

India: The real reasons for hurt sentiments

Tuesday 21 April 2015, by [THAPAR Romila](#) (Date first published: 13 March 2015).

Perumal Murugan is an Indian author, scholar and literary chronicler who writes in Tamil. In January 2015, he announced that he is giving up writing after he came under attack for blasphemy from Hindutva and caste outfits for his novel “Madhurobhagan” which was first published in 2010 and subsequently translated and published in English in late 2014 as “One Part Woman”.

This is the text of eminent historian Romila Thapar’s remarks at the meeting organised by SAHMAT in support of Perumal Murugan on February 17, 2015.

Contents

- [Objection to the novel](#)
- [Silencing people](#)
- [Defending a right](#)

The right to freedom of expression is part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and this right is incorporated in the Indian Constitution. Yet, week after week it is being violated by what are euphemistically called “fringe groups.” This allows those who govern to remain unconcerned. It is, therefore, a matter that concerns civil society now. We have to react irrespective of promises from the government. It is incumbent on us to protect our rights. This right has to be discussed openly and fully because it sustains the autonomy of the individual in society. We are, after all, human beings and not robots.

This is especially so since the claim is always made that what is objected to hurts the religious sentiments of the community stating the objection. But this raises important questions that are neither asked nor answered. Does the objection reflect the sentiments of the entire community or only a small fraction of it? Who constitutes this community and represents it? It is time now that we all start asserting that we too represent a community in society, and that our sentiments are deeply hurt when freedom of expression is denied to us. We do not stamp out other people’s rights, but we do have to defend our right to express ourselves.

Objection to the novel

We also have to question what may be the real reason for the “hurt sentiment.” Is it really caused by a slur on religion or is religion being used as a mask for other reasons more closely related to our social values? What is Perumal Murugan addressing in *Madhurobhagan*? It is a human predicament — a childless couple desiring a child — depicted with admirable sensitivity, anguish and gentleness. So, are there other themes implicit in the story? Is the objection really concerned with the revival of a past Hindu religious tradition that is no longer legitimate from the perspective of the laws of the land, or is there an objection to the novel because it casts a slur on a religious tradition?

What is implicit in the narrative is the juxtaposition of the individual to society. The main characters

are happy as a couple but are taunted for being childless by the family and the community. As always it is the woman who is blamed more than the man, and has to find a solution. She is advised to resort to what was regarded as a legitimate solution in traditional terms. It was not regarded as immoral. Was this perhaps a kinder way of resolving childlessness in the days gone by? Consensual sex with a stranger for purposes of conception on a particular religious occasion would not have been considered adultery but accepted as a sanctioned religious custom. People today do not recognise the fact that in past times, customary law that was outside the social code of brahmanical law was regarded as quite legitimate, as long as it had the sanction of the community, and this sanction is made explicit in the novel.

Is the objection to this action because it is a custom that was once permitted but is now contrary to the law, and therefore should not be legitimised in a novel? But the objection is to depicting it as sanctioned by Hindu religion. But to write about an activity that was current in the past is not an endorsement of what is today, contrary to contemporary law. Nor is it in any way a slur on religion, since it is an activity that is regarded as legitimate by the community, as the novel makes clear.

Is there some other reason? The solution suggested could be a slur on the husband, for if the wife conceives with a stranger, then it reflects on the impotency of the husband. This is unacceptable in a male chauvinist society where the woman is always at fault. In a highly patriarchal society such as our present-day society, such a slur would be unacceptable. Ultimately the woman takes an independent decision in this action, as the husband's consent remains somewhat ambiguous until the very end. Is all this seen as contrary to patriarchy? And is that the underlying reason for the objection? Is the objection then to the novel evoking a religious ritual that is degrading to the Hindu religion, or just a mask for the real objection, which is the right of a woman to take a decision in a matter that is of importance to the husband, his family and the community? Is it an out-of-date custom associated in past times with the communities of the region? If the purpose of the objection is to deny independence of action to women, and condemn what is depicted as a normal and affectionate marital relationship, then why drag religion into it and speak of it as maligning Hinduism — only because that will bring in more publicity in current times?

Silencing people

The action taken is to effectively silence the writer. There are many ways of silencing people. The resort to physical violence is immoral and unethical in any situation of confrontation. The alternative is emotional and intellectual silencing: silence the author by accusing him of having degraded a religion. Murugan's sensitivity has showed in the way he has silenced himself. The demand that a book be pulped, banned or burnt is becoming a regular agenda in this country. In the name of hurt religious sentiments, the real attempt is to prevent the emergence of a society that can think for itself, that can openly discuss the issues that confront it, that can effectively understand the massive process of historical change that it is undergoing. This is a process that will force us to face more changes and more confrontations. Therefore, we need to understand the process and not give in to those wishing to take it in their own direction.

So what can we do? Do we condone Murugan's self-censorship? Or do we stand by him, as I think we should, and as many of us do, and invite him to retract his decision to write no more? We need to assure him that he must go on writing and assert this right to freedom of expression. His shift to Chennai is a form of exile. We don't want him to exile himself.

There is perhaps no absolute freedom of speech. But it is necessary for us to assert that such a freedom should be determined by responsible people who share the author's profession. At least that

would ensure a sensible debate on the subject. This is not to deny any organisation the right to object to what anyone is writing, but to insist that no body of people can silence an author. But if self-censorship is to be the answer then where does one draw the line even in that? It should be in the hands of those who are professionally involved, and not in the hands of the “fringe elements” of political parties — the kinds of organisations that threaten individuals with violence and demand they be silenced, irrespective of how this is done. Authors and publishers have been threatened and acted against. Are we to become a silent society?

Defending a right

Can we think of a more effective way of handling such threats? It would help if there were to be an organisation committed to defending the right of free expression, especially of authors. It could be constituted of lawyers, publishers and some authors, set up to challenge those who threaten and abuse authors. This would involve naming organisations that threaten in this manner, and their individual members, so that they are also known as being among those that threaten authors. If court action is required, that could also be considered. A statement coming from such an organisation would also give courage to many others who tend to fear controversies.

THAPAR Romila

P.S.

*<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-real-reasons-for-hurt-sentiments/article6987156.ece>

Romila Thapar is Professor Emeritus in Ancient History, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.