



LAW GOVERNANCE AND DEMOCRACY

A Global Concern



Edited by

DR. VIKASH KUMAR

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Books and Bans: Politics of Censorship

Rajesh Kumar, Ganga Nand Singh and Niraj Dang

Books are perilous commodities. They force history and governments to shift shape and space. They have acted as wands of wisdom, erected masts of resistance and have been toted around as porta-labs of revolutions. They contain invented and practised doctrinal casuistry and often record the future like civic time machines. If Plato's *Republic* and Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* have been influential in secular constitutional formations, volumes like The Bible and The Ramayana have subtly pleaded theocracy in governance. Creative literary discourses can denominate governance principles as well. They have performed as intermediaries and modifiers through processes and intentions in both democracies and autarchies. Creative literature can raise heckles and browbeat despots. They influence codes of governance substantially.

The world has witnessed an extensive register of tyrannical subpoenas against creative fiction. Why are books banned? A plausible resolution is extended in Robert P. Doyle's *Books Challenged or Banned in 2015-16*: '... more than half of all banned books are ... viewpoints outside the mainstream.'¹

However, the politics of banning books includes contradictory apertures. Bans challenge non-acceptance and protest, yet, sometimes, the protests themselves are partisan and prejudiced, fuelled by parochialism rather than eclecticism. It is difficult to gauge how far creative literature has compensated for anomalies in governance policies or miscarriage of justice but there is no doubt that their intellectual vigour has put terror in the hearts of martinets and proselytizers, often forcing them to retract a dogmata. In return, the inevitable, subsequent backlash has made the creative domain suffer at the hands of unforgiving rulers. There is scant support to dissident literary efforts within a nation and governments try to undercut the funding to schools of literature that contest government policies.

Nations expand cultural hegemony through agenda-driven efforts. India fosters forums like the Indian Council for Cultural Relations and Indian Literature Abroad. The US had its Division of Cultural Relations, China blends red rhetoric with Dragon dances and Lion dances. Powerful nations use art and culture to push soft diplomacy in the garb of literary fronts and events. International litfests, a cross-child

of consumerism and local defiance, are fertile grounds for espionage as well. Influential and incendiary creative writers can work as secret agents. Graham Greene, the author of *The Heart of the Matter*, worked for the MI6 and in pre-Shakespearean times, Christopher Marlowe travelled to France as the queen's spy. One reckoning is that Ernest Hemingway used to pass information to the KGB. Thus, if Arundhati Roy is passionately anti-establishment, there may be conjectures what she might be up to! Rival countries often take advantage of such reproaches to cultivate informers.

The success of such festivals is a reassertion of the centuries old maxim, 'the squeaky wheel gets the grease.' Authors with anti-establishment views draw the largest audiences at these events, and it is not always that they are sublime writers or that the reader concurs with them unconditionally. They flock for the reasons of curiosity, why's and how's and who's of the persona, the privilege of a coterie identity, and lastly, a shared chorus of exasperation against the establishment. Many of these authors are the fly-by-night sorts, rising and sinking in popular memory with equal pace. They are the guerrilla cadre of loaded narratives, grabbing public attention instantly but generating sustained hostility in home governments, nation-states and institutions of authority. Religious organisations too believe in status quo and oppose any assumption disproving their respective scriptures. Although Copernicus' relations with the authoritarian church in Italy were not actually strained when he disrupted the Biblical idea of the earth as the centre of the universe by his discovery of heliocentrism, still, his work, *De revolutionibus*, was banned by the Protestants for more than two centuries. Galileo had to revoke his views that the earth moves around the sun yet he famously murmured in 1633, '*E pur simouve*' (nevertheless it moves).

Accommodation of views and acceptability, clash of interests and ideologies, personal ambition vs. the rebel call, psychological deviations and the issues of morality and immorality energise texts of protest. These rebellions and non-conformations leak into creative literature in considerable quantum. There is a long list of books down the ages, banned by the various organs of establishment now and then. Notions of monarchy, democracy and other forms of government are not absolute. They are variable preferables. Society itself is a heterogeneous, non-linear entity in political ideologies and therefore, administrative and governance philosophies are tailored with the aid of demagogy to suit temporal essentials. One of the most critical evaluations of these choices is undertaken by creative literature. It challenges political processes and voices doubts over economic prerogatives. Non-conformist creative writing articulates sullen silences. The past, the present and the future of mankind receive value accretion through rebellious writing and subsequent state responses. The ban juggernaut road rolls all routes of literary expression - diction, religion, morality, ethics, politics. It is owing to state intolerance that creative literature transforms into protest and wisdom literature in the minds of the succeeding generations.

History has always been re-transcribed by victors. Creative literature negotiates failed aspirations, oppressions, banishments, engagements, exploitations *et al.* The resultant censorship emanates from vicarious sources. One is brazen government postulation; another is the pretext of 'hurt sentiments' of purloins of society. It is manifest in book-burning, defacement, taking them off academic curricula and shelf-removal. In extreme cases it can lead to the persecution of an author. Hearsay plays a crucial part in harassment. A most wicked instance is Salman Rushdie's hounding after he published his metaphorical *Satanic Verses* in 1988. It has references to Prophet Mohammad and several other characters from the history of Islam. Ayatollah Khomeini, the supreme leader of Iran, issued a death fatwa against the author on the ruse that his book was blasphemous. Rushdie survived several assassination attempts and was eventually provided protection by the British government. However, the translator of the book, Hitoshi Igarashi, fell victim to radical Islamists; he was murdered in cold blood. The book was banned in India by the then Congress government on the excuse that it offended the religious sentiments of the Muslims. Oddly, the sectarian perception was the upshot of vote politics, not that the government was really bothered about the Muslims.

Bans have been enforced on books for other reasons too. Some of them are considered outright anathema by governments, and some have whims operating in the background. Religion and morality are the most susceptible virtual victims in this run to maintain 'law and order' in subject communities. It has been a serial offence by governments. They have repeatedly discounted the possibility of creative literature being an agency of social change. Creative literatures often pose uncomfortable questions to governments. Through dissent and non-conformation they chart a future trajectory for the culture, polity and economy of a country. If they denounce one norm of political conventions, they also prescribe alternative channels that eventually mould the collective consciousness of a nation.

The role of religious scriptures and their followers in the flux of bans and alternatives has been to pull the world to a number of unpredictable turning points. It is contentious to claim that the polytheistic pagans converted into monotheistic Christianity around the 1st AD because they were deeply influenced by the rhetoric of the Bible. Probably, the Bible furnished conviction to the proselytisers who did not consider violence an unholy tool for conversion. It is ironical that man constitutes social and religious institutions but over time, these very institutions begin to write the fate of humanity. In closed societies, orthodoxy operates as a mechanism for control. Crafty administrators have always exploited it as a sentiment by raising the bogey of annihilation. It is difficult to assert whether these holy books preach exclusion or not, yet it can be said with some certainty that the search for intended subtexts in them has altered the fate, form and flow of governments the world over from time to time. Maybe, it is a valid conjecture that religious texts are mostly codes of conduct to hold together particular communities and that if spiritual and philosophical descants occur in them, it is merely an intellectual accident. Preference of genuine human values over the ruling institution is at the roots of the dread that

governments harbour for a new creed or milieu of morality. Relentless affiliation to power inserts the concrete role of guardianship in the abstract idea of governance. A recent case of this intervention was the banning of Sowvendra Shekhar Hansda's collection of stories, *The Adivasi will Not Dance*, in Jharkhand. One of the ministers of the ruling party was convinced that the book was 'obscene' because it exhibited the sexual permissiveness and exploitation of the tribal people in a brusque yet explicit manner and that it would have presented an 'erroneous' picture of the tribes of Jharkhand to the world. As usual, protests were staged against the ban and ultimately, the government had to capitulate and revoke the suspension of the medic author from government service. On a grander scale, D.H. Lawrence's book, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, was singled in a similar manner when Penguin Books published it in 1960 in the UK. The allegation was that it was too 'graphic' although the publishing house was exonerated when it established in the court that it had great literary merit. It heralded a new era of openness and permissiveness in arts and literature and the sequel is that even pornography has become acceptable as a visual and plastic form of art. There are other instances of books altering the course of history. Even if we do not dwell upon *Satanic Verses*, we can talk about Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* published in 1951 in America. It is listed as one of the best English novels of all times but many American schools were wary of the text initially because they believed that it was part of a communist ploy. The imagined guilt of the book was that it advocated 'anti-establishment-ism' at a time when the Cold War had strained the US-USSR relationship significantly and anybody harbouring socialist or communist ideas was suspect. The resistance persists in the 21st century too. Dalton Trumbo, the Hollywood screenwriter of films like *Roman Holiday* (1953) and *Spartacus* (1960) suffered censorship and persecution for the reason that he was a communist, and during this period, anybody with communist leanings was supposed to be a sympathiser of the enemy state. However, such proscriptions make a state or government inclusive and pragmatic in succeeding periods eventually by realigning political and civil sensibilities.

Books can hurt governance perceptions also through their critique of 'majoritarianism' and 'minoritarianism'. Various governments have banned creative works from time to time e.g. Taslima Nasreen's *Lajja* (1993) and *An Area of Darkness* (1964) by V.S. Naipaul. Such exercises are a deliberate subversion of literary values. They bruise the ruling junta's chicanery. Many non-fiction books with conscious political agendas too are on the ban list. Seymour Hersh's *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (1983) was taken off the shelves in India because it insinuated that Morarji Desai, a former prime minister of India, was an informer for the CIA. Retellings like Aubrey Menen's version of The Ramayana and Wendy Doniger's *The Hindus: An Alternative History* fell under the axe due to majoritarian concerns. Nasreen's *Lajja* is a novel citing the torment of the Hindus in Islamic Bangladesh in the wake of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. The book was banned in Bangladesh. In a Rushdie like rerun, an Islamic community leader, Taqui Raza Khan, offered a five hundred thousand rupee bounty on her head but fortunately there were sane voices among the Muslims who opposed the barbaric decree.²

Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness*, on the other hand, is a deeply pessimistic portrayal of India. It grew from his visit to his root-country in search of origins. 'Maligning India' was the pretext of the ban this time. However, the sanction demonstrates the attitudinal orientation of different governments in a country. Mulk Raj Anand's 1935 novel *Untouchable* too presented a darkly sordid picture of India but it was not interdicted then because it fitted the British colonial stance perfectly. Set in a fictional Indian town, it presents a gripping storyboard of Bakha, a lowest of the lowest caste member, a latrine cleaner, who faces a series of starkest ignominies at the hands of upper caste Hindus.

Common perceptions alter over time. Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) is about racial inequity in America – 'The spirit-corroding shame of the civilised white Southerner in the treatment of the Negro'.³ Tim Robinson, a coloured guy, is accused falsely of raping a white woman. At one point, a white mob is intent on lynching him. At his trial in the local court, the entire town turns up. But these were times of segregation and even the courtroom had separate seating for the whites and the blacks: 'The Colored balcony ran along three walls of the courtroom like a second-story veranda, and from it we could see everything.'⁴ Paradoxically, the novel, once hailed as a great work against racism, was removed from the syllabus in several American schools in the 1970's on the plea that the use of the word 'nigger' was offensive and that it belittled African-Americans. It is a classic case of power engineering by altering the rubrics of social interpretation.

The flip side is that non-government bodies and sponsors batting for 'emancipated' creative literature also have their avowed motives. They sift genius across a discriminatory eyepiece. Elitist attitudes have frequently denied rightful honour to prodigies. Nobel Prize committees have their own prejudices like proscribing governments. Tolstoy, Zola or Ibsen never received the Nobel Prize despite their pedestal status in world literature. The Nobel Committee was averse with Tolstoy because he offered the philosophy of blind chance in *War and Peace* instead of the Will of God. The committee was of the view that the prize was intended for a work of 'lofty and sound idealism exhibiting true nobility'⁵ but this was sophistry, not integrity.

Creative literature is oracular. George Orwell's futuristic novel *1984*, written in the year 1949, is a point in case. A dystopian work, it anticipates the Big Brother syndrome that marks draconian surveillance regimes like the previous communist USSR and the People's Republic of China. The current obtrusion of cyber technology into everyday life of the individuals is a testimony to the book's power of prophecy. The obtrusive surveillance via android phones and social media platforms like WhatsApp has generated the 'Right to be Forgotten' movement. It involves issues of privacy. It has prompted the European Union and Argentina to respect the individual's right by asking internet engines to remove negative information about a person.

In the end, a glimpse into the posterity of corrective confessions. At the Times Litfest in 2015, the former Congress minister, P. Chidambaram, said that it was wrong on the part of the Rajiv Gandhi government to ban *Satanic Verses* in India in

1988. Rushdie tweeted a rejoinder, 'The admission just took 27 years. How many before the mistake is corrected?'⁶

The former Indian prime minister, Narsimha Rao, is allegedly said to have banned unofficially another book by Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, in 1995. The Supreme Court declared the ban unconstitutional in 1996 but bookstores remained reluctant. They were apprehensive of vandalism.

Governments seldom learn from history.

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Within a few short years Vinoba Bhave University has arrived as a dynamic intellectual center in India and with this second of its series of international seminars, this one on *Law, Governance and Democracy: A Global Concern*, it marks its firm establishment on the international stage. Its footprint there is small, but its administration and faculty have a sense of determination and direction and its students want to be part of the journey. On the evidence of what it accomplished in this seminar – in arrangements, speakers, and university-wide support and participation, it is only a matter of time until it gains a significant international voice.

– Miles L. Bradbury
University of Maryland

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