

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Asia > India > Fundamentalism, communalism, extreme right, secularism (India) > **The Ramayana controversy: “Unless the secular politicians and (...)**

The Ramayana controversy: “Unless the secular politicians and intelligentsia show great courage, both pluralism and artistic freedom in India will be under constant threat from the pseudo-religious zealots”

Sunday 27 November 2011, by [GANGULI Amulya](#), [MISHRA Alya](#), [MUNSHI Suhas](#), [SUROOR Hasan](#), [VENKATARAMAKRISHNAN Rohan](#), [WANKEDHE Harish S.](#) (Date first published: 26 November 2011).

Contents

- [Ramayana controversy: India's](#)
- [INDIA: Protests continue \(...\)](#)
- [India: Religion, Freedom \(...\)](#)
- [India: Delhi univs voice \(...\)](#)
- [Oxford University Press \(...\)](#)

Ramayana controversy: India's pluralism under threat again

As Delhi University's pusillanimous decision to scrap A.K. Ramanujan's essay on 300 versions of the epic Ramayana shows, vice chancellors and professors easily choose the discretion of trashing a book or a work of art over the valour of upholding the principle of intellectual freedom in a democratic country.

As was demonstrated by Bombay University's similarly gutless capitulation to the Shiv Sena last year on Rohinton Mistry's novel, "Such A Long Journey", in the syllabus, the academic community is mortally scared of defying Hindu right-wing militants. It is, however, worthwhile noting that the saffron crowd has succeeded in making its writ prevail in Delhi and Mumbai, where the Congress and other secular parties - which claim to have a more open mind on the question of art and letters - are in power. It would have been understandable if the deletion of Ramanujan's essay and Mistry's novel had taken place in Narendra Modi's Gujarat, but that is not the case.

If the secular stalwarts in the government at the centre have maintained a deafening silence, the reason is a cowardly reluctance to offer a head-on challenge to the Hindu nationalist brigade lest it cost them the Hindu vote. But that is not the only reason. Such faintheartedness has been in evidence in the corridors of power ever since Salman Rushdie's "The Satanic Verses" was banned by the Rajiv Gandhi government in 1988 to placate Muslim fundamentalists. So it isn't the Hindu extremists alone who are favoured.

Even the Communists haven't been noticeably brave in this respect considering that the Buddhadev Bhattacharjee government hurriedly bundled out Taslima Nasreen from Kolkata in 2007 following

demonstrations by a little-known Muslim outfit. Interestingly, Taslima first went to Rajasthan, which was under the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) rule at the time.

It has to be remembered, however, that the BJP is all for artistic freedom as long as it is the Muslims who claim to be offended. Hence its support for Rushdie and Taslima. The party is up in arms only when it believes that the sensitivity of the Hindus is affected.

Curiously, however, it is the BJP's Atal Bihari Vajpayee who voiced the correct sentiments when the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune was ransacked by a group of Marathi chauvinists in 2003 because the author of a controversial biography of Shivaji, James W. Laine, had worked there. Vajpayee's view was that anyone objecting to Laine's book could write a rebuttal of his own instead of indulging in vandalism.

If only the leaders of secular parties had been as forthright about the importance of a scholarly debate, M.F. Husain would not have had to die in exile. There is little doubt that it is their gutless conduct which has encouraged the saffron goons to lay down the terms which the artists must follow.

For the Sangh Parivar and the BJP, it must be a matter of satisfaction that their agenda in the "cultural" field has not suffered any setback as a result of their loss of power at the centre. True the two United Progressive Alliance governments have rectified some of the distortions in history books which the Vajpayee government had introduced. But there has been little or no resistance to the threat of violence which the saffron outfits make against books, paintings or exhibitions which present a picture different from their own.

They are particularly aggressive about the Ramayana since their politics revolves around the proposed Ram temple in Ayodhya, which they project as a symbol of Hindu assertiveness vis-à-vis the Muslim "invaders". It also propagates their concept of establishing a Hindu 'rashtra' (state) in India, which is the Parivar's ultimate objective.

Not surprisingly, therefore, they are unable to accept any interpretation of the epic, as the one by Ramanujan, which differs from their version in which the emphasis is on Ram as a warrior. This selective depiction is intended to provoke the Hindus to rise against their enemies who, in accordance with the Parivar's subtext, comprise the minorities. It is easy to see how this rendering is different from Mahatma Gandhi's focus on Ram Rajya, the ideal state where Ram is a benevolent ruler for all.

The Ramanujan version was reflected in an exhibition organised by Sahmat in 1995 which looked at diverse origins of the Ramayana. Like the essay, it had earned the ire of the saffronites who lost no time in attacking it.

Unless the secular politicians and intelligentsia show great courage and personal integrity in their commitment to an ideal which they profess to cherish, both pluralism and artistic freedom in India will be under constant threat from the pseudo-religious zealots.

Amulya Ganguli

** 29.10.2011 - Amulya Ganguli is a political analyst. He can be reached at amulyaganguli gmail.com*

** Source: BBC India Edition, 29 Oct 2011*

http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/politics/ramayana-controversy-indias-pluralism-under-threat-a-gain-comment_100573446.html

INDIA: Protests continue over academic freedom curb

Students and teachers at Delhi University went on marches last week to protest against the removal of a celebrated essay by the late scholar and linguist AK Ramanujan on the Hindu epic, the Ramayana.

The essay titled "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five examples and three thoughts on translations", which was part of the history honours course at Delhi University, had attracted the ire of Hindu religious activists because it talks about 300 different versions of the Ramayana that abound in India and beyond.

The decision to remove the essay was taken by the university's academic council, which is in charge of syllabus content, despite a recommendation from an expert committee created by the supreme court to keep the article in the syllabus.

Angered by their peers' apparent capitulation to right-wing pressure and undermining of academic freedom, lecturers protesting the essay removal have launched a nationwide signature campaign to build pressure on the council and the vice-chancellor to review the decision.

"We will not let the thing die quickly. We have an action programme and will build pressure on the university to take back its decision," said Abha Dev Habib, an executive council member who had, as an academic council member in 2008, been among those who supported the continuation of the essay in the syllabus despite the controversy surrounding it.

Habib said nearly 2,000 people including academics had signed the petition so far.

"This is a glaring example of an academic institution succumbing to pressure from right-wing political parties," said council member Rakesh Kumar, who was one among only nine academics who expressed a dissenting opinion against scrapping the essay.

"The council has severely compromised its standards and has conveyed to our students the message that only the ideology that is supported by the majority will be accepted."

A writ petition had been filed in the high court on the grounds that the essay hurt religious sentiments. The matter was then taken up by the supreme court, which directed the university to seek the opinion of experts and place it before the academic council.

Notably, three of the four experts, whose names were kept confidential, were happy with the essay but the fourth expressed an opinion that second-year students may find it difficult.

According to one expert: "By all accounts there is no single version of the Ramayana. Many writers, poets, dramatists and scholars have interpreted the story in their different ways. In fact, if the story had been static and did not hold the potential of re-narration, perhaps it would not have survived over 2,000 years."

The fourth member, who termed the Indian psyche incapable of handling different versions of the Ramayana, seems to have convinced the council to scrap the essay. "Epic personalities are divine characters and showing them in bad light is not easily tolerated," he noted in the report.

But Professor Renu Bala, another dissenting academic council member, argued: "Nothing religiously offensive was found by the experts. India is a diverse country and there are 300 versions of the Ramayana. We give students the right to vote when they turn 18, so why not the right to think?"

In 2008, activists from the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the student arm of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata party, barged into the history department to protest the teaching of the Ramanujan text and vandalised the place, forcing then department head Professor SZH Jafri to take refuge in his office.

The matter is set to escalate now, with teachers and students planning a one-day seminar and several street plays to educate students about the importance of academic freedom and secular beliefs in academics.

Meanwhile the ABVP is celebrating the essay's removal and says it will oppose any attempt to restore it in the syllabus.

Alya Mishra

27 October 2011

Source: University World News, Issue: 195

<http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20111027182555654&mode=print>

India: Religion, Freedom of Expression and the Censorship

"A University stands for humanism, for tolerance for reason, for adventure of ideas and for the search of truth. It stands for the onward march of the human race towards ever higher objectives. If the universities discharge their duties adequately, then it is well with the nation and the people."

Jawaharlal Nehru

Recent events at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and the Delhi University showcased the implicit command of the right wing political forces in controlling the academic environment. The first incident related to the AK Ramanujan's text '300 Ramayanas', which was recently dropped by the Delhi University's Academic Council from the BA honours History syllabus, succumbed to the violent protest demonstration by Akhil Bhartiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) in 2008. In the second incident the JNU administration served a show cause notice to the activists of All India Bahujan Students Forum (AIBSF) for organizing a seminar on 'Lord Macaulay and Mahishasur' and circulating 'blasphemous posters and articles' in the campus. In both the cases, ABVP took aggressive stand to raise the issues and systematically communalizing the academic environment in favour of the right wing political ideology.

In most of the campuses, the right wing students' organizations are censoring each and every attempt where a critical enquiry is waged to understand the dynamics of religion (especially Hindu). Issues like caste discrimination, religious orthodoxy and conservatism and women's position in the society, in most of the times are absent in the academic discourses or met with cold shoulders. Even at the time of conflicts, the University administration, under the pressure of violent protest and

demonstrations, accepts the dictates of the right wing political ideology. Also, the sensitivities of a large section among the liberal academia look complex and tilted towards such conservative appeal that they fail to make a difference between the malicious designs of Sangh Parivaar to appropriate Hindu religion for its political interest against the rational critical enquiry of the Dalit and Left progressive forces. Both the groups have persistently utilized a critical method to evaluate the hegemonic role of religion in the public domain.

Lets us evaluate the reason behind the attack against Ramanujam's essay. Among the thirty-three billion Hindu gods and goddesses, Ram is one of the most politically usurped deities. His human character was eulogized and glorified by the RSS ideologues to turn him into a 'macho' hero of religious fanatics. Ram is a handy personality for the Sangh Parivaar as his character supplements the patriarchal, castiest and racist elements that they want to proudly cherish and perpetuate. It is to conserve his glory that the Sangh Parivar demolished the Babri Mosque and threw the whole country into the worst kind of communal riots in the recent past. During the Mumbai riots, every rape of a Muslim woman or slaughter of a child was celebrated by shouting the slogan 'Jai-Shri Ram'. The religiosity of the Hindus are so blindfolded that they have hardly made any difference between the sublime, tolerant and spiritual character of Gandhi's Ram against the gallant character of Ram constructed by Advani & co. to mobilize the majority sentiments against the Muslims. Religion was used politically by the Hindu right and evidently the religious symbols and deities became political elements devoid of any spiritual or sentimental attachment. Those who are arguing that their sentiments are hurt should register their protest against the strategic misuse of Ram in politics. This is high time that the liberal academia understand the immoral political construction behind the usage of religious symbols by the Sangh Parivar.

Ramanujam's article thus defeats the political purpose of the Sangh Parivar, which wanted to portray the icon of Ram according to their particular needs. The Left understood the political nature of such crude censorships which the right wing has instrumentalized to dilute the scientific and rational temperament of higher education. Violent censorship is part of their agenda to saffronise the whole academic environment. The criticism of the Left intelligentsia against such communal high-handedness of academic activities drew its merits mainly by flagging the concrete scholarship of the text, rationality of the research and in defence of freedom of expression and thought must for every author. The battle of the Left therefore is to preserve the sanity and progressive credentials of the current academic institutions.

The Dalit-Bahujan perspective on the other hand has apt social credentials to understand the hegemonic appropriation of the religion by the right wing forces. In the modern times, these groups wanted to locate their social position with equality and respect. Hence, they use alternative myths and imagination to counter the regressive social history where their ancestors were demonized as criminals or villains. Their method may look disruptive and infantile (celebrating Mahisasur as Hero or ridiculing Durga at JNU) however, it represents a new political consciousness away from the cultural appendages given to them by the social elites.

The Dalit-Bahujan political movements have a history to contest such hypocritical religious rhetoric of the caste Hindu elites. It has courageously demonstrated the inhuman, irrational and discriminatory social ideology of brahmanical culture which is primarily responsible for the dehumanized and degraded social identity for the majority of people. Being the vanguards of social revolution, the Dalit-Bahujan intelligentsia believed it as their right and moral responsibility to target and diminish the symbols and cultural values which were used by the brahmanical elites in order to suppress and oppress the majority community. Dalit-Bahujan intelligentsia have rejected the symbols of cultural oppression, brahmanical social ideology, false deities and idols, unscientific and orthodox social customs and more over also converted to other religions. This is a rejection of a conscious, modern and progressive Dalit-Bahujan mind who wants to emancipate from the clutches

of Brahmanical caste in order to become an equal and dignified citizen of the modern Indian nation-state. They understand the need to bring the discourse of religion in the public domain to critically scrutinize its necessity in building a humanitarian, scientific and rational world order.

It is well understood that India being a religious nation cannot subtract religious identities, related sensitivities and customs from the public reason. However, this does not mean that the intelligentsia should not raise rational and critical voices against the degraded values, obscurantist knowledge and corrupt social practices which are celebrated as the part of religions. The political philosophy of the Left and Dalit-Bahujan has a secular-rational motive which allows them to take a critical view towards the hegemonic presence of religious symbols and rituals at the public domain. They utilize humanistic and logical method to study religion, culture and social customs which obviously opposed by the right wing communal forces. However, in this clash of ideological merits, the Sangh Parivar normally appeared as a winner as the sentiments and sensitivities of most of the decision makers are governed by the subtle communal and casteist logic and they further use their time tested communal rhetoric formulae to mobilize the masses in their favour.

The communal-casteist agenda of the Sangh Parivaar needs a comprehensive rebuff. The struggle to protect methodological research, academic scholarship, scientific enquiry and secular-rational ethos of the universities needs a wider support and cooperation from all the sections of the society. The perspectives of the Left and Dalit-Bahujan intelligentsia appear radical and insensitive at the first glance, but only it has the needed intellectual capacity and argumentative rigor to show the Sangh Parivar its place in the academic world.

Harish S. Wankhede

Mon, 2011-11-07 12:47

* The author teaches Political Science at the Delhi University

Source: Pragoti/ Progress and Struggle <http://www.pragoti.in/node/4571>

India: Delhi univs voice support for banned Ramayan

Students and teachers from two universities in Delhi assembled on Wednesday to express their support in favour of retaining A. K. Ramanujan's essay, 300 Ramayanas. They also had a discussion on the various translations of the Ramayana.

While those gathered at Delhi University held a candlelight march, the scholars gathered at Ambedkar University were audience to a short documentary called Anek Ramayana.

The gathering at the DU campus saw about 50 people marching from the department of history to the faculty of arts, shouting slogans against the administration and the growing influence of communalism on academia.

"Basically, we're trying to mobilise opinion both within the university and outside. We are trying to use democratic ways to express our demand," said Pankaj Jha, a professor of history at Lady Shri Ram college. "The only thing that will really satisfy us in the end is for the essay to be reinstated in

the syllabus.”

The march was preceded by a panel of professors discussing the impact of the decision to drop the essay, written by renowned scholar A. K. Ramanujan. History professor and daughter of the Prime Minister, Dr Upinder Singh chaired the meet.

“In the face of all this intimidation... it seems like the space for academics to express themselves is under threat, and we need to do something about that,” Singh told the crowd, “This is a question of safeguarding the university as a place. It is a struggle to ensure that this kind of thing is not taken casually.”

Ambedkar University was host to a short documentary film directed by Sikha Sen, which explored the various translations and historical depictions of the Ramayan. The documentary was followed by a panel discussion aimed at debating how autonomous may an educational body be in teaching its syllabus, and how immune may it be to political pressure. “The issue before us is to decide whether to succumb to political pressure. In my opinion we have to fight this political pressure that pressurises syllabus decisions not on merit but political basis,” faculty member Salil Mishra said.

Rohan Venkataramakrishnan and Suhas Munshi

New Delhi, November 17, 2011

Source India Today

<http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/delhi-universities-support-banned-ramayan/1/160403.html>

Oxford University Press under pressure over Ramanujan essay row

Oxford University Press is under growing pressure to explain its role in suppressing A.K. Ramanujan’s essay, “Three Hundred Ramayanas,” as the renowned indologist Sheldon Pollock and a number of other leading academics on Saturday joined the mounting outrage over its decision to stop publishing and selling the essay in India following protests from a right-wing group.

In a strongly-worded joint letter to Nigel Portwood, Chief Executive, OUP, U.K., they conveyed their “shock and dismay” at OUP India’s action which, they said, was compounded by its abject apology in court to a group which had claimed that the essay hurt Hindu sensitivities.

“In addition, OUP India has, it appears, subsequently withdrawn from the market Ramanujan’s Collected Essays, in which 300 Ramayanas also appears, and has assured Delhi University that it will not keep the book in print, a pledge that enabled the university’s Vice-Chancellor to overrule his own committee who had argued for retaining Ramanujan’s essay on the syllabus of the History department,” the letter says, referring to the controversy over Delhi University’s decision to drop the essay from its syllabus under pressure from Hindutva groups

Besides Prof. Pollock, Ransford Professor of Sanskrit and Indian Studies at Columbia University, the letter is signed, among others, by American Indologists Wendy Doniger and David Shulman; and historians Muzaffar Alam and Dipesh Chakrabarty. Prof. Pollock said the signatories also included former colleagues or students of Ramanujan. Among them were authors who had published with

OUP.

“Ready for dialogue”

An OUP spokesperson said: “OUP is aware of the recent debate regarding the removal of an essay by A.K. Ramanujan ‘Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation’ from an undergraduate reading list at the University of Delhi. We have not received a copy of this letter from Professor Pollock or indeed any other scholars who are co-signatories. We would welcome a dialogue with Professor Pollock or his colleagues on any matters concerning scholarly freedom, which is of central importance to Oxford University Press.”

It is understood that the letter would be formally sent to Mr. Portwood on Monday with a copy to OUP Delhi.

Pointing out that the Ramanujan case is “only the most recent in a series of shocking acts on the part of OUP India — including the suppressing or pre-censoring of scholarly books — that are inimical to the open exchange of ideas, the lifeblood of scholarship,” it says: “This situation cannot go unchallenged.”

The letter calls for the OUP to withdraw its court apology, publicly state that it is committed to the right of scholars to publish their work without fear of suppression or censorship, and demonstrate this commitment by reprinting Ramanujan’s “Collected Essays.”

“If you are unwilling to do these things, and thereby effectively attempt to bury Ramanujan’s book, we demand that you publicly relinquish all rights to his work and return them to the original copyright holders, so that this scholarship can be published by another press that understands the importance of freedom of expression, to say nothing of courage in the face of fanaticism,” it concludes.

Students’ campaign

Meanwhile, Oxford University students have launched a campaign to press OUP to clarify its position arguing that OUP India’s actions “run counter to the ethos of dissemination, debate and freedom of expression that are the hallmark of institutions of academic excellence around the world.”

They have been given to understand that the decision to stop publishing and distributing the essay was taken on “standard commercial” grounds as its sale had fallen to “negligible levels” and had nothing to do with external pressures.

Prominent South Asian academics including Ramachandra Guha, Philippe Roman Professor in History and International Affairs, London School of Economics, will speak on the politics and culture of non-state censorship in India in the context of the Ramanujan essay row at Oxford University next week.

Hasan Suroor

Source: **The Hindu**, 27 novembre

<http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/article2663318.ece>

