

FROM THE EDITOR

BANNING A NOVEL

A novel has been banned. To ban a work of literature is an act of insult to our sense of freedom. Hence it is natural for those who care for freedom to take to task a Government which banned such a book.

The irony in this case is, neither those who wanted the government to ban the book have read the book nor have those who passed the necessary order to oblige them have done so. The position, naturally, makes the government even more vulnerable to criticism.

But must it be the government to bear the whole whip? Is the situation that simplistic? Is it just to oblige a few communal leaders that the government took such a step?

Only the other day a riot was instigated in Bangalore and elsewhere in Karnataka for a literary short story, a highly humanistic story depicting the life of an unfortunate, mentally deficient young man simply because he bore the name of a religious leader. It is a sad fact that communal sensitivity in India has assumed primitive and tribalistic proportions. Some leaders, instead of trying to lead their people above such weaknesses, tend to 'strengthen' that weakness for sake of an easy climb to leadership. There have been instances of educated officers resigning their offices and coming to 'serve' the people and their gestures have kindled hope in our hearts, but alas, instead of trekking the hard way to leadership toiling for people of all sects, they are found anxious to hug the magic carpet of communalism that flies them up in no time.

Such leaders are bound to take advantage of any passage that can be reasonably interpreted to appear offensive to their religion. In no time they will mobilise a mob to demonstrate their sway on it. The author's puny voice asserting his right to freedom of expression, his explanation that there is a thing called literary fantasy, subtlety and so on and so forth which can be appreciated only by sympathetic readers having a taste for stuff that is intellectual, will be of no avail. There will be bloodshed and arson followed by police intervention resulting in more bloodshed. The blood that is not shed remains bitter. Freedom of expression, aesthetics, literary and philosophical reflections are reality of one plane; this is a reality of another plane—a plane that immediately concerns law, order and security of life.

A Government can afford to side with the author's intellectual freedom only if a substantial part of the intellectuals of all the communities are with it, only if such intellectuals realise that the path to truth does not lie through suppression of a voice and the path of progress does not lie through dogmatic exercise of passions translated into mob fury. Every religion has a great truth in it which sustains it. No amount of criticism can destroy or even make a scratch on that truth. Let there be hundred criticisms, reflections, fantasies, and observations on all the religions. The truth will emerge only more and more radiant in the minds who aspire for truth, if not in the immature minds who desire power and popularity.

Let the present occasion be an occasion for a little introspection among our leaders and intellectuals.

Day in and day out we are exposed to ugliness and vulgarity of many sorts, promoted by the vested-interests, commercial and otherwise. They are the kind of "freedom of expression" which should be banned—not by the government—but by the people's rejection of them. The other kind of freedom of expression, the intellectual reflections, do not debase anybody. They only exercise our minds. We may differ with them, but we must bear them. A Buddha, a Jesus or a Muhammad could not have given their wisdom to us had they been denied this freedom. If they were persecuted, it only shows that the persecutors were at fault, not they.

Let the intellectuals of India—Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Christians—come together and uphold this freedom. If they can create the necessary climate, no democratic government will like to take as reactionary a step as banning a novel.

The other alternative is for the government to lift the ban come what may. It may breed some unfortunate developments, but the lifting will even then be justified, for a far greater principle of freedom is involved in it.

ON THE TIDES OF TIME

THE JOKE

I was under the impression that the so-called Mother-in-law jokes were nothing but jokes, remote from real life. Indeed, they are not, at least not this one:

A beggar approached a house for a handful of rice. "There is no rice today. You can go," said the daughter-in-law. The beggar was going away when the mother-in-law called him from the balcony. The beggar returned to the gate. "Why are you going away?" she asked. "Well, your daughter-in-law told me that there is no rice today!"

"Who is she to tell you and turn you away? Is she the chief of the household? Now, listen to me. I tell you that there is no rice. You can go!" yelled the mother-in-law.

I was in Calcutta when the parties in power in West Bengal gave a call for a Rail Roko (stopping the trains) on a certain day, against some alleged apathy of the Central Government towards it. The chief opposition party protested, saying, "The rulers giving a Roko call, eh? How they play with the people? How callous they are towards the inconvenience of the common man!"

And then they declared in their great wisdom, "Now, we declare a Rasta Roko (stopping the vehicles on the road)!"

Both went ahead with their highly patriotic programmes on the same day, reducing a hilarious joke to a grim reality.

How long will the petty politicians continue taking the public to ransom? Can't the political parties come together and decide on some more imaginative way of showing their might, without causing harassment to the people—the very institution by which they swear? Don't we have any non-political citizens' organisation to bring them to such a resolution?