

Gujarat - Gandhi Doesn't Need This Defence: Banning books shows insecurity

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Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Milosevic Modi has again demonstrated that his capacity for setting new lows in politics remains undiminished. His government has banned *Great Soul*, a new biography of Mahatma Gandhi by former *New York Times* India bureau chief and editor Joseph Lelyveld. The ground for the ban, passed after a unanimous vote by the Gujarat Legislative Assembly, is based on hearsay—a review by Andrew Roberts, a British practitioner of canned imperialist history and vulgar celebration of royalty, in *The Wall Street Journal*, one of the world's most wretchedly Right-wing papers.

The review maliciously misinterpreted parts of the Lelyveld book to claim that Gandhi had a homoerotic relationship with German-Jewish architect and bodybuilder Hermann Kallenbach in South Africa. Roberts also said the only portrait in the mantelpiece opposite Gandhi's bed in his home was Kallenbach's. This was further distorted by the British tabloid *Daily Mail* which ran the sensational headline: "Gandhi 'left his wife to live with a male lover' new book claims".

Those who have read the book say Kallenbach's name appears in less than one-tenth of the book's 349 pages. Gandhi had a close friendship with Kallenbach, but as with many other men and women, it does not seem to have been erotic or sexual. Reputed psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar, who has written about Gandhi's sexuality and reviewed some of his correspondence with Kallenbach, says he does not believe the two men were lovers.

Kakar was one of the first analysts to write on Gandhi's sexuality in *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality* and later, in *Mira and Mahatma*. He says that nothing in Gandhi's writings suggests that he had a sexual relationship with Kallenbach. Kakar says that that Gandhi often filled his letters, including those to female associates, with strong love language, but that didn't lead to physical intimacy. Gandhi's feelings were "platonic", not sexual.

Gandhi had similarly close correspondence with Rabindranath Tagore and CF Andrews, a founder of the Indian National Congress. That too is replete with romantic language. But no one has ever suggested that Gandhi had a homoerotic relationship with either man. Gandhi and Kallenbach were both sworn to *brahmacharya* (celibacy). Kallenbach told his brother in 1908 that after he met Gandhi "I have given up my sex life". Ultimately, Kallenbach violated the vow of celibacy by entering into a sexual relationship with a woman.

Gandhi, according to Kakar, was a believer in the "Hindu" idea that "sexuality has this elemental energy which gets dissipated. If it can be sublimated and contained it can give you spiritual power. Gandhi felt his political power really came from his celibacy, from his spiritual power." Gandhi's *Story of My Experiments with Truth* contains a candid description of his struggles to overcome sexual temptation, to the point of asking his 17-year-old grand-niece Manu to sleep next to him. He wanted not to be roused and told Manu he wanted her to think of him as her mother.

Roberts is equally wrong to claim that Gandhi was a racist who hated Black Africans. Gandhi worked with South African Zulus and during the Boer War espoused the cause of the Blacks. The fiction

about Gandhi's "racism" probably arises from Roberts' uncritical admiration for Churchill, who passionately hated the "naked fakir" and always reviled him.

Gandhi's was an extremely, and uniquely, complex personality. He tried to combine spirituality and personal morality with politics. The concept of *satyagraha* is an expression of this. This also explains Gandhi's use of numerous fasts as political instruments. One may agree or disagree with the objectives of the fasts. For instance, there can be a genuine disagreement on the fast which led to the Poona Pact under which Dr BR Ambedkar was forced to drop, with the utmost reluctance, his demand for a separate electorate for Dalits. But that's a different discourse altogether.

The fraudulent charge that Gandhi was a bisexual, who deserted his wife for Kallenbach, has provoked narrowly parochial reactions from many politicians who want Lelyveld's book banned. These include Maharashtra's ruling leaders, and worse, Union law minister M Veerappa Moily. Mr Moily waxed eloquent about how "history will not forgive us" if Lelyveld's book is published in India and blasphemous lies are disseminated about the Father of the Nation.

The reaction is profoundly irrational because none of those who are clamouring for banning the book has read it. They have all allowed themselves to be led by third- and fourth-hand accounts, which magnify misinterpretations and distortions. Some of these pro-ban zealots should pause and ask if what riles them so much isn't homophobia, a hatred of homosexuality which continues to attract stigma despite the recent landmark judgment of the Delhi High Court "reading down" Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code and decriminalising same-sex relationships.

However, a deeper pathology is at work here than moth-eaten and archaic notions of personal morality and the state's role in policing it and enforcing one (wrongly) privileged version of it. The pathology lies in the fear of free debate and radical, even irreverent, questioning of received wisdom. This inevitably leads to calls for bans, prohibitions, book-burning, and worse. Yet, the correct, indeed the only rational, response to Lelyveld's book is not a ban, but another book and yet more debate.

The Central government, and even worse, the states, have cultivated a pro-ban instinct towards books, plays, paintings, exhibitions, films and even people. There only has to be an intemperate protest by a community or segment of society about how a book or a person has hurt its "sentiments" before the state proscribes the book and denies the visitor a visa. This is a low form of pandering to intolerance. As Amartya Sen put it, this kind of "tolerance" is nothing but the sum-total of different intolerances, all of which undermine free expression and impoverish society and public culture.

The number of films, books and exhibitions Independent India has banned runs into hundreds, from *Nine Hours to Rama* to documentaries by Louis Malle, James Laine's book on Shivaji to Sahmat's exhibitions on the Ramayana's different versions, and to magazines which print maps which don't conform to the official versions of India's borders. Anand Patwardhan has had to fight for each one of his award-winning films to be shown on Doordarshan.

India's best-known modern painter MF Husain has been forced into exile by bigots who delude themselves that he really wants to defile Hindu deities by painting them in unconventional ways. Hindutva zealots have attacked paintings at Baroda in an attempt to turn one of India's finest art schools into a desert. The Indian state has persistently failed to defend these artists and their fundamental right to the freedom of expression.

Ironically, intolerance of dissent and difference has grown just as India globalises and opens itself up to new cultural influences. One would have thought that an India that aspires to become a

knowledge-based society would at least be more welcoming of eminent intellectuals, scholars and scientists than it would be of predatory multinational corporations, shady foreign universities out to make a fast buck, and other mercenary agencies. But it is not.

The government recently pulled out rules and regulations from the 1950s to ordain that nobody should organise an international conference without prior permission from the Central ministry which deals with the subject under discussion. All participants must be cleared before they get a visa.

This has become a major nuisance for universities and learned institutions, which often have to cancel worthy conferences which would promote fruitful interaction between Indian and international scholars-researchers. Last December, the government refused to allow a prestigious body, the International Panel on Fissile Materials, comprised of well-known physicists and researchers from different countries, to meet in India. The Panel's agenda is to promote a fissile materials ban, which the Indian government says it too favours. The ban attracted sharp criticism from the world's best-known science journal Nature.

Earlier last year, the government banned a conference on space-based weapons and nuclear disarmament which a non-governmental organisation was planning to organise. After 10 months of petitioning various ministries, the NGO was told it couldn't hold it. So much for the government's professed commitment to a nuclear weapons-free world and to eliminating nuclear weapons, through a step-by-step process, including prohibition of fissile material production, de-alerting of weapons and their class-by-class dismantling!

The knee-jerk instinct to prohibit, ban, punish and censor speaks to a huge flaw in India's democracy. For all its successes in holding free and fair elections, India has failed to evolve and institutionalise a culture of free expression, free debate and scholarly exchange. Only the crassest forms of commercial exchanges and corporate interactions have thrived in Emerging Power India.

It is a collective shame for this nation of 1.2 billion that it has never been far from imposing an intellectual straitjacket on dissenters and becoming a book-burning cultural backwater.

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P.S.

* From Praful Bidwai blog, April 18, 2011:

<http://www.prafulbidwai.org/index.php?post/2011/04/18/Gandhi-Doesn't-Need-This-Defence%3A-Banning-books-shows-insecurity>