (Shame), Annadashankar Roy, the revered thinker and writer, had told her, "Keep writing about women's emancipation; that's not against Islam".

While she is writing on women's issues, if Nasreen is constrained by not being able to say a word against Islam, who is she up against, after all? She has been vocal in running down the Hindu fundamentalist practices that warranted criticism but why must she draw back while critiquing Islamic fundamentalism?

It looks like Nasreen's time in India is running out. And that undesirable eventuality ~ a whole-hearted humanist's exit from a land which she wanted to adopt as her own ~ will be

a matter of shame for us, Indians. Nobody except the politicians and intellectuals who want to play it safe are keen to see her go. Her harassment in this country is reprehensible. We should have honoured this brave and sensitive writer with a Deshikottama award, not shut the door on her face.

Evidently, the minds of Bengali intellectuals are not without fear any more, as Rabindranath Tagore had envisaged. Will they be able to hold their heads high ever again?

The Statesman/ 02 Dec

Taslima Case: Attack on Artistic Freedom

Praful Bidwai

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

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

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

The West Bengal government wants to minimise its role in expelling Nasreen from Kolkata, one day after a violent rally held by the little-known, but originally Congress-backed, All-India Minority Forum, which brought the army to the city for the first time since 1992. Some Left Front leaders claim she left Kolkata of her own will and is welcome to return.

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

Mr Bose hastily retracted the statement, but meanwhile, reports 'The Indian Express,' the city police had asked two businessmen belonging to the Rajasthan Foundation to "facilitate" her exit, which they did. She discovered she was headed for Jaipur only when a police officer handed over the ticket to her. Nasreen's move was certainly not voluntary.

She's clear that Kolkata is her home and she wants to return there.

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

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

Muslims form more than 25 per cent of West Bengal's population, but their representation in government employment is an appalling 2.1 per cent. (The respective ratios even for Gujarat are 9.2 per cent). Instead of remedying this failure of inclusion through purposive affirmative action, the Front resorted to gimmicks of the kind

that it itself criticises other parties for, including pandering, to religious bigots. However, the Left's timidity in the face of religious hardliners pales in comparison beside the breathtaking duplicity of the Bharatiya Janata Party and its allies. The BJP parades itself as a saviour of Nasreen and a defender of the freedom of expression. It even demands that she be granted refugee status because she's fleeing persecution by religious fanatics.

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

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

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

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

True, it's not only the Hindu fanatics of the Parivar who demand censorship and bans. Groups that claim to be speaking in the name of Sikhs, Muslims, Christians or Jains also do the same. Typically, the state yields to them; indeed, it acts as if it had granted them the "right" to vandalise works of art and criminally assault writers. The cases of 'The Last Temptation of Christ' and 'The Da Vinci Code,' or Salman Rushdie and the Dera Sacha Sauda are instances of this. All such groups effectively exercise veto power over society and the state by invoking the "hurt sentiments" of a particular community. So we end up defining tolerance as the sum-total of different intolerances.

In any case, private groups or individuals have no right to usurp the functions of the courts in deciding what is permissible and what is impermissible by virtue of being gratuitously offensive, vulgar, egregiously scandalous, or calculated to incite violence or to insult and humiliate. Such groups only impoverish social life by regimenting it and

imposing conformity or homogeneity on it. They simply have no business to dictate uniform norms, whether in respect of sexual preference, dress, religious practices or social behaviour.

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

Navhind times/05 Dec

Taslima and the Realpolitik

Sumantra Maitra

FREEDOM OF speech, author's freedom, Islamic fundamentalism, vandalism, rioting... do these words sound familiar? Yes, these are the issues that rocked the state of West Bengal, recently over some passages of a book *Dwikhandito* (Broken in two) by Taslima Nasreen. The furore that had been there for quite a long time, took a nasty turn two weeks back, resulting in unprecedented vandalism and total chaos, ultimately leading to curfew in Kolkata after 15 years, last being on the occasion of Babri Masjid demolition.

From then on, there had been a never-ending chain of claims and counter claims leaving the common people completely bamboozled. But there is more to this than meets the eye. Let us carefully analyse each perspective categorically.

Now, before going into details, I should like to clarify a few things. I am not here to comment on the literary aspect of

the novel because it is outside the scope of this discussion, though I will do injustice if I decline to say that, I have read it and it didn't appeal to me as one of the greatest pieces of Bengali literature, or a collectors item to die for. Nor do I approve of any kind of fundamentalism or people having even the faintest amount of support for it. The people who want their women to wear Eskimo suits in the hottest of summers in the name of religion are no more than sick psychopaths. And if this trend of pacifism is kept on by both the central and state governments, then devil knows we are going to reach a time when even a groan will be condemned by some odd group in some obscure part of our country. All this should be stopped immediately.

First, coming to the point of the uproar: It was for everyone to see, in this age of booming tele-media that the action was all planned, contrary to what is being said. The people taking part in it were mostly hooligans and goons grabbing the opportunity to loot and riot when anarchy was reigning supreme. The majority of the youths taking part in the 'movement' were illiterate, and probably having an IQ "30 per cent lower than that of an absent minded jellyfish", to borrow the words of PG Wodehouse. The police, normally sloppy, acted with extreme caution and did a commendable and praiseworthy job. And ironically the intellectuals of Kolkata, who are in the habit of thinking themselves to be some sort of privileged demi-gods, tending

to look down upon lesser mortals, and those who had been overactive in the past few months frowning at people with even a left squint, were stone quite on the issue. They never organised a single candle lighting competition, or took out a road march. Were they afraid of backlash? Or are they, by nature, tilted? It is for the people to decide. But we felt cheated. And now it is high time they should be reminded that they are not that important, sorry.

Now, about the novel: It is a matter of debate about how much leniency should be given to creative freedom. What are the checks and who defines those. It is said that the mass is greater than the individual, and the State is even greater than the mass. Then should we not expect someone who is a guest of a nation after having been expelled from her own country due to some odd reason, however impractical and unjustified the reason, to at least not do anything that hampers the relation of the State with its neighbouring nations? Though it does not justify violence, but still it cannot be denied that the feelings of a particular community was hurt, as was the feelings of another community by the acts of MF Hussein. Responsibility should be there for every work of art and every thing cannot and will not be justified in the name of freedom. We can't expect pornography, to be justified as an erotic art with great aesthetic value, can we? I mean it is just not done.

Lastly, the greatest of them all...the political parties: Communists rounded up the matter by sending Taslima out at that instant and ended up appeasing the communalists. They forgot that they created a Frankenstein by supporting the same people who sneaked into this country illegally from god knows where, and now threatens the very foundation of the set up. The Trinamool Congress, with its omniscient leaders somehow didn't get the grasp of the situation, and preferred to stay quite, though I somehow feel that their share of the vote bank guided this. BJP having a minimal presence in Bengal failed to make any impact, though tried to steal the show at the national level by sympathising with Taslima. Congress, never seriously tried to think beyond their sphere of influence, and left the matter to decay with time, only formally delivering a statement cajoling both 'Tweedeldum and Tweedeldee'. Helpless Nasreen, thinking of the advisability of losing a place to stay, ultimately decided against it.

Merinews.com/06 Dec

Marxists bungle on

Bibhutibhushan Nandi

Long before Bangla deshi author Taslima Nasreen thought of seeking shelter in India, Comrade Biman Bose had joined the chorus of calumny and disinformation against her, orchestrated by the Bangladesh Directorate of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) at home and abroad. At a drink and dinner session arranged by the DGFI at the residence of Mr Humayun Kabir, deputy high commissioner of Bangladesh in Kolkata, soon after the publication of Nasreen's Lajja, the comrade said the Bangladeshi writer was a "paid agent of RAW" and she had written the book at the instance of the Government of India. As a former Intelligence professional, this writer is in a position to confirm that other guests at the dinner, including RSP leader Mr Khiti Goswami and his wife, CPI-M leader Mr Manab Mukherjee, Jadavpur University's International Relations Professor Baladas Ghosal and some journalists were flummoxed by his baleful indiscretion; their host was embarrassed as well. One can confirm from personal knowledge that till then, Nasreen was not even known to anyone in the Indian establishment, let alone RAW, but it cannot be said with equal confidence that Mr Bose was not linked to any foreign

Intelligence outfit.

Hounding Nasreen out of the Marxist haven of Kolkata to Jaipur is the latest example of the Left Front government's policy of diversion, duplicity and decadence. The disclosures made since the gratuitous violence had rocked the metropolis on 21 November, it is again clear that for the sake of minority votes, the pseudo-secular CPI-M leaders pander to the bigotry and intolerance of a fringe group of Muslim fanatics. In this case, they were willingly privy to provoking the orgy of violence in the city. The manner in which Kolkata Police and a government-friendly Marwari businessman executed in tandem the "Oust Taslima Operation" perceived to be conceived and designed by Mr Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee is reminiscent of the trader-police nexus that ruined the lawful marriage of a young couple and drove the husband to violent death. As if that was not enough, the former Kolkata Police chief Mr Prasun Mukherjee first, and Mr Vineet Goel, DC (Headquarters) later, pressured Nasreen to leave the state against her will.

The fact that Imam Sayed Mohammed Barkati of the Tipu Sultan mosque claimed that Mr Bhattacharjee had described Nasreen as "a horrible woman" is testimony to the fact that the chief minister was the master conspirator in this case. As a writer, Nasreen has been fighting for equal rights for women ~ the victims of gender bias and religious bigotry. She has raised her voice against persecution of religious

minorities in Muslim societies. Her novelette *Lajja*, written and published in the backdrop of the post-Babari cataclysmic Hindu-cleansing in Bangladesh, is an account of the unrestrained loot, arson, rape, destruction and desecration of Hindu temples and idols that swept rural Bangladesh in 1992. *Lajja* is an indelible blot on the history of Bangladesh. The then Bangladesh Nationalist Party regime in Dhaka, in league with the Jamaat-e-Islami and other allied fundamentalist groups, wreaked vengeance on the author for “tarnishing the image of Bangladesh abroad”. Encouraged by the cynical Bangladeshi government, mullahs mobilised Muslim masses on the streets, declared her apostate (*murtad*) and issued fatwas sentencing her to death. The government of Begum Khaleda Zia banned *Lajja*, impounded her passport and exiled her to Europe. In 1998, she returned to Bangladesh in cognito to be at the bedside of her dying mother. When she was spotted, hell broke loose again, with mullahs baying for her blood. When her mother died, no cleric agreed to perform her burial rites. The dead woman’s crime? She was the putative mother of a daughter judged apostate by mullahs trading in religion! The persecuted Nasreen went back into exile, in the USA this time.

In 2003, a so-called Muslim poet in Kolkata secured a court order staying the sale and circulation of Nasreen’s autobiographical piece *Dwikhandita*, on the allegation that

it contained unsavoury, defamatory references to him. The Marxist government of West Bengal banned the book to ingratiate itself with Muslim voters in the state. In the face of the uproar sparked off by the politically-motivated government action, the chief minister claimed that 25 writers consulted by the government believed that parts of the book could offend Muslim religious sentiments and incite communal violence.

These eminences were known to be pliable pro-establishment intellectuals and one of them had repeatedly derogated by his blasphemous writings Hindu gods and goddesses ~ Kali, Saraswati, Radha and Krishna. The Bangladeshi military ruler General Ershad banned a feature film based on one of his books because it had hurt the religious sentiments of the Hindu community in that country.

The Marxist government's rationale behind proscribing Dwikhandita being thus suspect, the publisher challenged its legality in Calcutta High Court. The court held the government action banning the book "unjustified and untenable".

During the two years that the case lingered in the High Court, fundamentalist Islamic groups held street demonstrations against Nasreen, demanding cancellation of her visa. Imam Barkati, who was in the forefront of the agitation, announced monetary rewards for publicly insulting Nasreen and even issued a fatwa to behead the writer.

All the time, the state government and the police played footsie with these fundamentalist fanatics, ignoring the criminal offences, including incitement to commit murder in police presence. The state administration prevented the holding of literary seminars at Midnapore and Siliguri, which Nasreen was scheduled to address, by imposing prohibitory orders under Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code on the specious ground that these could disturb communal peace.

In August, at a book release function in Hyderabad, Majlish Itthadul Musalmeen leaders, including party MLAs and their hoodlums assaulted Nasreen to press the demand for cancellation of her visa. The police in Congress-ruled Andhra Pradesh did not take action against the criminals, but in the face of public criticism, later registered a case. That did not deter the culprits from ganging up with the likes of Imam Barkati in Kolkata to iterate the fatwa to kill the Bangladeshi writer, with a huge police possé headed by two DCs looking the other way.

Among the people arrested for the day-long violence on 21 November are known CPI-M cadres and elements involved in the community policing programmes of the Kolkata Police. Many illegal aliens from Bangladesh were involved in the violence.

Most of the hoodlums were non-Bengali Muslim followers of the non-Bengali imam of a city mosque and were mostly

from the constituencies of Mohammed Salim, MP, and Assembly Speaker Mr Hashim Abdul Halim. Other Muslim-dominated areas in the city represented by non-Marxist parties in the Assembly were unaffected by the anti-Nasreen violence.

Except for aimlessly firing teargas shells at random, the police did not do anything to address the crisis, requiring the Army to be pressed in and night curfew imposed. The ruling clique has showered encomiums on the police for the “patient handling” of the violence and the pliant section of the media parroted the same view. But to anyone with a modicum of professional experience in handling law and order, it was clear the police were under instructions to allow the crescendo of violence to build up unchecked.

That was meant to prove to the world how well-founded the contention of the Marxist ruling clique was that Nasreen’s presence in West Bengal was dangerous to maintaining communal harmony in the state. And that justified Mr Bose’s fatwa, pronounced with the flourish of revolutionary cussedness that the Bangladeshi writer must leave West Bengal and its subsequent execution by Mr Goel, successor of Mr Gyanwant Singh at Lalbazar. This operation may or may not help the CPI-M to retain its hold on minority votes in West Bengal but it could help ensure the victory of Mr Narendra Modi in the upcoming Assembly election in Gujarat.

As for Nasreen, she has since wilted under pressure and withdrawn the “objectionable” portion of Dwikhandita. After the government ban on the book, I wrote: “Taslima Nasreen is not a paragon of virtue, but she is a brave woman” (The Hindustan Times 8 December, 2003). I regret having to admit now on hindsight that the accolade I had showered on her then was premature.

The author is a former additional secretary in the Cabinet Secretariat.

The Statesman /6 dec

Punish rioters, not writers

Amit Varma

The concept of free speech has become a political tool in india, not a principle to fight for

Thinking it through

A friend of mine, *Mint* contributor Salil Tripathi, recently drew my attention to a wonderful poem by Amit Chaudhuri. The poem, called *The Writers*, was based around “constantly mishearing ‘rioting’ as ‘writing’ on the BBC”. It began: “There has been writing for 10 days now/unabated. People are anxious, fed up.” And so on. You get the drift.

Chaudhuri’s poem felt especially apt given the events of the last couple of weeks. In this time, our cops and politicians have forgotten the difference between rioters and writers. Rioters came out in Kolkata to protest a writer’s words. It was the writer who then had to run around, evading accusing eyes and fingers. Eventually, it was the writer who apologized for her words—the rioters haven’t yet apologized for their actions. Indeed, it could be argued that the rioters have won—as they do every time.

This isn’t just about Taslima Nasreen and Islam. Three states in India banned the recent film, *Aaja Nachle*, because members of a particular community felt insulted by a line in one of its songs. (“*Bole mochi bhi khud ko sonar hai.*” Go figure.) On Tuesday, BBC reported that “a local Sikh leader” in “northern UP” filed a case against Anil Ambani because sardarji jokes were circulated on mobile phones using the Reliance network. The report didn’t mention the law involved, but I’m guessing it was Section 295(a) of the Indian Penal Code, which makes it a crime to “outrage religious

feelings or any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs”.

A few months ago, a gentleman filed a case using Section 295(a) against Ravi Shastri because his religious sentiments were offended by Shastri’s statement that he enjoyed eating beef. In March this year, the Mumbai Police arrested the publisher of *The Santa and Banta Jokebook* for hurting Sikh sentiments. In April, a case was filed against Liz Hurley and Arun Nayar for having a Hindu wedding that allegedly “malign(ed) the spiritual sanctity of Hinduism and Indian mythology”.

In May, some BJP goons barged into the Fine Arts Faculty at Vadodara because some paintings displayed there by a student had offended them. They manhandled the artist, abused faculty members and other students, and then the police came in to restore normalcy. They arrested the artist.

Ironically, it is the BJP, whose protest at M.F. Husain’s work forced the painter to leave the country, which is defending Nasreen’s right to free speech now. That is politics, and quite what you’d expect. On the one hand, the BJP will stand up for anyone who offends Islam, but will jump on anyone who might offend them. On the other hand, we have pseudo-liberals who defend those attacked by the BJP, but not those who offend Islam.

The concept of free speech has become a political tool, not a principle to fight for, as groups across India take offence randomly to show their clout and rally their supporters.

Worryingly, such competitive intolerance, as blogger Nitin Pai once termed it, seems to find support in civil society.

Outlook magazine carried a recent interview of Nasreen where she was asked accusatory questions that reflect a common viewpoint. “(F)reedom of expression at what cost? Does it give you the right to hurt religious sentiments? 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?” It was as if the writer was responsible for the violence caused by the rioters. It was like a rape victim being accused of wearing provocative clothes.

Similarly, Karan Thapar, perhaps being deliberately provocative in an interview with Arundhati Roy, asked her if it was acceptable for Nasreen to offend “beliefs which for tens of millions of Indians, maybe for hundreds of millions, are sacred”. His question implied that these beliefs were so flimsy that they could be shaken by one woman’s words. Should true believers take offence with Thapar then?

A mature democracy ignores the wail of the mob and protects the rights of the individual. America’s First Amendment set the benchmark. Christopher Hitchens stays out of jail despite describing the author of the Ten Commandments as “a mad despot”, and Richard Dawkins is unmolested on book tours after calling the God of the Old Testament “a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully”. Giving

offence is not a crime in the US, or free speech would become subject to politics, and thereby meaningless.

And yet, in India, politicians run to the courts or the government like schoolkids running to their teacher after recess shouting, "Teacher, Teacher, Chintiya called me Motoo. I'm offended." Really, what is wrong with us? We haven't just let Nasreen down recently, we've let ourselves down as well. In India, it now seems that the sword is mightier than the pen.

Livemint/05 dec

A Forgotten History

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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Outlook /06 Dec

Islam's Silent Moderates

Ayaan Hirsi Ali

The woman and the man guilty of adultery or fornication, flog each of them with 100 stripes: Let no compassion move you in their case, in a matter prescribed by Allah, if you believe in Allah and the Last Day. (Koran 24:2)

IN the last few weeks, in three widely publicized episodes, we have seen Islamic justice enacted in ways that should make Muslim moderates rise up in horror.

A 20-year-old woman from Qatif, Saudi Arabia, reported that she had been abducted by several men and repeatedly raped. But judges found the victim herself to be guilty. Her

crime is called “mingling”: when she was abducted, she was in a car with a man not related to her by blood or marriage, and in Saudi Arabia, that is illegal. Last month, she was sentenced to six months in prison and 200 lashes with a bamboo cane.

Two hundred lashes are enough to kill a strong man. Women usually receive no more than 30 lashes at a time, which means that for seven weeks the “girl from Qatif,” as she’s usually described in news articles, will dread her next session with Islamic justice. When she is released, her life will certainly never return to normal: already there have been reports that her brother has tried to kill her because her “crime” has tarnished her family’s honor.

We also saw Islamic justice in action in Sudan, when a 54-year-old British teacher named Gillian Gibbons was sentenced to 15 days in jail before the government pardoned her this week; she could have faced 40 lashes. When she began a reading project with her class involving a teddy bear, Ms. Gibbons suggested the children choose a name for it. They chose Muhammad; she let them do it. This was deemed to be blasphemy.

Then there’s Taslima Nasreen, the 45-year-old Bangladeshi writer who bravely defends women’s rights in the Muslim world. Forced to flee Bangladesh, she has been living in India. But Muslim groups there want her expelled, and one

has offered 500,000 rupees for her head. In August she was assaulted by Muslim militants in Hyderabad, and in recent weeks she has had to leave Calcutta and then Rajasthan. Taslima Nasreen's visa expires next year, and she fears she will not be allowed to live in India again.

It is often said that Islam has been "hijacked" by a small extremist group of radical fundamentalists. The vast majority of Muslims are said to be moderates.

But where *are* the moderates? Where are the Muslim voices raised over the terrible injustice of incidents like these? How many Muslims are willing to stand up and say, in the case of the girl from Qatif, that this manner of justice is appalling, brutal and bigoted — and that no matter who said it was the right thing to do, and how long ago it was said, this should no longer be done?

Usually, Muslim groups like the Organization of the Islamic Conference are quick to defend any affront to the image of Islam. The organization, which represents 57 Muslim states, sent four ambassadors to the leader of my political party in the Netherlands asking him to expel me from Parliament after I gave a newspaper interview in 2003 noting that by Western standards some of the Prophet Muhammad's behavior would be unconscionable. A few years later, Muslim ambassadors to Denmark protested the cartoons of

Muhammad and demanded that their perpetrators be prosecuted.

But while the incidents in Saudi Arabia, Sudan and India have done more to damage the image of Islamic justice than a dozen cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad, the organizations that lined up to protest the hideous Danish offense to Islam are quiet now.

I wish there were more Islamic moderates. For example, I would welcome some guidance from that famous Muslim theologian of moderation, Tariq Ramadan. But when there is true suffering, real cruelty in the name of Islam, we hear, first, denial from all these organizations that are so concerned about Islam's image. We hear that violence is not in the Koran, that Islam means peace, that this is a hijacking by extremists and a smear campaign and so on. But the evidence mounts up.

Islamic justice is a proud institution, one to which more than a billion people subscribe, at least in theory, and in the heart of the Islamic world it is the law of the land. But take a look at the verse above: more compelling even than the order to flog adulterers is the command that the believer show no compassion. It is this order to choose Allah above his sense of conscience and compassion that imprisons the Muslim in a mindset that is archaic and extreme.

If moderate Muslims believe there should be no compassion shown to the girl from Qatif, then what exactly makes them so moderate?

When a “moderate” Muslim’s sense of compassion and conscience collides with matters prescribed by Allah, he should choose compassion. Unless that happens much more widely, a moderate Islam will remain wishful thinking.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a former member of the Dutch Parliament, is the author of “Infidel.”

New york times/ 07 dec

LAL SALEM and MODITVA!

Amit Sengupta

Diehard cynics are pushing the threshold. The rumours doing the political rounds in Kolkata and Delhi are uncanny and diabolical. That the spontaneous protests against Taslima Nasrin in Kolkata were stage-managed by those who wanted the nation's attention to shift from the shame of Nandigram. That the Centre and state government played footsie as they twiddled their thumbs while Taslima is shunted from here to there. Is it possible that the mighty Indian nuclear State can't protect one lone woman? And that too in a CPM bastion? It's fishy, and it stinks.

So how come suddenly, from nowhere, unknown, fringe fundamentalist groups with no identity or strength, started calling the shots on the streets of big bully's Kolkata and the big brothers at Alimuddin Street chose to watch the show on the idiot box? How come suddenly Taslima became a hate-figure in a city and state where the 'secularists' call the shots? And why was the army called so desperately and in such quick notice and curfew declared etc, even when the party's bloody party went on non-stop at Nandigram under

siege while Writer's Building washed its hands off. So who has the blood of the peasants on their hands, in March, and in November, so that Lal Salem can resonate on the recaptured village bylanes by armed thugs and motorcycle gangsters?

This blood won't wash and the communal twist won't work now as it did not work after the March 14 massacre. It is a peasant struggle and it's not the fault of the poor Dalit and Muslim farmers if they constitute the majority in Nandigram. Besides, Muslims in Bengal have never voted for Muslim fundamentalists — they have voted for the Left, the Congress or Trinamool Congress. The Nandigram MLA belongs to the CPI and it does not matter if he is a Muslim.

Those who forcibly decided to 'deport' Taslima to BJP-ruled Jaipur, have obviously lost not only their ideology, but also their sanity and integrity. This communal insanity, combined with rapes and killings in Nandigram by their cadre, is so transparently crass that even the belligerent and foul-tongued troika of Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, Biman Bose and Benoy Konar seemed to have lost their tongues. If anybody who needs to be deported from Kolkata, it is this cosy muscle-flexing threesome. And if this is not utter degeneration and ideological bankruptcy, then what is?

And look who is celebrating? Narendra Modi and the Hindutva rabble-rousers. They will protect Taslima — so send

her to Gujarat. Modi can then take her on a guided tourist package to Naroda Patiya, Ehsan Jaffrey's Gulberga Society, Kalupur, Juhapura, the Shah Alam refugee camp where thousands of survivors were dumped, and of course, the ravaged Best Bakery of Zaheera Sheikh in Vododra where they were all burnt alive. And enlightened 'Buddha' can call up 'vikas purush' Modi and promise to show him his pet, infatuated obsession: the chemical hub of Salem, notorious for backing the murder and disappearances of 2 million dissidents and communists by dictator Suharto in Indonesia.

Indeed, if money has no ideology or colour, as Buddha so proudly claims, then why not deport Halliburton and Bechtel from 'occupied Iraq' to Bengal. Blood for oil in Iraq. Chemical hub for blood in Nandigram. And if Henry Kissinger can be an honoured guest of Buddha, why not George Bush and Dick Cheney?

No wonder, a Rightwing Hindutva columnist is glorifying Modi and Buddha — as great role models of development. The Gujarat genocide celebrated communal fascism. And the Nandigram massacre — capitalist fascism. So why not?

So between the Left and Right, what happens to Indian citizens in the twilight zone of a failed democracy when the State turns predator against its own people? Ask that Muslim woman in Nandigram, surrounded by a CPM mob,

gangraped by known CPM criminals, her daughters too gangraped and still missing. Does't it all remind you of Gujarat, 2002?

HardNews Magazines/ 07dec

Lessons from a teddy bear

Editorial

Here we go again. Gillian Gibbons, a Briton, teaching English to young boys in Khartoum, Sudan has been deported after a court sentenced her to 15 days in prison for allowing young pupils to name a teddy bear Muhammad.

The seemingly trivial action by the British mother of two, triggered riots and calls for the “bitch” to be executed by fundamentalist Muslims, crazed by the “blasphemy.”

In India, two reputed artists — M.F. Husain, the painter, and

Taslima Nasreen, the writer — are being hounded by fundamentalists.

Husain, who is an Indian, is facing the wrath of Hindu fanatics after several cases were filed against him for his alleged obscene depiction of Hindu goddesses. He now spends most of his time in London and Dubai.

Nasreen, a Bangladeshi, has received death threats both in her own country and in India from Muslim zealots who hate her for saying Islam and other religions oppress women. A group of religious leaders issued a “death warrant” against her in August.

Before this we had the Danish cartoon controversy and demonstrations against filmmaker Deepa Mehta by xenophobic Hindu outfits upset at her depiction of Indian widows in the movie Water.

What all these incidents underline is the failure of the majority to fight the censorship norms prescribed by a bigoted minority.

A key reason for this failure is the reluctance of politicians to take on the fundamentalists who masquerade as patriots.

These rabble-rousers are everywhere nowadays seeking swift

retribution for perceived crimes against historical figures and anyone who dares explore religious themes through art. They have the ability to disrupt normal life and are empowered by cowardly politicians who pander to retrogressive elements in their constituencies.

They make political hay through the wider lack of understanding of cultures. The recent case in Sudan is a prime example.

The Sudanese don't understand that teddy bears are part and parcel of a kid's life in the West and naming them is an exercise in affection.

For her part, Gibbons should have known better and stayed away from naming anything after the Prophet.

Still, this hardly calls for 15 days in jail and demands for her execution.

These cases highlight a need for better understanding between cultures that co-mingle in today's shrinking global village.

We all need to take into account the customs and religious sensitivities of others.

At the same time the zealots need to realize that you cannot judge everyone or everything by their own hardened standards.

The extremists also need to know that if they keep whipping up hate, the rest of us will not stand idly by, but will raise our hands together in defiance of their hateful intolerance.

Asia pacific network/10 Dec

Crisis of civilisation

Taslima under virtual house-arrest

Editorial

The Government of India has decidedly turned its screws on Taslima Nasreen and we can almost hear the collective sigh of relief at the level of the Bengal Left. The timing has been suitably propitious; with the Gujarat elections out of the way, she has ceased to be an emotive issue for the Bharatiya Janata Party. Having decided to spell out its position, the ministry of external affairs, under an incumbent ever so conscious about the country's "civilisational heritage", should at least have been forthright on the most critical issue ~ whether or not her visa will be extended beyond February 2008. Instead, the plan of action as communicated to her on Thursday is neither here nor there. The UPA's Left crutch is safe with the fatwa that she will not be allowed to enter Kolkata. Beyond that directive, the crippling curbs on her movements are tantamount to action wholly out of proportion to the controversy that has dogged this permanently aggrieved feminist author from Bangladesh

since 1994. Of course, for the past 13 years she has been able to keep herself in the international limelight and for the wrong reasons. But having played the willing and tolerant host for as long as it has, the Centre's latest stand is dehumanising as it makes a travesty of basic human rights. Well may she wonder whether she has committed a "crime". The subtext of the MEA joint secretary's verbal *démarche* is that she can hang on in Delhi, but under veritable house arrest with a bar on public appearance and interaction with the outside world. The choice is stark ~ either she stays in Delhi confined to the four walls or she leaves the country. It is a cruel irony that the MEA's prescription has been the standard weapon to fix political opponents in what used to be Taslima's home country of Bangladesh. Which obviously emulates the parent nation of Pakistan in such matters. It is shameful no less that a perceived secular and tolerant India should willingly be a part of what now turns out to be common strand running through the sub-continent. The Bengal Left may have succumbed to fundamentalist posturing by ejecting Taslima from Kolkata. Pranab Mukherjee's MEA, traditionally mealy-mouthed in its policies towards Bangladesh, has now placed "civilisational heritage" at stake. That heritage was trashed on Thursday, and the country is faced with a crisis of civilisation if an author has to be put under virtual house-arrest. The trend is chillingly ominous.

The Statesman/22 Dec

in liberal doses

Editorial

Much ink has been expended on the matter of Taslima Nasreen and her 'right' to return to her 'favourite' city, Kolkata, not to mention on whether the Bangladeshi writer should be allowed to stay on in India.

A fair proportion of this ink has been devoted to a sidelight involving artistic freedom — that of the liberal response to attacks on freedom of artistic expression.

There is a strong argument that the liberal voice is vociferous in a country when those attacking artistic freedom are from the overwhelmingly majority Hindu community.

When those attacking artists and their works in the name of that old chestnut, "hurting religious sensibilities", happen to be Muslims, the liberal voice becomes muffled, even apologetic, veering towards a line of thinking that sounds uncomfortably like, "Artists should be aware of the sensibilities of (some) communities."

While such a patronising, double-standard attitude feeds its own little 'inter-community' debate, the bigger picture of liberalism standing up to obscurantism and anti-freedom cloaked in the garb of religious sensitivities can get lost.

So when the India International Centre (IIC) in Delhi was threatened for hosting an exhibition of MF Husain's prints, and the show was suspended for a day, we grew worried that the liberal voice against Hindu fundamentalism had started to behave like it usually does against Muslim fundamentalism.

Thankfully, the exhibition was reopened after a day's gap thanks to fellow artists refusing to surrender to threatening goons doubling as cultural critics. The artists have rightly argued that giving in to the threats against the Husain show would have only widened the space for fundamentalists to manoeuvre.

Today it's Husain and Nasreen; tomorrow it will be an issue of truly ridiculous proportions that will get these professional foam-in-their-mouths foaming in their mouths. The law is there to take care of humbugs of these types and unlike public sentiment or, for that matter, liberal shufflings in the face of minority aggression, an FIR is blind to one's faith or one's demographic and social position.

Art has the job of pushing the envelope, pressing the 'wrong' buttons. The question of whether we care for Nasreen's writings or Husain's paintings is so besides the point in this context.

Hindustan Times/ 24 Dec

Taslima nasreen : write stuff ?

Vaibhav Singh

Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen has been told that she cannot return to her adopted city of Kolkata. She has also been told that if she wants to live in Delhi, she will not be allowed to take part in any public functions. So she is virtually a prisoner in a country she thought she would be most free.

Forget the fact that she is being hounded by the self-appointed crusaders of Islam. Forget the fact that as a writer she has suddenly become the most hated and most dangerous because she raises some uncomfortable questions, not in suavity or in stuttering language, but in the most precise and straightforward manner.

Forget the fact that all this has pulled her into the quagmire of politics and she is forced to admit whether she is a believer or a non-believer. Whether she is with 'us' or with 'them'. And lastly, forget the fact that there are some who want to get a bounty fixed for her head.

Let us instead begin at the beginning — the point that is lost in this cacophonous chest-thumping. What does she actually write? Because as honest readers we must discuss her literature. And there are many instances of furore against a writer and his/her writing without the reader getting to know what is wrong with the written word.

In a way, Taslima's writings are sharply political and interestingly polemical, but the issues she raises are important for all sections of the society. Any discussion on Taslima will be incomplete without understanding her political proclivity. She interrogates the nation and the patriarchal society from the perspective of a modern paradigm of an Enlightenment-led rationality.

Like any other sensible person she also feels perturbed when her nation is pushed towards a rightward polity which believes in blind faith and enforces patriarchy upon the womenfolk.

As a nation, Bangladesh was born on secular foundations which punctured the shallow concept of religious unity that Pakistan upheld. In *Dwikhandita*, Taslima writes:

"In 1971 Bengali Muslims waged a war against the oppressive ruling class of non-Bengalis and hammered the point that by merely being a Muslim all cannot live together. They also proved that partition of India on the ground of two religious nationalities was also wrong. Those who fought war against Pakistan dreamt that by loving the Bengali culture and language they will be able to form a new nation."

But the gains made by people popularly called as *muktiyoudha* were lost, secular nationalism was

conspiratorially disabled and a fanatic version of patriotism was superimposed. Taslima has acknowledged the many ills of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman while remembering him with respect. She has expressed the sorrow for the vicious politics of General Zia-ur Rahman and Irshad who again committed all fascist treacheries to take the nation to the brink of fundamentalism.

A Bengali nationality encompassing the entire creed of Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist and Christians was torn into pieces to bring forth the fanatic politics of religion. Taslima writes on these trajectories that took her nation into darkness. It can be a lesson for the subcontinent including India where Hindu fundamentalism is just a counterpart of Islamic fundamentalism.

There is a competitive invocation of religious identity-politics for pure political battle. Polity, failing miserably to solve the crushing problems of poverty, inequality and hunger, is using religion as a fodder to feed the masses — a tool they can play with under the control of an influential minority of clergy and the ruling class. But everybody realises the acute irony of the predicament.

Writers are sensitive barometers of a changing social reality and Taslima too has written about the undercurrents and

open upheavals in our own society, stirring the stupefied consciousness of apathetic people. By banning their books the society is parching its own spring of startling truths.

Taslima has rightly observed in her writings that it is paradoxical to ban books for being harmful to the society which is replete with fake medicines, adulteration, corruption and black-marketing, and in which rebarbative treatment of women is common. She rightfully asks: "Are books banned because writers belong to a powerless section of the society?"

Taslima has also developed a very powerful, hard-hitting critique of patriarchy in her novels and showed how women are always seen as 'the inferior' in society. In fact, patriarchy and fundamentalism are hand in glove with each other. Both of them rule via violence, intimidation, fear and negate the principle of rational justice to others. In such a gruesome scenario Taslima writes:

"Women are oppressed in the East, in the West, in the South, in the North. Women are oppressed inside and outside their homes. Whether a women is a believer or a non-believer, she is oppressed. Beautiful or ugly, oppressed. Crippled or not,

rich or poor, literate or illiterate, oppressed. Covered or naked, she is oppressed. Dumb or not, cowardly or courageous, she is always oppressed.”

Taslima has been charged not only for blasphemous writing but also for pornographic tinges in her four-volume autobiography. She favours sexual freedom yet refuses to take sexual exploitation lightly. In her autobiography she has written about many celebrity Bengali writers which was cause for aversion among the literati.

Many famous and revered poets were enraged by the amorous relationships she had depicted and alleged that they were shown in bad light by Taslima. Her malicious writing badgered their social image, they alleged. One of them even filed a defamation case in court charging her with character assassination and demanded Rs 11 crore as compensation.

In the face of such charges, Taslima’s valour is even more enviable. She shrugs them off and dismisses these allegations as “a pack of lies”. She says that the society cannot assimilate the fact that a woman can write about the sexual experiences of her own life because she was traditionally

groomed to shy away from such utterances and wear silence.

Liberals may label this as extremism. But can we afford to forget that every extremism has a contextual sense and a historical logic. When liberal voices are feeble, unable to comprehend the real unrest, radical criticism, even a subversive feminism, emerges to challenge the fictitious process of liberation and pass. When domination is unbearably extreme, extreme response to break it also surfaces. And this is happening in country that has celebrated the emergence of authors like Kamala Suraiya, better known as Kamala Das, Ismat Chughtai, Krishna Sobti and Amrita Pritam.

The Economic Times /22 dec

Abduction Simplifier!

D. Bandyopadhyay

On November 22, 2007, Ms Taslima Nasreen, the noted Bengali writer, was clandestinely and forcibly whisked away from her residence at 7, Rowdon Street, Kolkata, by a posse of plainclothes men presumably of the West Bengal Intelligence Branch and or, the Special Branch. She was made to board an IC flight bound for Ahmedabad and Jaipur, reportedly under a false name. She was taken to Jaipur where she was not welcome by the Rajasthan Government and had to be moved out to a secret location in the National Capital Region. The Statesman, Kolkata, November 24, 2007, reported under the caption "The Mystery Deepens..." that "Ms Taslima Nasreem who was moved to Jaipur from Kolkata last night is now believed to have been kept at a secret location in or around the National Capital Region. The mystery about her whereabouts deepened when the Rajasthan Government said in a press release issued tonight that it was 'left with no alternative except to have Nasreen as a guest of Government of Rajasthan till such time the (Union) Ministry of Home Affairs, takes a final view regarding her stay and security'. The press release further said that it toyed with the idea of sending the writer back to Kolkata but the West Bengal Government 'simply

refused to countenance this idea'!" That was the official version of the Government of Rajasthan.

The same day's Statesman carried a statement of Prasad Ranjan Ray, the State Home Secretary, in which he observed, *inter alia*, "She (Taslima Nasreen) is a free person and as such she won't come and go according to our dictates. It was only from the television channels that I came to know that she had left the city ... We did not ask her to move out."

Prasad Ranjan Ray is known to be a gentleman. I would go by what he said. Obviously, this clandestine and covert operation was conducted without his knowledge and sanction. To put it mildly, it is now clear that some foul and nefarious actions were being done by a section of the Home Department of West Bengal behind the back of the Home Secretary and obviously without any legal sanction. This is a very ominous sign.

THE State Home Secretary's statement stands negated not only by the press release of the Rajasthan Government but also by the bill of Rs 10,000 preferred by the management of the Hotel Shikha of Jaipur for the occupation of their five rooms by Ms Nasreen (one room) and police and security persons (four rooms) who flew with her from Kolkata to Jaipur or later on joined the group at Jaipur. The policemen

decamped the hotel with the writer without settling the bill, true to their tradition of enjoying “free lunch” anywhere and everywhere.

What is this ‘dirty tricks department’ of the West Bengal Government? Is it a government within the government without any accountability to anybody? From whom do the operatives of this shady organisation take their orders? To whom are they accountable? Do they take their directives for their sinister and unfair activities from any political caucus outside the formal set-up of the government established by law? Is the Government of West Bengal being run by gangsters in plain- clothes? Is the West Bengal Government following the technique of involuntary disappearance perfected by General Pinochet after toppling and killing Salvador Allende in Chile?

These are some of the serious issues arising out of the Taslima episode which the Chief Minister and the Police Minister have to respond to. All the basic issues of good governance have been systematically flouted with utter contempt by the party and its Chief Minister. Unless this nefarious and wicked organisation is exposed publicly and dismantled totally, life, liberty and property of every person residing in this State would be unsafe. We are living here in highly perilous times. Everyone has to understand it and lodge protest against it individually and collectively. After all, this loathsome

organisation is being run by our money—the tax payers' money. We have a right to know what is going on and why?

The CPI-M as a party had been losing hold on their traditional minority vote-bank. In all the cases of mass murder and civil strife sponsored by the party beginning with Nanoor, through Chhoto Angaria, Keshpur, Garbeta, Nandigram to Rizwanur Rehman, a large number of victims had been from minority community. The fragile veneer of "secularism" of the CPI-M party got torn and tattered again and again by their anti-minority action and statements. In the Sachar Committee Report, West Bengal has the dubious honour of standing second from the bottom in regard to the State's effort regarding the welfare and well-being of Muslims after their 30 years glorious rule. In the Rizwanur Rehman case, in the first statement of the CM he mentioned that there was "a communal angle" where there was none. Communalism was sought to be injected in a purely private love affair of two educated and civilised young man and woman belonging to different communities. People of Kolkata—Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Parsis and others—stood shoulder to shoulder together and exposed the communalism of the CM and his party.

The CPI-M had been wooing the fundamentalist groups among the Muslims for a long time. The Government of West Bengal proscribed Ms Nasreen's book *Dwikhandita* on the ground that it offended the sentiments of a section of

Muslims. It was done on a public demand of some Maulanas and on the basis of a report of an Assistant Commissioner of Police of questionable literary competence. After a full hearing the Calcutta High Court set aside the order. But the party and its government, shameless and brazen faced as they were, did not show any contrition or remorse. They started a fresh move to harass, tease and torment Taslima Nasreen to make her leave the country out of disgust.

The Dainik Statesman reported on November 23, 2007 that several months before this episode, the then Police Commissioner of Calcutta, Prasun Mukherjee, had threatened and intimidated the writer several times to leave the country. He clearly stated in his usual uncivilised and rude language that he was conveying the desire of the CM. She was told that she was a security risk for West Bengal and India. It was reported that Ms Nasreen firmly and politely refused to leave stating that she desired to end her nomadic life by settling peacefully in India and, particularly, Kolkata to pursue her literary career. Though Prasun Mukherjee had to leave his post of Police Commissioner disgracefully over the Rizwanur episode, the current Deputy Commissioner of Police (Hqs.) continued to threaten her till she was forcibly moved away from Kolkata against her wish. But why was she taken to Jaipur? Thereby hangs another tale of a dubious wheeler-dealer and his questionable foundation. But let's not digress.

On November 21, 2007 Kolkata witnessed an ugly outburst of communal frenzy on the issue of driving out Taslima Nasreen. This incident reminded people of my generation of the murderous and wild behaviour of the crowd during the Great Calcutta killings of August 16, 1946, organised by the then Premier of Bengal, Shahid Suhrawardy. There was an uncanny similarity between the two episodes separated by a time lag of over six decades. Clearly the incident of November 21, 2007 was a sponsored one. TV footage showed a posse of policemen standing silently witnessing or enjoying the scene of rampaging of young men breaking windshields of buses and cars without any attempt to intervene. It was exactly the same on August 16, 1946, when policemen allowed marauding crowds to commit murder, arson, mayhem etc., almost with their connivance. The present CM of West Bengal had the same desire like his distant predecessor of 1946. He only lacked Suhrawardy's intelligence, efficiency, capacity, gumption and astuteness. Given firm orders his own police force could have controlled the situation easily. But he would not allow his forces to soil their hands, lest his fundamentalist friends condemned him for highhandedness. Hence he called in the Army. He used a sledge hammer to crack a hard-nut.

AFTER this incident Party Secretary Biman Bose's immediate reaction was that Ms Nasreem should move out elsewhere if

her continued stay in the State disturbed peace. More ominous was the statement of H.A. Halim, the Speaker of the West Bengal Assembly, that Taslima's stay in the city had created problems and he thus advised the West Bengal Government to send a report about it to the Central Government. The Speaker had no business to make any such statement. His untold intention was that since she was the cause of disturbance, her visa should not be renewed by the Centre. Thus, it is evident that the ugly incident of November 21, 2007 was a well-orchestrated, well-executed and a diabolical move to endear the party to the fundamentalist elements among the Muslim community and through their good offices to regain the lost ground among them.

Now let us have a quick look at the legality of the West Bengal Government's action regarding forcibly moving out Taslima Nasreen from Kolkata to Jaipur and then to the Rajasthan Guest House at Delhi. The Criminal Procedure Code does not provide for any extradition. Some States have local Goonda Acts which provide for such a procedure for undesirable persons. West Bengal does not have any such law. So legally Taslima Nasreen could not have been moved out of her Calcutta residence at 7 Rowdon Street and from the State of West Bengal to Jaipur and Delhi.

If the continued presence of Taslima Nasreen would have caused any cognisable offence, she could have been arrested under Section 151 of Cr.P.C. to prevent occurrence

of such offence(s). In that case, she had to be produced before a Magistrate within 24 hours of her arrest. In such an event all the killers in the party's and government's bag would have come out mewing their own stories. The media would have lapped it up causing discomfort. Since the party and its government did not believe in the rule of law, why should one bother about it. Bypass the law totally.

The facts of this case are that Ms Taslima Nasreen was moved out of her residence on November 22, 2007 against her will by force by the plainclothes persons presumably belonging to the West Bengal Intelligence Branch and, or the Special Branch of the Kolkata Police. Section 362 of the Indian Penal Code defines abduction as follows: "Whoever by force compels, or by any deceitful means induces, any person to go from any place, is said to abduct that person." There are two ingredients of this offence: (1) forceful compulsion or inducement by deceitful means, and, (2) the object of such compulsion or inducement must be going of a person from any place. In the case of Taslima Nasreen both these ingredients have been fulfilled. Hence it is a case of abduction simpliciter.

Those persons who have abducted her have also committed, in addition, the offence of wrongful restraint by keeping her confined in the Rajasthan Guest House, Delhi. Moreover, wrongful restraint is a continuing offence. Each

additional day of restraint enhances the gravity of the offence.

Since all these offenders have committed the offence at the behest of some organ of the State Government, the police in West Bengal would not take cognisance of these offences. Hence, some public spirited lady and or gentleman should move in the Hon'ble High Court of Calcutta a Public Interest Litigation praying for issuance of a Writ of Habeas Corpus to produce Ms Taslima Nasreen before the Hon'ble High Court and writs of mandamus and quo warranto against the State Government to set in motion proper actions under the relevant laws against the offenders to bring them to justice.

The author was the Secretary to the Government of India, Ministries of Finance (Revenue) and Rural Development, and the Executive Director, Asian Development Bank, Manila.

Mainstream/25 Dec

Independent, yet intricate

Editorial

Jyoti Basu's Christmas Day message to Taslima Nasreen to the effect that she is "welcome" to return to Kolkata is in the best traditions of the festive season, upholding the values of a democratic and secular country and professedly also the party that he leads. It bears emphasis, nonetheless, that it is a loaded invitation; the characteristic one-liner carries multiple messages. In one stroke, he has made the security of the Bangladesh author the responsibility of the Government of India which has played a willing host for the past thirteen years. This is perfectly logical as it is the ministry of external affairs and the home ministry that will eventually decide whether or not her visa will be extended beyond February.

He has passed the security factor to the “centre court”, to summon the metaphor of tennis. If implemented, this would mean one headache less for the out-of-its depth Kolkata Police. The second message has implicitly been addressed to the CPI-M and its government; to both entities is Taslima a security threat, a perception that has ruled out her presence in Kolkata since 21 November. Unlike the present generation of party leaders, the patriarch is not prevaricating. Nor for that matter has he been unnerved by the fundamentalist demand for her exit. The third message is for the fanatics within the minority community who had wanted Taslima to be ejected from the city and, to its satisfaction, has found the government remarkably obliging. The final message is for the author herself with the caveat that there are portions in her prose that offend the community and are, therefore, wholly unacceptable. In a word, she has been advised to draw the line on feminist liberalism. It may not be easy for the Left establishment to balance Basu’s enlightenment and the fundamentalist fury with the Centre playing the role of the cop. It is doubtless an intricate prescription to implement, and governments, Centre or/and state may not have the nerve to give it a try. Basu may have gone off at a tangent from the rest of the party, but alone in Alimuddin Street has he been able to take a positive and independent stand on the issue. And that is enough.

Coping with a gangster culture

B.Nandi

By now an authentic but horrid picture has emerged of the cruel treatment lately meted out to Taslima Nasreen by the Indian establishment ~ the Marxist regime in West Bengal, BJP rulers of Rajasthan and the Congress-led UPA government at the Centre.

Based on first-hand inputs, one is in a position to confirm that following the attack on her in Hyderabad on 9 August by Majlis Ittehadul Musalmeen (MIM) activists with impunity, she has become a victim of state-sponsored intimidation and persecution by turn in Kolkata, Jaipur and New Delhi.

After the Bangladeshi writer's return from Hyderabad, Kolkata Police virtually put her under house-arrest on the pretext of providing her enhanced security. But the fundamentalists of Andhra Pradesh who had roughed her

up, merrily descended on this city and, in concert with their local Urdu-speaking compatriot Imam Sayed Mohammed Barkati and other Taslima baiters, issued a fatwa at a post-jumma namaaz congregation to behead her. A huge police force led by two deputy commissioners of police was present at the venue of the congregation, but it took no action against the miscreants. Commissioner of Police Prasun Mukherjee, busy by then in wrecking the lawful Rizwanur-Priyanka marriage at the instance of Ashok Todi, the bride's ravenous father, justified the police inaction in respect of the murderous mullahs on the plea that the clerics had issued the fatwa by words of mouth and not in writing!

Infinitely more reprehensible was the fact in tandem with the mullah's anti-Taslima tirade, the metropolitan police chief personally mounted enormous pressure on the feminist writer to leave West Bengal. He visited her house and gave her a lurid account of how the fundamentalists were hell-bent to attack her house and finish her off, adding that the police wouldn't open fire on such a violent mob as that would ignite uncontrollable communal violence in the city. He counselled her that she should go away to the Madhya Pradesh jungle for her safety or anywhere else outside West Bengal. Later, he even suggested that Singapore or Thailand could be her possible next port of call.

Shortly before he was removed from the post of CP, Prasun Mukherjee advised Taslima that Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, in consultation with his counterpart in Kerala,

had arranged for her to shift to that state and she should go there quickly as time for her “was running out”. In response, Taslima only said that if the fundamentalists were so much determined to take her life, they could do so in Kerala as well.

After Mukherjee’s departure from Lalbazar, Deputy Commissioner Vineet Goel took over the charge of the “oust Taslima operation”. Soon after he joined the SB, one opposition MLA and a government-friendly writer separately advised Taslima to stay away from West Bengal for some time.

The writer in question was once Taslima’s literary patron, but in 2002, among others, he strongly advised Buddhdeb Bhattacharjee to ban her book *Dwikhandito*, but Calcutta High Court later scrapped the ban as “unjust and untenable”. The same writer had earlier repeatedly injured the religious sentiments of the Hindu community by depicting his perverse sexuality towards Goddess Saraswati and by his outrageous comments on Goddess Kali and other Hindu deities.

In the second week of November, as the second round of pogrom in Nandigram by CPI-M cadres was underway and the whole world condemned the atrocities, in a bid to divert public attention from the spate of murders, arson and rape, the Marxists reactivated the Taslima baiters in the state. As a result, Siddiqullah Chaudhury-led Jamat-ul-Ulema Hind, pro-Congress Minority Forum led by Idrish Ali and sundry other

groups that had actively participated in the anti-land-acquisition movement in Nandigram abruptly organised road blocks in Kolkata on 14, 15 and 16 November (On 14 November a mahamichhil decried the renewed barbarities in Nandigram), demanding cancellation of Taslima's visa.

Amidst this anti-Taslima build-up, on 14 November Vineet Goel sent Sandip Bhuturia, a Kolkata-based Marwari businessman, to her with the message that a violent non-Bengali Muslim mob would attack her house any time and so she should flee to Jaipur. Bhuturia assured her that through his own contacts in Jaipur he would fix her accommodation and do everything else to make her stay there comfortable. Taslima didn't agree.

Later the same day, Vineet Goel expressed over telephone his annoyance at Taslima for not acting on the police advice. He told her that early next morning she would be shifted to some other place in the city. Strangely enough, soon thereafter her security detail as also her police escort and personal security officer were withdrawn from the compound of her residence to the SB office.

Next day, at 5 a.m. she was escorted to the house of a friend of hers under police escort, but the police went away immediately after reaching her there. The fact that police security was withdrawn was proof enough that the so-called threat to her life was sheer make-believe ~ a ploy to remove her from West Bengal.

The way violence was engineered in certain Urdu-speaking Muslim areas of Kolkata on 21 November to make a strong case for Taslima's ouster has been exhaustively reported by the media and need not be repeated here. The same evening, state CPI-M secretary Biman Bose, in a TV appearance, wanted Taslima to go away from West Bengal; this made the real motivation behind the day's high drama crystal clear.

On 21 November, Vineet Goel sent Taslima words through Sandip Bhuturia that the after the jumma prayer on 23 November a riotous non-Bengali Muslim mob would attack her house and for her protection she should fly to Jaipur on 22 November evening for three days as a safety measure; Goel would provide her air ticket and Rajasthan police would provide her security. On the 22nd, Goel reiterated these instructions and in the evening a police party put her on a Jaipur-bound flight.

On arrival at Jaipur, a police detail met her and wanted to know what her destination in the city was. The police added that when her flight was in the air, they received a message from Kolkata Police that she was reaching Jaipur to attend a seminar and she should be provided police security. Realising that Kolkata Police had pulled a fast one on her and its Rajasthan counterpart, Taslima tried to telephone Goel but to no effect. She could get through to Bhuturia who arranged accommodation in a third-rate inn and a car from

a local cement company in which she travelled to the guest house.

At the dead of night (12.30 a.m.), the police woke her up, put her in a car and left with her for an undisclosed destination. At day-break, the police halted for a while on the way and changed from the uniform into mufti and resumed the journey. Not knowing what was happening to her Taslima telephoned Pranab Mukherjee who assured her that he would look into the matter, adding that she should not worry about her security.

The Rajasthan Police party drove Taslima to New Delhi and lodged her in Rajasthan Bhawan where she remained till 14 December. Since then, the Union Home Ministry has taken charge of her and shifted her to an undisclosed building in the city (apparently a safe house of one of the Central intelligence agencies.), where she is kept practically under house-arrest. She cannot meet anyone, nor can anyone meet her there. With prior MHA clearance a meeting with others can be arranged at a third place.

On 19 November, Amit Dasgupta, Joint Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs, met Taslima at the safe house and told her in as many words that there was no question of her going back to Kolkata and that she would have to live in India under the restrictions imposed. Later, Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee's statement in Kolkata echoed these words. In Burdwan, however, when a journalist asked him

about the Centre's policy on Taslima, Mukkherjee lost his cool, insulted the scribe and refused to answer his query.

So far only two persons, MA Baby, Education Minister of Kerala and a friend of Taslima from Sweden, have met her under the restrictive conditions imposed by the MHA. Baby's visit was part of the CPI-M's damage-control exercise, as was the statement of Jyoti Basu that Taslima was welcome to return to Kolkata.

The Statesman/ 30 Dec

Challenge before Muslims

Vinod Jain

Many like me would be grateful to Mr SM Murshed for writing about Taslima Nasreen ("To you be your way and to me mine", 16 December).

He decided not to go out with a can of petrol or diesel or kerosene to the streets to incite the mobs to indulge in arson or loot. He instead decided to write about it. One is grateful to him because after weeks of confusion and ignorance regarding what she wrote that provoked protests and arson, one now knows what it was all about. It is necessary to quote from his article: "Such then has been the character of this rascal of a prophet; and concealed within the folds of his raiment is the hoax known as Allah". This is outright abuse. And abuse cannot be accepted, cannot be permitted by anybody against any religion.

Mr Murshed follows his quotation by a question: "Can the Muslim world be expected to look on with equanimity as mute spectators on this wholly uncalled for, insulting and derogatory remark against Allah and his Prophet?"

An emphatic no, but with a difference. The entire civilised world in an increasingly globalised atmosphere could come to a mutual understanding/agreement that religious abuse will not be accepted, will not be permitted, by anybody against any religion. Similar developments are taking place all around us. Why not this? Should such a day come when such a broad understanding is reached, it will be possible for members of the civilised world to object to abuse against any religion.

This should open up another prospect: that of the civilised world asking the protesters of the other kind ~ arsonists et al ~ to channelise their protests properly. The pressure on the erring abusers will then come not just from the people of the abused religion but from the whole world.

The purpose to stop religious abuse, however, should not be to stop freedom of expression, or to stop the desire to reform through arguments and discussions.

Such steps could lead to a calming of nerves, avoidance of violence, and a reduction in intolerance. Another likely consequence could be that sensitive matters may gradually come to be handled by the members of the civilised world who generally are educated and thoughtful, rather than by the variety of clergies who are not so thoughtful or so broadly educated.

Another good thing that Mr Murshed has done is to join issue with the use of the word “fundamentalist” in the debate. The word is often used with an accusing finger. He quotes the

Oxford Dictionary for its meaning and then goes on to say: "Going by this definition, I am a fundamentalist Muslim, for I believe, and practice, the five fundamental tenets of Islam, namely I believe in one God and that Muhammad was his Messenger, I pray five times a day, keep the fast during the entire month of Ramzan, give in charity the prescribed amount of my savings, and I have performed the Hajj. So is everyone else in the world who regards himself as a true Muslim".

One can see from his writings that Mr Murshed is an upright man, he is proud that he is following the fundamentals of Islam truthfully, and that he feels similarly about others like him. Prima facie no one can take objection to this, irrespective of one belonging to this religion or that, or even if one is a non-believer.

There is another aspect of fundamentalism that needs to be taken into account in a serious debate of this nature. Time was when these fundamentals were formulated and set for the good among the followers to accept and follow.

Permit me for the sake of argument to shift a little. At one place in the article it is pointed out: "The custom among Arabs those days was to take more wives than one. Upon Khadija's death he was miserable and lonely. He was persuaded by friends and relatives to marry again which he did. He then had to fight many battles and each of them took its toll in lives lost, which created a large number of

widows with no one to look after them. He proceeded to set a personal example by taking war widows as wives.”

And further: “At no time were there more than four wives, the maximum prescribed in the Koran.”

Countless number of fundamentalist Muslims must have been practicing it since the days of the Prophet. Those few who may have abused the permission by devious means may be left out of our discussion. This provision, peculiar to Islam, is another fundamental tenet. Let us for the sake of discussion look at it this way. It is provided in the Koran and the example for the same was set by the Prophet Himself, therefore, it is the accepted thing. This would be the fundamentalist position. Now let us look at it another way. It is pointed out that the custom among the Arabs up to the time of the Prophet was (1) to take more wives, actually even more than four and (2) many battles during the time of the Prophet resulted in a large number of widows, with no one to look after them.

For the Prophet and for the Koran to restrict a man to a maximum of four wives and to lay down rules regarding the treatment of these wives was a matter of great social reform in those days. Permitting up to four wives because contemporary wars resulted in a large number of war-widows also suggests an attitude of trying to find practical solution out of a difficult situation. This also shows a reformist attitude.

Taking the discussion further we find that in the first instance the faithful follower takes in good faith what is laid down and permitted. Since the days of the Prophet to this day he is sticking to it. This is fundamentalism.

Arguing on the other hand that to restrict a man to a maximum of four wives when earlier there was no restriction on number was a matter of reform. It must have improved the position of women in that society. The solution found in case of a large number of war-widows also suggests practical social reform.

Looking at it this way, it is not a case of fundamentalism. This instead is a case of reformism.

After Islam spread beyond Arab shores where it was not the practice earlier for a man to take more wives than one, the provision of up to four wives was not withdrawn. That was one state when reformist, progressive Islam turned backwards and turned reactionary. Even in Arab lands where reform had first been introduced it should have been taken progressively to a stage where no man will have more than one wife. After all, so many centuries since then have elapsed. But nothing of the kind happened. This is fundamentalism.

Taking the case of war-widows in those days further one may give a look at the intervening period since then. There must have been periods of peace and tranquillity in lands governed by Islam. Were the provisions of multiple wives

withdrawn then? If not, it was due to fundamentalism taking a different shape and acquiring a different meaning.

One wonders if the educated well-meaning Muslims who believe and practice the five fundamental tenets of Islam know that the Prophet during His time and under his lands had encouraged the most wonderful centres of learning. If it is no, or alternative if it is yes and they have done nothing about it, either way it is a consequence of fundamentalist thinking.

Take for instance madrasas. There must be countless numbers of them. They tend to be controlled by the clergy. Their purpose does not seem to be to impart education. They seem to be imparting "fundamentalism" of a certain kind. Nobody knows how many of them are churning out terrorists and jihadis. Looking at them from the standpoint of centres of education, they are at the bottom of all the education systems of the world. From great centres of learning to terror centres!

Why this degeneration? Could it be that education is not an important tenet and could be ignored, allowed to degenerate and die. Overindulgence with the fundamentals of religion to the exclusion of all other matters is always dangerous for any society.

Take the case of wars during the early period of Islam. The believers who fought them must have been charged with a mission, for they fought so brilliantly and effectively that they brought within the ambit of Islam such a vast area of the

globe within an unimaginably short period of fifty years. Nobody else could repeat/achieve that feat in the entire human history.

On the other hand, the Arabs have been fighting Israel for a period longer than that. And the Arabs have achieved nothing except failures and losses. This, despite the fact that the Arabs around Israel constitute fifty times the area and fifty times the population of Israel. What has happened? Could it be that Islam has so thoroughly degenerated over the period? How come when the Israelis are aiming guns at the Arabs, the Arabs are pelting stones at the Israelis! Could it be a consequence of fundamentalism, of inertia, of socio-cultural fossilisation?

Take a broad glance at the major religious groups the world over ~ Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Where would the Muslims place themselves overall?

Take the case of women. The position of women all over the world is a matter of great concern to all thinking people. But the position of Muslim women should be a matter of greater concern.

Take this very recent news item from Dubai for instance. "A year-and-a-half ago in the eastern province town of Qatif, seven men gang-raped a 19-year-old girl 14 times. Three judges from the Qatif General Court sentenced the rape victim to 90 lashes for being in the car of an unrelated male at the time of the rape. The court also suspended the victim's lawyer Al-Lahem for defending her and confiscated

his license... She and her companion were kidnapped at knife-point and brutally gang-raped by the seven men". (The Statesman, 18 December)

Being an outsider to Islam, I should not like to say anything further in this matter, as this is a sensitive issue. Persons from within the fold could take it up. But I should like to bring in one point here because that has already been a matter of widespread discussion.

One such person who has taken it up is Taslima Nasreen. Muslim society should let her do the work she has taken up. Who knows the coming generations of Muslims may one day look upon her as a liberator. After all Sir Syed Ahmed Khan in his times faced tremendous opposition to the educational institution he wanted to establish for the Muslims. So much so that the Imam of Mecca had at that time issued a fatwa against him.

We should not be carried away by emotion or fundamentalism, nor should we allow the elements in our societies or clergies to persecute such persons. We know enough about how the Christian clergy persecuted the scientists in Europe during the Middle Ages. Who would bother to remember those Christian clergies today, and who would like to forget Galileo Galilee and other persecuted scientists like him.

All religions, all fundamentalism, all ideologies tend to degenerate with time. Because they stick to the original, because they refuse to budge, refuse to move with times. In

so doing they stiffen and harden and get fossilised. These words do not represent life, they represent approaching death or death. Let us take an example. We all knew what was happening to China behind the bamboo curtain. Then one day around 1980 China decided to break loose from or go back on one of the fundamental tenets of its ideology ~ anti-capitalism. It decided to swim with time. It took to capitalism with a vengeance. The world gaped in disbelief. Today that China is a determining factor in world economy. Socialist India did a similar thing in 1991.

Religions in their time were meant to be liberators of mankind. Let us not turn them into shackles of humanity. Let the Muslims take a re-look at themselves, at their past and at their future.

(The writer, a founding member of Citizens for Democracy, is a former president of Humanist Youth Forum)

The Statesman/04 January 2008

Writer Blocked

Editorial

It's precisely when BCCI officials say that India's cricket tour of Australia will go on that one suspects that the tour might be in trouble. Likewise, a Union minister waxing eloquent about India as a pluralistic nation and how much he personally loves literature sounds ominous. A crackdown on freedom of expression may be in the offing.

As information and broadcasting minister, Priya Ranjan Dasmunshi ought to be well versed in norms followed by a liberal democracy. One of those norms is that literature, even if considered unsavoury, should be allowed to be published and its writer shouldn't be taken to task for it. But Dasmunshi wants exiled Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen to "bow

down" before those she has offended and apologise "with folded hands". Even though Taslima has already expunged the offending passages from her controversial book *Dwikhandito*, Dasmunshi has hinted the book itself might be banned.

As Taslima rightly suspects, she isn't the issue any more. Instead of making an issue of the freedom of expression she has done all she could to appease her critics. But she's nevertheless held at an undisclosed location in Delhi and visitors to her are being screened. The Centre says it's up to the West Bengal government to decide whether it will have her back after ousting her from the state, while according to the state government she's the Centre's responsibility. Clearly, she's become a pawn in a larger political game. Putting her down might be seen in some quarters as unlocking the magic key to the Muslim vote, as eminent writer Mahasweta Devi has alleged. The problem with such a political strategy is that the more one appeases fundamentalists, thinking their point of view to be representative of a community, the more demands they'll raise. And the more powerful they'll become, once they're seen to be effective in translating their views into state policy.

A secular state has to draw the line somewhere, otherwise it will give rise to a game of competitive fundamentalism that will damage the nation's multicultural fabric. Moreover, a

demo-cracy cannot stifle individual dissent. An individual, after all, is the smallest minority. It's on his defence that democracy rests. When calling on Taslima to bend and scrape before religious authorities, it's these democratic basics that the good information and broadcasting minister appears to have lost sight of.

The Times of India/08 jan

Hark! Is the bell tolling?

Karan Thapar

Of one thing you can be certain, Voltaire wouldn't approve of present-day India. That may sound facetious but, in fact, it conveys a sad and disturbing truth. I accept he may never have actually said, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to death your right to say it", but no one has so far questioned the fact that he believed in this principle. Today, this aphorism has become the litmus test of a free liberal society.

Well, we've just failed that test, yet again! But what's particularly galling is that this time round, it's happened at the hands of our politicians, the supposed defenders of our freedoms! For no reason that I can discern, Priyaranjan Dasmunsi has weighed-in against Taslima Nasreen — as if she doesn't have enough critics and enemies already! — and kicked his jackboot in. "She should bow down before the people whose sentiments she has hurt," he says, "and apologise with folded hands."

Consider for a moment what this amounts to. He's not simply asking her to say sorry, he's forcing her to her knees and telling her to plead for forgiveness! And this, from a man, who is not just a senior member of the Congress Party, not just an eminent cabinet minister but, in fact, the guardian of our press and broadcast freedoms! He is our I&B Minister.

Sadly, Mr. Dasmunsi's intemperate outburst is wholly in keeping with the official position of his government. It only goes further in its crude bluntness. Way back in November, Pranab Mukherjee said in Parliament that whilst Ms. Nasreen would not be refused shelter, "it is also expected that guests will refrain from activities and expressions that may hurt the sentiments of our people." Even if more subtly phrased, the Mukherjee position was hardly better.

So where does that leave India's "civilisational heritage", to use Pranab Mukherjee's grandiloquent and beguiling phrase? In terrible contradictions, if not in tatters.

When Buddha and Mahavira challenged the brahminical orthodoxy of their day, was this India's "civilisational" response? Clearly not. More significantly, is it the Guru Teg Bahadurs, the Syed Ahmed Khans and the Ram Mohan Roys we are proud of or our Pushyamitra Sungas, Aurangzebs, and Dwyers? And finally, what has happened to Mahatma Gandhi's open windows and the challenging winds he hoped would sweep aside the cobwebs in our mind? The

Government seems to have shut, if not also barricaded them.

Next, what does this limited welcome mean for Taslima? As Arundhati Roy said to me: "It's 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 in these conditions, I would become a yoga instructor!"

But, most importantly, who are these Indians whose sentiments must not be hurt? Who are the people to whom Taslima Nasreen must bow down and plead for forgiveness with folded hands? Not you or me or other broad-minded, rational, free-thinking, enlightened, educated people, but narrow, prejudiced, insular and authoritarian mullahs. Are our freedoms to be judged by their values and reactions? Are they the accepted arbiters of what is and what is not acceptable?

I have to assert that when Mr. Mukherjee says Taslima Nasreen must not say, do or write things that "hurt the sentiments of our people", I do not recognise the pronoun 'our'. Am I part of it? Are you? Is he? Or does he only have in mind a small but vocal and violent minority — perhaps disowned by, or at least, embarrassing to the majority of their co-religionists — who, he believes, delivers votes?

We don't expect very much of our politicians — if there is one lesson experience has taught us, it must be this — but, at the very least, they should stand up for our freedoms. Otherwise, they could soon be tolling the bell for themselves. Let them remember what they deny Taslima or us today, they could end up losing themselves tomorrow.

The Hindustan Times/12 January 2008

Just Say No

Editorial

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh cites Naxalite violence as the biggest threat to internal security. Statistics back his claim. However, there is another potent threat to the foundations of our republic that calls for urgent action. The secular and liberal character of the nation is under threat from illiberal forces. Fundamentalisms of all hues - religious, caste, ideological - are on the rise and agencies that ought to check these seem to be failing.

Violence against Christians, first in Orissa and now in Chhattisgarh, by Hindu extremist groups and the boycott threat issued against the Godrej family by some Muslim

organisations for hosting Salman Rushdie in Mumbai are recent examples of rising intolerance. Tennis star Sania Mirza confessed that she had contemplated retirement thanks to pressure from extremist groups. Now, a so-called patriot has dragged her to court for disrespecting the national flag. M F Husain and Taslima Nasreen are under attack for being outspoken in their creative works.

These seemingly unconnected events challenge two defining features of the Indian nation: freedom of speech and freedom of religion. Ironically, the latter is used to justify assaults on the former. State agencies and political parties that should defend the secular character of the nation often become accomplices in such attacks. What should we make of a senior minister who wants Taslima to beg pardon from religious extremists who have threatened to take the law into their hands? Does he really believe in the sanctity of law and the right to free speech? Similarly, judges should ask themselves if they ought to admit motivated pleas that are meant to harass celebrities. If at all they need to act, it should be to haul up overly litigious persons for clogging the judicial system.

Political parties have to share a large part of the blame for allowing extremists a free run. Each of these is bound by the Constitution to uphold secularism and free speech. But rarely have politicians shown the spunk to confront

fundamentalists, who are in a minority. Instead, politicians seem to travel with the tide for temporary gains and not resist the attacks on the secular edifice of the republic. The rise of identity politics is symptomatic of the failure of mainstream political parties to defend the inclusive provisions of the Constitution. The time has come for democratic forces to close ranks and guard the republic.

The Times of India

22 Jan,08

Insider Tirading

Editorial

The nation's attention remains glued to one part of the country from where citizens of India are being targeted by a handful of lumpens and are being forced to flee an Indian city for being 'outsiders'. Meanwhile, in an unknown 'safe house' somewhere in the capital, a writer from another country who made India her country of residence since 2004 is being quietly but firmly cajoled to leave the country by the Government of India because of another handful of lumpens. The two situations may strike one as being totally different. In the case of north Indians being told to get out of

'Marathi' Mumbai by Raj Thackeray and his fellow goons, our outrage may be more palpable because of fellow Indians being victimised. In the case of Taslima Nasreen, it's a sometimes-bothersome-for-some Bangladeshi writer whose desire to stay on in India is being made increasingly difficult by an Indian government looking for an easy way out. But in both cases, it's the notion of the 'outsider' that gives the licence for most people who should be appalled by the treatment meted out to Mumbai's 'North Indians' and Ms Nasreen to keep quiet.

For both sets of victims, theorising about what constitutes 'belonging' doesn't matter. Even the statistics of 30-40 per cent of Mumbaikars coming from north India doesn't underline forcefully enough the idea of the migrant finding 'home' in a place away from where he or she left — by choice or otherwise. In this context, geographical entities are superfluous. A Marathi's sense of belonging can be as strong in Lucknow as a Bangladeshi's can be in Kolkata. Since 2004, Ms Nasreen has been renewing her resident permit every six months. (She first came as an exile to India in 2000 after living in Europe after being forced to leave Bangladesh in 1994.) In November 2007, a proverbial bunch of loudmouths in Kolkata went on the streets rampaging and protesting against what they called the writer's 'blasphemous' prose. Soon, Ms Nasreen removed the offending passage, hoping that the act would be atonement enough. That was not to be, as a few fanatics wanted her out of the country — or worse. And the West Bengal government complied by shuttling her out of Kolkata.

It is up to the Government of India, that will hopefully renew Ms Nasreen's resident status before Sunday, February 17 (the date on which it expires), to send out the message as to which side it is on. Otherwise one would start thinking that the government tacitly agrees with Raj Thackeray that people should stay rooted to the spot on which they were born till they die.

Hindustan Times/ 14 feb

LEADER ARTICLE: Stand And Deliver

Editorial

BLOOMINGTON: India, quite justifiably, likes to promote its democratic credentials. It holds regular elections which are mostly free and fair, its press is unfettered, the higher echelons of its judiciary have made contributions to modern jurisprudence and civil and personal rights, except under conditions of great duress, find constitutional protection. Yet its leaders, while loudly proclaiming the country's democratic achievements, seem singularly weak-kneed when faced with the possibility of illiberal protest or the possible defection of a voting constituency.

It is particularly tragic that this was brought home yet again in the 60th year of the nation's independence. The professedly secular UPA government shamelessly caved in to the threats from some obscurantist members of India's Muslim community when French President Nicolas Sarkozy proposed awarding the Simone de Beauvoir Prize to Taslima Nasreen during his state visit on Republic Day.

The UPA government's record, not to mention that of the communist regime in West Bengal, has been nothing short of appalling. Taslima had to flee from exile in Kolkata because of the thuggish behaviour of some segments of the Muslim community of the city. Subsequently, the UPA government hustled her off to some undisclosed location ostensibly out of concerns for her own safety. Worse still, an otherwise sensible and seasoned minister for external affairs, Pranab Mukherjee, felt compelled to publicly warn the hapless writer that she must avoid public commentary on issues that might "hurt the sentiments of the people".

In a democracy, free speech occasionally involves hurting the "sentiments of the people". Otherwise all speech would become circumspect, boring and eventually deadening. There is nothing that Taslima has uttered or written that could not be said about another faith. Her views may offend some members of the Muslim community and they are at complete liberty to disagree, debate and argue with them with as much intellectual vigour that they can muster. They may even verbally condemn her remarks as well as her writings. However, in a country that professes to be a liberal democracy, they simply do not have the right either to call for her extradition, to threaten her physically or resort to street violence to hasten her imminent departure.

The failure of the West Bengal government to forthrightly rein in the Muslim zealots who ran amok on the streets of Kolkata baying for her blood was nothing short of cowardly and smacked of the most pathetic resort to political exigency.

Some commentators, in fact, have argued that the regime in West Bengal allowed the demonstrations to proceed apace in a crude attempt to divert attention away from Nandigram.

The responses to this form of unreasonable and irresponsible behaviour both on the part of the country's left-wing intellectuals and the central government have been craven. Left-wing intellectuals, who never lose an opportunity to berate the obvious shortcomings of Indian secularism have, with marked exceptions, maintained a stony silence on this issue. Their silence speaks volumes about their conduct. Two issues, that their deafening silence raises, are salient. On the one hand they fear that any criticism of the nation's largest religious minority could strengthen the forces of resurgent Hindutva. On the other, they have always betrayed a curious propensity to overlook minority communalism. Such behaviour is both intellectually untenable and morally reprehensible.

It is intellectually flawed because such silence actually bolsters the position of the Hindu zealots. They can easily take potshots at this form of selective criticism of loathsome behaviour. It is morally dubious because it undermines one of the central tenets of democratic discourse namely the defence of ideas that may be offensive to some members of the community. Over time, the failure to take a firm, unyielding and clear-cut position on issues of this order will help corrode whatever moral authority that the intellectual Left commands.

The UPA government's choices and actions are equally indefensible. It has failed to show that it has sufficient courage to stand up to a small number of well-organised thugs who should face the full brunt of the law of the land. Instead, it has chided the victim of their outrageous behaviour and has curbed her right of free expression. In the process they have trampled on the principles of free speech, they have given comfort to the intolerant and they have provided political fodder to the Hindu right. In sum, their policies abjectly fail the tests of both moral courage and political astuteness.

It is time for the government to dispense with its pathetic equivocation, assume a firm stance against intellectual thuggery and grant her political asylum. Only then will it have redeemed the moral high ground and demonstrated its commitment to the principles of liberal democracy. Any posture that falls short of this principled position will simply corrode the very foundations of what most Indians so cherish: their hard-won rights of democratic speech, however unpalatable to some.

Finally, it does no good to suggest that Taslima, a foreigner, does not enjoy the same rights and privileges of an Indian citizen. If India cannot uphold the rights of someone who has sought solace and refuge from persecution in its midst, it will soon be unable to protect the rights of its own citizenry from the howls of shrill mobs. The time to act is now.

The writer is a professor of political science at Indiana University.

The Times of India/19feb

Taslima attack un-Islamic

Asghar Ali Engineer

It was shocking that three MLAs of Ittehadul Muslimeen in Hyderabad gatecrashed into the book release function of Taslima Nasreen's *Lajja*, translated into the Telugu, launching a physical and verbal assault on the author. All this in the name of Islam, as though Islam stands for such hooliganism.

The party leadership endorsed this behaviour, instead of condemning it. One MLA even said that if Taslima returned to Hyderabad, she would be beheaded. Was all this done for love of Islam? It was a display of love for power, pure and simple. The party leadership thought this was a good opportunity to widen its electoral base.

I disagree with Taslima's views and think she is ignorant of Quranic teachings. But holding that view does not give anyone the right to violently attack her or incite people to attack her.

Such hooliganism is not just reprehensible but also unwise from the viewpoint of those who are opposed to Taslima's attacks on Islam. The Hyderabad episode gives her more publicity that she deserves. It will make her a celebrity in the eyes of those who are hostile to Islam.

She would turn more hostile to Islam than ever before. If we really love Islam, then we should try to win her heart and soul through love and compassion. And that is what the Prophet of Islam did. It is a well known story that a Jewish woman who hated the Prophet (peace be upon him) would throw garbage on him whenever he passed by her house. One day, when that did not happen, he learnt that she was sick. He went to inquire about her health. She was so moved that she embraced Islam.

Today, those who claim to love the Prophet and Islam are attacking a woman, pushing her to hate Islam. It is heartening that many religious leaders — Maulana Mustaqim of Jamiat-ul-Ulema-i-Hind, Shiah leader Maulana Ather Abbas Rizvi and several others — have condemned the attack.

The book released in Hyderabad was not on Islam but on persecution of the Hindu minority in Bangladesh. Just as Hindutva hordes attacked Muslims all over India after the demolition of Babri masjid, hooligans of the Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh attacked Hindus. Do we Muslims not heave a sigh of relief when fair-minded Hindus stand by us against Hindu communal forces? Should we not stand by fair-minded Muslims of Bangla-desh if they stand by a Hindu minority?

Taslama can be countered by arguing on the basis of the Qur'an, in dignified language befitting a true Muslim. The Qur'an or any hadith does not support violence against others.

The Qur'an says, "Call to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and argue with them in the best manner" (16:125). Allah says in the Qur'an "...do not be aggressors, Allah does not love aggressors" (2:190). And even if a Muslim renounces Islam and becomes a non-believer, no one has the right to punish him except Allah. Allah does not refer to any punishment to those

who repeatedly believe and disbelieve, let alone permit humans to punish them.

Democracy hinges on preserving the rights of the individual, rights of the collective, freedom of conscience and the right to believe or disbelieve. However, politicians, greedy for votes, launch aggressive campaigns in opposition to these democratic norms.

This is what the sangh parivar did when it launched an aggressive movement for Ramjanambhoomi and demolished Babri masjid. Sangh leaders like Uma Bharati and Sadhvi Rithambara used abusive language against Muslims and the government did nothing. They allowed the hate campaign to go on. Had the likes of Uma Bharati and Rithambara been punished, MLAs of Ittehadul Muslimeen would not have dared to indulge in hooliganism.

Communal riots, too, take place because the guilty are never punished. In the Mumbai riots, more than 800 people were killed, yet the state is extremely reluctant to act, lest the Shiv Sena disapproves.

People of all hues involved in such public crimes must be severely punished to send across the message that hooliganism and rioting will not be tolerated under any circumstance.

(The writer is a Mumbai-based Islamic scholar)

The Times Of India/20 Aug 2007

Freedom of Expression: The circus goes on

M.S. Verma

Salman Rushdi, Taslima Nasreen, and M. F. Hussain are perpetually in the focus of the media. There are certain common factors that make their cases similar. All are creative artists. All three are accused of hurting religious

sentiments of one section or the other of the society. All three have had their roots in India. All have survived threats to their lives. All claim that they used their constitutional right to freedom of expression.

Now the questions arise what went wrong; when and how it went wrong; what religious code they violated? Is the constitution perfect? Is there anything mysterious that escaped the attention of the constitution framers? These questions are very hard to answer where religion is involved. Religion, after all, is the opiate of the people, said Carl Marx. There never was an absolute authority on religion, any religion for that matter, whether it is Hinduism, Christianity, Islam or any major religion of the world.

There, always have been commentaries on scriptures of all religions by very well intentioned and learned scholars but more explanations, elucidation, commentaries keep coming up. Religion is a matter of faith and ultimately a matter of the heart and will always defeat the language of logic.

Constitutions were framed by very learned men but human nature which differs from person to person does intervene and imperfections are endemic. Honorable courts interpret laws framed by the parliaments and thus have their limitations. But the civilized humanity has learnt to live with these limitations and will ever have to do so.

The people who threaten the persons who allegedly hurt their religious feelings, show total disregard to the constitutional provisions which in most cases are total Greek to them. They are also ignorant of the law of the land. But their gullibility is frequently exploited by some unscrupulous people from behind the scenes; who pull the strings of these puppets, the so called trouble makers and watch the mayhem from their safe perches. Demonstrations are engineered that result in loss of life and property. Common people have learnt to live with these demonstrations.

But then another consideration comes up. Are all the protestors mere unthinking zealots? Obviously not. The artists, no doubt, have the freedom of expressions, but their definition of this freedom of expression can't be the ultimate one. They certainly overstep their boundaries now and then. That is why such matters are referred to courts of law that interpret the legal provisions. But laws' delays are universally notorious. Even the great English dramatist Shakespeare bemoans law's delays.

The consequence is that the references to the courts keep dragging on and on and the matters turn almost into festering boils. The just indignation of a large number of the people when some hot headed or self righted artist takes liberty with sensitive issues connected with faith and religion, forces the sane people to side with the unruly and these sensible people too lose their identity in the mob. They are then non-entities and are criticized by the media and self imposed intellectuals. Obviously the scenario is far from being simple.

It is here that the Government looks helpless. It dare not displease this party or the other. It lacks the will to take some decisive action as there is nothing decisive in these cases. Let the law take its own course or let anarchy take its own course sound identical.

This is one of the inherent flaws of democracy. 'Democracy means simply bludgeoning of the people, by the people and for the people,' says Oscar Wilde, or to quote George Bernard Shaw 'Democracy is a govt. of the fools, by the fools and for the fools.

Democracy is a humbug. (Preface to his famous play 'The Apple Cart'). But other forms of govt. too whether dictatorship or kingship face a similar predicament. 'For forms of government let fools contest. Whatever is best administered is the best,' says Pope, the English poet. Governments take some action doing patch work here and there, pacify the people for some time and the main issues remain unresolved.

Let us take the case of Taslima Nasreen. Her visa has been extended by the Govt. of India. In numerous statements and interviews to the media she seems to be crying for justice showing her helplessness in the web she has been caught willy-nilly or has deliberately got herself entangled into a controversy that keeps lingering on. The lady is tired of it and is helpless and her pictures show how pathetic she looks.

The Indian intellectuals and artists have come out in support of her and this perhaps forced the hands of the govt. to grant the visa extension without a date. But what next is the question still bugging it and to most of us. Do we have some easy solution in sight?

No there isn't. On the one hand the govt. is to maintain law and order and on the other hand it is faced with a vital question of fulfilling its obligation of maintaining the integrity of the constitution and the Indian culture, which regards guests or the people who seek asylum on just grounds to grant them asylum. All this is like tight rope walking with lots of uncertainty associated with it. But what about the people who are after the lady's blood?

Obviously the use of force is no solution. May be bringing the aggrieved people and the protestors face to face in a

dialogue in an attempt to thrash out the issue and remove the misunderstandings could show some light. All mean well in their own way but the results are the opposite of the good intentions exactly as the Biblical saying implies 'The Road to Hell was built with good intentions.'

The artists also don't seem to share the concerns of the governments who are burdened with the responsibility of looking after their security and are exposed to criticism at home and abroad. The sympathy of majority of the people around the globe is with the artists and would like the often senseless protests to end but their good intentions do not find a concerted expression with the world communities and harping on their individual trumpets becomes ineffective. The result is almost a zero and the circus goes on. When we read that Taslima's visa has been extended (the date not mentioned) a big question mark 'what next' still glowers at us.

What is going to be the judgment in the court case against M. F. Hussain too is eagerly awaited by most of us. Let us see which way the wind blows.

Mynews.in/20 feb.08

A murky affair

A timid UPA government under constant pressure from ultra-secular communist parties and obscure Muslim religious groups in Kolkata on the one side, and

controversial, feisty Bangladesh author Taslima Nasreen, with a compulsive streak to play victim to the hilt, on the other. The tenets of liberalism are quite clear in this kind of a situation: Support the hapless individual, however pigheaded, against a state apparatus that is impersonal and insensitive.

The government has tried to save itself political embarrassment rather than stick its neck out for the rights of the individual, as any democratic government should. The UPA government has failed to live up to the image of being truly democratic.

More than the UPA, it is the Left Front government in Kolkata which should be ashamed of failing to control unruly elements strutting as Muslim groups. The suspicion that the Communists had indeed generated the tempest against Nasreen to divert attention from its acts of naked authoritarianism against the poor in Nandigram seems to gain a certain amount of credibility. It was the primary responsibility of the state government to have protected the freedom of speech and movement of Nasreen. Instead, it chose to send the writer out of Kolkata.

The response of the Communists does not come as a surprise. It is forgotten that the Marxists do not believe in freedom, either of the individual or that of a group. Their doctrine is based on the vicious assumptions of collectivism — economic, political, social. So, even those Communist parties which function in a democratic set up like the Indian ones are not to be trusted with the responsibility of defending individual rights.

Is Nasreen justified in indulging in fulminations against India? The demand implied in minister for external affairs Pranab Mukherjee's statement in Parliament that she can stay in India but she should keep in mind the sensitivities of the people is not unreasonable, much less an autocratic demand.

Instead of speaking out loudly on restrictions placed on her movements, she should have spoken out in public about her intellectual beliefs, which are being misinterpreted by the fanatics. She has clarified that the offensive remarks about Islam have been deleted voluntarily from her books, but the clarification gets lost in the din of her tirade against the authorities. Nasreen has been less than tactful in making her case.

It has been a messy, murky affair on all sides. No one emerges with any credibility — not the UPA government, not the Communists, not Nasreen.

DNA
March 20, 2008

Secular Travesty

Rabindranath Tagore's poem "Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high... into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake" is taught to schoolchildren all over the country. It's not a prescription, however, that the government intends to live up to. It kept Bangladeshi author Taslima Nasreen incommunicado for five months, at an 'undisclosed location' in Delhi, in the hope that she would leave the country even though she had a valid visa to stay. It had its way at last, with Taslima packing her bags for Europe.

The circumstances in which that happened don't do the government much credit. Her harassment didn't stop at cutting her off from those she wanted to see, in the name of security. She may have been denied access to proper medical care, going by complaints coming from her and backed by International PEN, the global writers' body.

Information and broadcasting minister Priya Ranjan Dasmunshi publicly asked her to "bow down" and apologise to those she had offended. He may have forgotten, for the moment, that India is a secular democracy rather than a theocracy. Concern about her treatment came not just from international human rights groups but also from the National Human Rights Commission, which sent a notice to the home ministry and Delhi Police on her "solitary confinement".

The UPA government and its leftist supporters claim to be champions of secularism. Forcing Taslima out of the country, however, was a sad day for Indian secularism. The tactics used replicated those adopted by West Bengal's Left Front government to get her to leave Kolkata, where she had been staying. Her security, apparently, was uppermost in the minds of both central and state governments. What gives the game away, however, is that there is no official condemnation of those who threatened violence against her, or actually carried it out at a Hyderabad book launch in August last year.

Secularism of this variety amounts to a game of competitive fundamentalism. Someone somewhere claims to be offended on behalf of his community and issues threats. The government, in the name of security, bans the book, the film, or the writer. It's the equivalent of handing fundamentalists a megaphone. Someone else, encouraged by the supineness of the government, threatens or undertakes more violence for the sake of his particular peeve. That not only undermines the constitutionally guaranteed right to freedom of expression but creates insecurity all round. Not only would Tagore have been horrified at all this, there's serious doubt about whether it works even in terms of such short-term goals as delivering vote banks.

Editorial
The Times of India
21.03.08

From Taslima to Tibet, India proves chicken
Jug Suraiya

Instead of the peacock, India should adopt the chicken as its national bird. Apart from the fowl being the dish of choice, at least in the northern part of the country, our official response to various situations - ranging from the Taslima Nasreen controversy to the protests in Tibet - can best be described as chicken-hearted.

Forced into exile from her native Bangladesh by religious fanatics who didn't like her feminist writings, Taslima sought sanctuary in Kolkata in whose Bangla milieu she felt creatively comfortable. However, after street riots instigated by local goons disguised as religious zealots caused the Marxist state government to decide that minority-appeasing discretion was the better part of secular valour, the writer was bundled out of the city and taken first to an undisclosed hideaway in Rajasthan and later to Delhi, where she was kept in virtual isolation.

Made to apologise for her 'anti-Islamic' views, she was warned by no less than the information and broadcasting minister - supposedly the custodian of the fundamental right to freedom of expression as spelt out in the Constitution - that she should not say or do anything that might hurt the religious sensibilities of any group. (Should the I&B ministry be renamed the ministry of intimidation and browbeating?)

Finally, Taslima has sought sanctuary in distant Scandinavia, saying: "A person who couldn't be scared by fundamentalists has been defeated by cold-blooded state terrorism inflicted by the Indian government. My terrible experience has shattered all my notions about a secular, democratic India."

Why did Taslima - yet another personification of freedom of expression — have to quit India? Because when push comes to communal shove, for all its professions to the contrary, India is too chicken to stick to its principles of liberalism and democracy and allows mob rule to subvert the rule of law. In the case of the Chinese crackdown in Tibet, India's official response has been so politically correct, not to mention politically chicken, that it has earned praise from no less than the Chinese premier, Wen Jiabao (who might have made special mention of the Indian Left whose non-response might be summed up as 'Tibet who?').

Despite China's continuing claims on Arunachal, and despite its proven nuclear proliferation to Pakistan, New Delhi walks on eggshells where Tibet is concerned and seems vaguely embarrassed by the Dalai Lama's presence on Indian soil. Why? Because then, maybe, China will support India's admission to the UN Security Council. Or at least stop using Pakistan as a foil against us. Or sell us cheap pichkaris for Holi. Or something.

The truth is that we are just too chicken to take on the big demons - Chinese totalitarianism, religious fundamentalism - but make do with assailing minor imps of the perverse. For instance, Fiona Mackeown, mother of the murdered Scarlett Keeling, has been strictureed for having left her 15-year-old daughter alone in Goa. What an unnatural, monstrous mother. How unlike the caring, sharing mothers of the suitably named Mother India, where female foeticide and infanticide are as common as the common cold. Or take the case of health minister Ramadoss who is so busy fighting the evils of tobacco and liquor - by putting 'gory' pictures on tobacco

products, and banning surrogate liquor ads - that he has no time to address the much larger ills that plague our practically non-existent public health system.

Can't move mountains? Find convenient molehills, turn them into mountains, and then move them. That seems to be the recipe. Not just for the health minister but for the entire sorry mess which might aptly be called Indian chicken curry.

The Times of India
21 Mar 2008,

Taslima's exit is a blow to Indian secularism

Amulya Ganguli

Taslima Nasreen's departure from India marks perhaps the lowest point in the history of Indian secularism.

Significantly, it is not the supposedly anti-secular Hindutva brigade which has forced her into exile, as has been the case with respect to M.F. Husain. Instead, it is the self-proclaimed champions of liberalism - the Congress and the Communists - who have compelled her to leave the shores of the world's largest democracy.

Arguably, there is now little difference between India and its smaller neighbour Bangladesh, which had earlier made life too dangerous for the controversial author to remain in the land of her birth.

If it is the fanatical mullahs of Bangladesh who had taken up the cudgels against her for her admittedly provocative views on the position of women in traditional societies, especially in Muslim countries, in India it took no more than a few hours of street violence by a little known Muslim outfit in Kolkata to make the "progressive" Left Front government of West Bengal put her on a plane leaving the city.

The reason why the Communists capitulated so meekly to Muslim fundamentalists is not far to seek. Since Muslim peasants constitute a sizeable number of those resisting the acquisition of land in the wake of the Left Front government's industrialisation drive, the comrades have been wary of antagonising Muslims any further, especially after the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind, a well-established organisation, joined the anti-government protests.

Evicting Nasreen, therefore, was seen as an easy way to win back Muslims on the eve of the forthcoming panchayat elections and a possible general election later in the year. The Left's ally at the centre, the Congress, too, was evidently feeling uneasy about her continued stay in the country while several retrogressive Muslim organisations continued to demand her ouster. The party clearly did not want to lose the support of Muslim voters who might be influenced by the fundamentalist campaign.

While the Congress has always been extra cautious on this score, as the ban imposed by its government on Salman Rushdie's "The Satanic Verses" in 1988 showed, the Left had been able to manage till now to sustain its pretence of being truly secular. The comrades could do so because they did not have as high a stake at the centre as at present when they are able to virtually dictate the government's policies on several counts, such as the nuclear deal.

Besides, their government in West Bengal is engaged in engineering a U-turn in its policies by putting socialism, their avowed dogma, on hold and embracing capitalism. Since this new, virtually heretical approach has disoriented many in their ranks, presaging an erosion in their previously unassailable base of support, the communists evidently do not want to create fresh problems for themselves by standing up for artistic freedom.

INDIAINTERACTS

22.03.08

The retreat of liberalism

Where the mind is without fear/Where the head is held high/Where knowledge is free/Where the world is not broken up into fragments by narrow domestic

walls...Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way.. Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, Let my country awake!"

Thus wrote Tagore. Contrast this with what the government has done with Taslima Nasreen, the Bangladeshi author who has been sent packing to an undisclosed destination in Europe. Some Muslims, acting on command, pretended to get enraged over her insults to Islam in a book she wrote several years ago. They noticed nothing until last year and then suddenly demanded her head. She was hounded out of Marxist-ruled and therefore self-avowedly secular Kolkata, where she had lived after she had been hounded out of her own country a decade ago. She went to Jaipur but was chased out of there. And last week she was forced out of Delhi and out of India as well. The assault has been against a Muslim by Muslims, and abetted by the state. It has been against the freedom of expression guaranteed in the Constitution. Those ready to jump on to every secular bandwagon have watched this shameful episode with a determination to do nothing. No Karat, no Yechury, no Arjun Singh, no Ansari, no Hussein, no Setalwad...no shame, just hypocrisy exposed.

India has reached a low point in the confrontation that identity-based politics has been having with the basic tenets of liberalism. Shortly before Ms Nasreen was shown the departure gate at Delhi airport, the government cracked down on a peaceful march by non-violent Tibetans, presumably to make sure that China does not get offended. But what about the right to free assembly and to free movement throughout the republic, both Constitutionally guaranteed? Then there is the case of M.F.Husain, who lives in exile because some of his paintings have caused offence to Hindus.

The slide down the slippery slope began with the banning of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* two decades ago—shortly after Hindutva-based politics came into its own following the Shah Bano judgment. Now anyone can claim offence at anything, and the state will come barging in. Indeed, the state in almost all cases takes no action against the people who take the law into their own hands and protest at someone else's use of his right to free speech. Rather, it is the victim who ends up in the dock.

Either we are a secular state and a liberal democracy, or we are not. At the moment, the liberalism is severely circumscribed, to the point where free speech is ok so long as you keep glancing over your shoulder. To be sure, the Constitution accepts limits on the freedom of expression where there is a threat to public order, decency or morality. But these are value-loaded terms and have elastic meanings that vary over time and context—The *Last Temptation of Christ*, for instance, was a minor classic that sold for many years as a book without causing anyone offence, until it was staged as a play in Kerala and brought Christians out in protest. More recently, a students' art exhibition in Baroda invited the Sangh Parivar's attention, with the surprise consequence of the dean being suspended by the university.

Rationalisers and apologists will find reasons to justify the assault on liberal values. There is always an immediate cause that can be used to obscure the larger purpose. The term for this is expediency. But expediency has final effect: it degrades core values. How can India reverse this string of reverses that liberalism has faced? There is only way: the state must do its duty, and must be made to do its duty. The courts have been doing what they can. Citizens too need to step up. For when liberal values fade, it is they who pay the price.

No country for Taslima

Arati R Jerath

Pranab Mukherjee and Buddhadeb Bhattacharya must have heaved a collective sigh of relief when exiled Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen finally boarded the plane to Europe last week. No-one ruffled their bhadralok feathers quite as easily as this controversial author who delights in lighting fires wherever she goes. Bhattacharya cleverly passed on his headache to New Delhi after a round of rioting in Kolkata made Nasreen too hot for him to handle. Mukherjee, on the other hand, is nursing his bruises after close encounters of the emotional kind. Obviously, there are different perspectives to the same story. Nasreen's rebellious spirit chafed at being locked up in a 'safe house'.

The government felt it was doing her a great favour by keeping her out of the line of fundamentalist fire. Over the months, their clashes assumed comic proportions. She wanted her cat brought from Kolkata to New Delhi but government guesthouses have a 'no pets' policy. She demanded that her friend from Sweden be allowed to stay with her.

The government's prudish sentiments vetoed the request. French president Nicholas Sarkozy insisted on decorating her with his country's top national honour during his brief visit to India. The government blew a fuse. Do it in Dhaka, Paris or Stockholm, not in New Delhi, the French were told. Ultimately, Mukherjee decided that he had to intervene personally. He met Nasreen to suggest that she slip out of the country quietly till the temperature cools. He gave her his word as foreign minister that he would ensure a safe passage back after a few months. To his horror, the news and contents of their meeting were splashed all over the media. In the end, Nasreen proved more malleable than Prakash Karat on the nuclear deal. She gave in and flew to Europe. And she may not be allowed back in till the general elections are over so that she doesn't become a poll issue. But Mukherjee's nuclear headache won't go away so easily.

Leave it to Lalu Yadav to lighten the government's nuclear burden. At the last meeting of the UPA-Left panel, the discussions traveled down the familiar technical road with Mukherjee and Chidambaram holding forth on the nitty-gritties and Left leaders raising the usual objections. Lalu sat quietly, bored by the Kabuki ritual that goes on at each meeting. Finally, when it became obvious that there was nothing more to discuss, Lalu decided to liven the proceedings by playing court jester.

No “kapda-phad Holi” this year, he announced dramatically. He said he would stick to traditional revelry and colours instead of the rowdy celebrations for which he is known. The discussion immediately turned to Holi and became more animated. When the panel parted, they were all smiling, ready to put on a show for the media waiting outside. So, who’s serious about the nuclear deal? It’s slowly becoming apparent that no-one really expects it to go through.

TAILPIECE

Is the Congress taking a cue from a suggestion Advani lobbed at Rahul Gandhi when they bumped into each other at an airport VIP lounge some months ago? Advani told the Gandhi scion that politicians should be competitors, not rivals. In other words, observe the usual courtesies away from the poll battlefield. Recently, when Amar Singh lost his father, Rahul telephoned him to commiserate. When TDP leader Yerran Naidu’s daughter got married, a host of Congress leaders and ministers, especially those with an Andhra connection, attended the reception he hosted in the capital.

DNA

23.03.08

Sending off Taslima was a good idea

NN Sachitanand

Normally, I beg to differ from the Communists. But not in their treatment of writer Taslima Nasreen. Buddhadev & Co. were so right in giving that pesky woman the boot from pristine West Bengal. She was a threat to peace in the state — worse than the Naxals.

Did you observe the righteous anger blazing in the eyes of those rioting youth who were baying for her blood on the streets of Kolkata? If the state government had not quickly swung into action, she would have totally alienated a huge vote bank of the CPI(M). And no political party can tolerate that. And, mind you, this single canker of a woman is not even a citizen of this country.

Yes, yes, one has heard of the Communist Manifesto upholding equal rights for women. Doesn’t Brinda Karat get to air her views on the tube whenever the channels want a more personable Left spokesperson than the usual octogenarians? But India is a multicultural nation and the Left cannot impose its notions of equality between the sexes on others. So, it was more judicious to jettison Taslima than provoke the wrath of the mullahs.

After all, she belonged to their faith, not that of the Left.

Please note that the CPI(M)’s approach was fully endorsed by the Congress-led central government which incarcerated the problematic woman. If the CPI(M) did not want to handle a hot potato, neither did the Congress — or for that matter, any other political party. Quite correctly, she has been sent to foreign climes where the most damage she can do is blabber to the international media. And, since Taslima is no Rushdie in terms of literary fame, even this spark of international attention will soon splutter and die out.

In a country where it is the norm to abort female foetuses, keep girls illiterate, burn brides for inadequate dowry, clobber wives regularly in a drunken rage, tease young women on the streets, coerce poor women into prostitution, treat divorcees as whores and confine

widows to a dark corner of the house, what right do we have to lionise a lone alien woman, even if she is a writer? All right, all right, we have a tradition of placing women on a pedestal and revering them. But, hey, they should be goddesses or figures from the distant past, not flesh and blood creatures of the present who can upset our peace of mind.

Pranabda was so right. Removing the Taslima thorn and casting it abroad was the correct approach. Her flight has hardly caused a ripple. Even the usual brigade of vocal female dissenters in this country have chosen silence. Perhaps it is because she was cast out by the Communist West Bengal and the secular UPA and not Modi's Gujarat. Considering an attention span of 24 hours for TV news channels and about three days for newspapers, we can safely assume that Taslima will disappear from our minds within a week.

Come to think of it, why are we hanging on to that other thorn which is causing such anguish to our Leftist brethren and their mentors north of the Himalayas? The Dalai Lama has been a pain since he took shelter here five decades ago. He and his followers have made the Dragon breathe fire at us again, just when we were forgetting the singeing of 1962. We can't even threaten to boycott the Olympics since we hardly have anyone to send anyway.

There is only one thing to do. Go back to primitive practices which dictated that when the gods are angry offer them a sacrifice to placate them. Send the Dalai Lama to Beijing. As a return favour, the Congress can ask the Left to support the nuclear deal, however unclear it be. Thus, the country will be rid of a major embarrassment, India's new mentors will be happy and the UPA can continue its merry reign.

DNA
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Goodbye Taslima, shame on India

Sujoy Dhar

As she broke the news to me over the phone on Monday morning, I felt indignant and helpless. "I can't take it anymore like this, I am leaving finally," she said. "They did not even allow me to go back to Kolkata to collect my things, you guys are there, take care of those."

They won, secular India lost. Taslima Nasreen is finally leaving India for Europe, unable to cope with life in solitary confinement in the dungeons of "safe houses"- or should we call it gulags for cultural offences? - that exist in free India. Safe houses are nice places to cage species like a "Muslim woman writer with a big mouth."

'Without Kolkata, Taslima the writer will die'

As she spoke, her defeated voice trailing and choking at times, my mind went back to a speech our Prime Minister Manmohan Singh gave at the SAARC summit in Dhaka in 2005. I recalled Singh mentioning the dangers of failed states around India. The Taslima episode punches holes in Prime Minister Singh's tall claims about India's pretensions to occupy the moral high ground in the subcontinent.

The India of “secular and illustriously progressive” Bengali leaders like Pranab Mukherjee, Priya Ranjan Dasmunshi and Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee has failed more miserably than the failed states that encircle India. There is only one expression to sum up the Taslima episode: Shame.

Last year while browsing through a copy of *Time* magazine I came across an interesting article by their India correspondent Simon Robinson. After a day's harrowing experience in the new shining India where mobile phones don't catch signals and roads are in a deplorable condition, he wrote of an India without slogans like India Shining or Incredible India.

Robinson writes: “I came to India looking forward to a place with a sense of momentum and hope. I knew India was still poor and frustrating as well as fascinating and exciting and full of great stories. I have found all those things, but I have also realised that parts of Africa have better services and infrastructure than India, and just as good prospects for development. It's just that Africa hasn't yet come up with a catchy slogan to sell itself. I hope it doesn't. Better to be surprised than disappointed.”

Taslima writes something similar as she prepares to leave after being confined to a room for nearly four months by the merry band of Congress and communist leaders who rule democratic India as if it were their fiefdom.

A portion of her email to friends in media reads like this: “I used to call this the torture chamber. I gradually came to realise that it was the chamber of death instead. I was not even allowed to stay in hospital for long though the doctors felt it was necessary in order to stabilise my blood pressure. But then, orders are orders and the government did not want to be inconvenienced by me in any way whatsoever. The government did not want the media to know I had been hospitalised. I did not have my mobile phone with me and the doctors at the government's hospital –AIIMS – were instructed to discharge me after a certain period of time.

Curiously though, the decision was not left to the doctors as to what this certain period of time was to be. The last time I was admitted to this hospital a few weeks ago I was suddenly discharged as a result of governmental pressure. At this undisclosed location I am neither allowed to go to a doctor for consultation nor is one allowed to come to me. I suffer from severely fluctuating blood pressure and the strange thing is that I was not even allowed to speak to any of the doctors at the hospital over the telephone. Even after repeated requests I was not given a single phone number.

When I was in hospital, I asked the doctors if I could call them if necessary but they said that they were not allowed to hand out their numbers. I had to make inquiries through officials to get even the simplest of answers from these doctors. I have suffered tremendously both physically and mentally. My blood pressure is now impossible to control. The doctors say it is due to stress, which I must avoid at all costs. How can I not be stressed when everything is continuously stressing me out? I am brought to this place and incarcerated like some animal; my human rights constantly and continually violated. I am not allowed to step out or meet anyone. How can I not be stressed?”

I first met Taslima Nasreen in 2003 for an interview at a hotel in Kolkata. She was not feeling too well. She had drunk some red wine at a party the previous night and it did no good to her. There were guards posted outside her room at Kolkata's Great Eastern Hotel.

I didn't find her too interesting at first, but there emerged many colourful stories about her as she spoke. I was pleasantly surprised by her candour.

To be honest, there was little I had read of Taslima. Though I did read with curiosity and appreciation her fearless pieces on the status of women in Bangladesh published in the form of *Nirbachito Kolam* (Selected Columns), despite finding them a tad repetitive.

I had read a pirated version of her book *Lajja* (Shame), Taslima's response to the anti-Hindu riots that erupted in parts of Bangladesh after the 1992 Babri Masjid demolition.

The pirated version was in circulation all over West Bengal, especially on suburban trains, where they sold like cheap skin ointments. The literary standard was a big disappointment, but her courage made up for the inadequacy. I met her several times later for stories and interviews. But it is her life in confinement that brought me closer to her for my own selfish reasons as a mainstream journalist. At one point, she referred to me as a "friend".. Our courage is under fire, Taslima, I refuse the friendship! It is a tall order to be your friend.

But we are not discussing Taslima the writer here.

I have time and again heard that Taslima is just lucky enough to be compared with such literary greats as Salman Rushdie. But even if Taslima is lucky on that count, having made it to the Ivy League of writers on the run like Rushdie, luck finally ran out for her.

Rushdie had chosen the UK, but this poor lady with a big mouth and a penchant for the Bengali language chose Kolkata. The communists in West Bengal had marked her, ever since she went to court against them and obtained a favourable verdict to lift the ban on one of her autobiographical books – *Dwikhandita*.

Taslima has repeatedly been accused of using media to further her interests. My interactions with her over the years as a journalist tell a different story. She herself is fodder for us. A Muslim woman open about her sexuality and "disparaging" about Islam is a heady concoction. So journalists like us looking for juicy copy to keep the job fires burning ran after her. At no point of time did I think Taslima was trying to sensationalise her life. Rather, her soft, dispassionate voice, often betrays no emotions. Of late she would constantly ask us: "What do you think they plan to do with me?" We had no answers.

I hope many of those reading this column would be among the younger generation. Our generation grew up to find the winsomely suave Rajiv Gandhi as Prime Minister, painting the progressive image of a new India on the highway to telecom revolution. But we also recall vaguely the hue and cry over the infamous Shah Bano divorce lawsuit in the 1980s.

Shah Bano, a 62-year old Muslim woman and mother of five from Madhya Pradesh, found herself unceremoniously divorced and without an alimony in 1978. The Muslim family law allows the husband to divorce his wife without her consent. The husband just needs to say the word *talaaq* before witnesses to obtain a valid divorce

An impoverished Shah Bano had approached the courts for securing maintenance from her husband. When the case reached the Supreme Court of India, seven years were already gone. The Supreme Court invoked Section 125 of Code of Criminal Procedure, which applies to everyone regardless of caste, creed, or religion. It ruled that Shah Bano be given alimony. The orthodox Muslims were quick to react. The Congress government of Rajiv Gandhi buckled. In 1986, the Congress passed an act, The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act 1986, that nullified the Supreme Court's judgment in the Shah Bano case.

More than two decades after Shah Bano's fight for justice was trampled by political opportunism and vote bank politics, External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee cautions Taslima against speaking out if she wants to stay in 'Incredible India'. His arrogant colleague, Priya Ranjan Dasmunshi, commands her to bend her head before the Muslims.

West Bengal's poet-king Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee is at peace now, having rid himself of the woman who dares to stay in his oasis (read Bengal) without paying cultural taxes to the party.

Taslima lost, Incredible India won!!

Sify
23.03.08

SHASHI THAROOR

Time to stand up for a tolerant society

Is India becoming a playground for the intolerant? The evidence is mounting that it is. *Jodhaa Akbar* cannot be screened in Rajasthan because some Rajputs have taken umbrage at the heroine's name. Sania Mirza has court cases slapped against her for resting her foot too close to a national flag; Richard Gere for resting his lips too close to Shilpa Shetty's. Viking Penguin has been served a legal notice because Jaishree Misra's historical novel on the Rani of Jhansi actually treats her as a human being. Our most famous living artist, M F Husain, is living in exile because he fears harassment if he returns to his own country — at an age where he should be able to live with love and honour in his homeland. An exhibition in Chennai on Aurangzeb is shut down after protests by Muslims claiming it misrepresents the mediaeval emperor. Taslima Nasreen, a persecuted author to whom India had given asylum, has now fled the country, her peace of mind and health broken by the relentless hounding of fundamentalist Muslims and the cravenness of both the West Bengal and Indian governments.

Where is our society heading? The rise of illiberality reflects a breakdown in our national consensus on the limits of the permissible. Some Indians feel strongly that in our culture, freedom comes with responsibilities, and that untrammelled freedom of expression carries risks of social and political disruption that should not be allowed. The example of the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed is often cited; not just India, but few governments hosting significant Muslim populations would be happy to permit the publication of material so derogatory as to offend and provoke a large segment of the people. We all know the famous American dictum that freedom of speech does not include the freedom to falsely shout 'fire' in a crowded theatre. Similarly, your freedom to move your fist stops just short of my face. Such restraints are obvious, and no reasonable advocate of freedom of the press would seek absolute freedom for the media, unconstrained by the well-being of the society in which it flourishes.

But there is a world of difference between accepting this principle and implementing it reasonably. Societies are self-correcting mechanisms; when the press goes too far, it rapidly discovers the limits for itself. The press everywhere adopts the restraints appropriate for its social environment; no American newspaper, for instance, would print the so-called 'n' word when referring to black Americans — not because the government disallows it but because the editors are conscious of what is the decent and socially acceptable thing to do. Indian editors are capable of the same judgements, as they demonstrated during the episode of the Danish cartoons. Leaving governments to decide what is reasonable and responsible substitutes the judgement of the authorities for the judgement of the media, and so jeopardises press freedom. But leaving it to unelected and unaccountable bigots — to whose uneducated opposition our governments cave in all too easily — is even worse.

It's not just an Indian problem. The arrest last year of a cartoonist in Bangladesh and the suspension of publication of the leading Bengali weekly, *Pratham Alo* — over a cartoon that sought to satirise not the Prophet but the social custom of naming everybody after the Prophet — is a disturbing example of this. If restraints are expected, fine; but if that means giving free license to the most intolerant elements of a society to censor ideas that are not in themselves blasphemous, then we are all in trouble. Asians are all too quick to make the argument that Asian societies are not European ones, and that not every standard applicable in Europe can be transplanted wholesale to Asia. But most Asians are capable of understanding a joke in the spirit in which it was intended. Such actions as Bangladesh's merely empower the humourless, whose agenda has little to do with society as it exists but everything to do with the society they wish to create, one in which people of their political persuasion will prevail.

But India is not Bangladesh. It is shameful that in a democracy like ours, we have become so

vulnerable to the pressure of the mob — that those who claim they are offended prevail over those who seek to exercise their freedom of expression. Today, in our country, it seems the ultra-sensitive are making the rules. It is high time that civil society stood up for the tolerance on which our entire civilisation has rested for millennia — allowing different forms of expression and ideas to flourish undisturbed, rather than allowing the easily offended to dictate terms to us. We should say to those whose outrage is easily sparked: if you're irked by scantily clad ladies on a fashion channel, watch some other channel; if you don't like Taslima Nasreen's book, read some other book. But don't try to persecute her for writing a book that you don't want to read.

Yet, we don't say that. We've allowed the narrow-minded to set the terms of the debate, partly because our governments, of whatever political hue, lack the courage to assert the values embedded in our own Constitution.

To the cravenness of politicians, anxious not to alienate every little vote bank, must be added the pusillanimity of the elite, who fear that somehow the protestors are more authentically desi in their outrage than we are in our liberality. But, in fact, it is tolerance that is the most authentic Indian tradition; as Amartya Sen has shown, the spirit of allowing assorted heterodoxies to flourish is deeply rooted in our country's soil. Every time we give in to the forces of intolerance, we are betraying that tradition. We are letting ourselves down as a civilisation.

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