

THE HINDU

Online edition of India's National Newspaper
Sunday, June 17, 2001

[Front Page](#) | [National](#) | [Southern States](#) | [Other States](#) | [International](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Business](#) | [Sport](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Miscellaneous](#) | [Features](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Employment](#) | [Index](#) | [Home](#)

[Features](#) | [Previous](#) | [Next](#)

Of liberals and tyrants

Freedom of speech is a powerful weapon in a free society. Yet, liberalism is creating its own tyranny whereby positions are sharply divided into opposing extremes, with no space for complexities, debate or discussion. Where, raising questions against 'banned' works tantamounts to sleeping with the enemy. Noted novelist, SHASHI DESHPANDE looks at the complexities surrounding questions of artistic freedom and duty.

THE right to the freedom of speech has always been the one great weapon with which to confront tyrannies. Writers have a special claim on this right, because free self-expression is what their work is about. The artist's right is extremely important to society as well, since the writer is its spokesperson, speaking on its behalf, voicing its concerns and its truths. And so, it was easy to understand why a Pakistani academic, at a seminar abroad, told me we were a fortunate people. "You can stand in the middle of the street and criticise your Prime Minister," he said.

Indeed, on the whole, except for the brief time of the Emergency, we have not done too badly. Problems do arise, but they are openly talked about, there is debate, there is opposition; no government has been able to get away with open repression. But there are other ways of gagging voices, an insidious censorship which comes with greater religious fundamentalism. Increasing intolerance is being translated into a concern for what is called "our culture" and makes a particular group become sensitive about something, giving it a chance to show its muscle and its political clout. Years ago, P. G. Wodehouse said, "The curse of today is the Pressure Group. You cannot take a step without getting picketed by someone." Some things, it seems, never change.

Yet they do, because pressure groups do not stop at picketing now. The game is a more menacing one, played with vigour and violence. A particular group decides it is the sole custodian of its own history, its myths, its leaders. It determines that their voice is the only voice that should be heard on these things, that their version is the right version; there can be no other and there can be no debate. And therefore, as K. V. Subbanna so correctly put it in a particular case, "Basavanna, a rebel himself, becomes an icon you cannot write about". More sinister is the fact of the governments giving in to these pressure groups - which is what happened when the film

"Water" had to be abandoned. The appeasement policy comes into play when the pressure group forms a large vote bank.

This is a very dangerous and disturbing trend. It is impossible for a writer, an artist or a historian to toe any line. The whole point of creative writing is that the artist/writer can give only her/his version. In Rushdie's words: "The liveliness of literature lies on its being the individual and idiosyncratic version of one human being."

However, there is no need to go on about the evils of censorship. No writer would defend it. But, while there is a strong and vociferous opposition to any kind of censorship, there are other issues, sometimes concealed within the very opposition to censorship, which should trouble all writers. But writers, who are very vocal on censorship, rarely speak about these - possibly, because to think of them requires a look into their own selves. The first time I was troubled by these thoughts was during the "Miss World" contest that was held in Bangalore some years back. The largest and the most vociferous opposition to this contest was on the very weak ground of "our culture". The argument that such contests went against our culture was very obviously a political ploy, but it gained, or tried to gain additional validity by allying itself with women's rights and feminism. As a feminist I was opposed to this contest and to all beauty contests in general. Not only do they turn women into sex objects and exploit the female body for money, there is also the premium they set on beauty in women, burdening all women, the very young specially, with the idea of beauty as being an essential requisite. Above all, I felt that the glare of publicity surrounding the event and the young women participating in the show, specially the one finally chosen, made them celebrities and role models, pushing out more relevant and desirable role models.

Nevertheless, as a feminist, it also seemed to me that I had no right to object to these young women choosing their professions of actor or model - which is what the young women really hope for. Subscribing as I did to an ideology that believes in people having choices, how could I deny these young women their choices? I am sure many others felt this way, but these voices were never heard. The huge opposition to the "against our culture" argument made all other arguments invisible. In fact, to speak against the beauty contest was to become part of the hysterical, culture-defending, fundamentalist brigade. A picture was built of ugly, frustrated, narrow-minded Puritan feminists who were opposing it. Rational arguments, doubts about such a contest on other grounds had no space in the drama and sensation that surrounded the contest. The protest took on a monolithic structure. Like the judge says in Arthur Miller's "Crucible": "if you are not with us, you are against us".

Another case: the film "The Bandit Queen". Two issues, which had nothing to do with the nudity or sex scenes, troubled me. One is: is it right to make a role model of a person who has lived a life of crime and violence? The movie was based on the life of a still-living woman, a woman who had taken to crime for various reasons, become famous in this avatar of dacoit, had decided to reform, gone to prison and become a celebrity. The

movie-maker was a thinking man, whose intent and purposes in making this movie, we had to believe, went beyond the pure entertainment purposes of mainstream cinema. Yet at one level, I felt it used the same simplistic argument that all masala Indian movies do. "She is not the criminal. Society has wronged her. It is society, therefore, which is the criminal".

The seriousness of the film, the context in which her criminal activities were framed, seemed to validate this argument much more than the fantasy world of the masala movies. So that a woman who was, perhaps, doing no more than fighting for survival, was elevated to heroinism. She became a rebel, a fighter against oppression, a crusader for social justice. And so, we were made to feel, the violence was justified, the criminality condoned. It compounded the problem for me that this helped her to become an even bigger celebrity, helped her to fight and win the elections, to become an MP. And this, not despite her criminal past, but because of it.

My other doubt is: do you have the right to take over the life of a living person and, recreating it, make of it what you want? When I question this right I know I stand on weak ground. Today, even fiction writers, with the increasing popularity of faction, are using real people in their fictional narratives and are not questioned about their right to do so. But what troubles me is this: when you recreate a life, in a way you appropriate that life, make of it what you want and give it a focus real life rarely has. Can you do this? Does a person not have a copyright to her/his own life? I am thinking of the writer John Berger who had used the life of a doctor in a work of fiction. This, I heard Berger admitting in an interview, did something to the doctor, who liked a kind of uncertainty about his life. Whereas, with this book, his life became definite, formulated. As a result, he tried to change the course of his life, with, Berger said, disastrous results.

Another case right now in the news is that of the Rajasthani saathin, Bhanwari Devi, who was gang-raped. This woman's life has been turned into a movie by Jagmohan Mundhra. Bhanwari Devi, the press reports tell us, feels exploited, her wounds opened fresh by this movie. Whereas, Mundhra says she saw the movie and approved of it. And anyway, he adds, he has the right to use a case that is reported in the press. Between these two views there is something else - the money paid to the woman, a fact that Mundhra admits. Which, I feel, not only does not make things better, it taints both the giver and the receiver. Can you sell your life? Can you buy a life? And there is also the doubt - why do artists have to take a real life, to use events so close to us that we cannot really see them objectively? Whether the subject is, like Bhanwari Devi, unable to understand the entire consequences of letting her story be told, or whether she is as savvy as Phoolan Devi, makes no difference. Is this trend of using real lives, real cases growing because these things make the product more sensational? Because they satisfy the voyeur in human beings? Fiction clearly cannot give the same kick, the same thrill as real life. Knowing that the woman - Bhanwari Devi or Phoolan Devi - was really raped, obviously makes it more exciting for the viewer looking for thrills. Fiction distances events, makes them more universal, makes them part of an eternal pattern. But what the maker and the viewer both want now is instant responses, instant

recognition, instant thrills.

It is even worse for those who are "used" without their knowledge. Reading Paul Theroux's book on Naipaul, I was filled with utter distaste. But at least Naipaul can write, he can get the platform to write, being who and what he is. What about those who can never respond? Those who can never correct the picture of their selves that some writer has painted? Yes, the truth should be told; but when the truth is most often sensationalism, because that is what sells, when it is most often sex, because sex is what sells, we have to ask ourselves what we really mean. I think we need to take a long, hard look at ourselves.

But none of these doubts, questions or arguments have had any place in the debates we have had on this issue until now. Complicated issues are simplified by blanking out everything but the issue of the freedom of the artist. There is a kind of facile liberalism that is quick to defend this freedom - rightly so, but, like in the beauty contest case, no space is left for discussing any other factor. To say anything against the "Bandit Queen" was to align oneself with the wrong forces, specially since the film centred round two very sensitive issues - caste and gender oppression. Feminism, like secularism, has become one of our sacred cows. And if a book or a movie stands on either of these politically correct grounds, it becomes impossible to speak against it. To me, to bring feminism as a justifying ideology into a movie like the "Bandit Queen" smacks of exploitation of feminism. Certainly feminism does not need, God help us, to include violence or revenge in its agenda.

In such cases, an atmosphere is created in which a free discussion becomes almost impossible. As someone once said at a seminar, it is impossible to say anything against Rushdie's writing, for, to do so is to put oneself on the side of the persecutors, the fundamentalists. Artistic merit is never an issue when the freedom of expression is threatened, (unfortunately, one has as much right to write a bad book as to write a good one); but surely, to call a book bad does not mean that one justifies the ban on it? To speak of the poor taste the maker of "Fire" showed in naming the two women Sita and Radha (stretching symbolism way beyond its reach) was to invite charges of being a fundamentalist, a saffron brigade sympathiser. Liberalism, which so strenuously defends the rights of an individual, is creating its own tyranny, so that to speak against a book, writer or an artist under threat is to commit the crime of sleeping with the enemy. In this process we are drawing a sharp line between two opposing forces, leaving no space for other opinions, for debate. The different shades of protest, the complexities of any issue, are being smothered in this either/or phenomenon. What has emerged through these cases is that there is room for only two parties in such controversies: the goons on one side - insensitive, violent, fascist and fundamentalist and the liberal, secular, freedom-defending forces on the other. There is no space left for a third party at all. Debate has become impossible. To the believer in force, debate does not exist. While the liberal position is: having captured all the politically correct arguments, what more can be said?

Perhaps writers/artists need to ask themselves some questions, like - does my right involve no duties? Are not duties the inseparable twin of rights? Does the artist have no responsibility towards society at all? One thing I am certain about: the writer is the sole judge of what she/he chooses to write. I do not give anyone else the right to choose what I should say, or how I should say it. And, certainly, for the writer to be cowed down by any authority, to give up the right to freedom of speech, is irresponsible; but, is it not equally irresponsible to ignore the duty this right involves? Let me come to the cause celebre of our times - Salman Rushdie's Satanic Verses. Like anyone else, I was horrified by what has happened to him: nothing justifies the horrendous threat under which he continues to live. And, like all writers, the idea of banning the book in India was abhorrent to me. At the same time, Khushwant Singh's argument for not publishing the book in India made sense. Do we need riots and communal disturbances? But there is also the doubt - should we give in to threats? Questions continue to teem in my mind. Do we uphold the right of the writer to write what s/he wants at any cost? A writer must say what s/he wants, must never gloss over the truth; but do we not consider what kind of truth is at stake? I would never advocate any restraint on the author, but what about self-restraint? Would I, as a writer, not think of some other way of putting things when others have to pay the price of my freedom to speak? Certainly we need writers who provoke their readers into thinking, but do we need them to provoke hatred? Such questions could never be raised in the heated debate that surrounded Satanic Verses. Even to speak of self-restraint would be akin to allying oneself to fanaticism and religious fundamentalism. But it seems to me that these questions are relevant and need to be asked.

I feel on surer ground when I speak of writers who write books in which the private lives of living persons is made public, columnists who make free to comment on anyone, biographies clearly written more for sensationalism than anything else, autobiographies that bring in living people who are unable to defend themselves. We talk much of freedom these days, but what we do with that freedom does not seem to matter to anyone. P. Lal, in a review of a book, spoke of "insolent cockiness masquerading as freedom of speech". There are even worse things masquerading as freedom of speech - glorifying violence, making heroes of killers and criminals. John Grisham, himself a best-selling author, writing about a movie that glorified random killings and inspired other crimes, said, "Hollywood will not take responsibility for it; it will pontificate instead about the necessity for the artist's freedom".

I saw this phenomenon on a TV show in which Bombay movie-makers shrugged off all responsibility for the effect of their increasingly violent movies on a frustrated, unemployed, half-literate audience. To show that crime is justified, to have the heroes, who, to our masses, are really the larger-than-life creatures they see on the screen, declaring that the law is of no use, that one has to take it into one's own hands - do the movie-makers think of how much this goes into an easy acceptance of crime? When heroes like Amitabh Bachchan or Shah Rukh Khan justify their violent roles, saying "I am only doing what the director tells me", are they not

shrugging off the responsibility that any artist must accept? Yes, we must accept responsibility for our words, for what we create. An Australian critic quoted the author Margaret Drabble as telling a reviewer, "Look me in the eyes and say that". Yes, we need to look squarely in the face of the results of our words and actions. If I remember it right, John Berger, like our movie-makers, said he had no feeling of guilt for what happened to the doctor. Putting art above humanity? Or simply evading responsibility? I do not know.

To me, the worst abuse of the freedom of speech is pornography. I am horrified when I read of cases where the courts have held pornography to be protected under the right to freedom of speech. I was even more horrified to hear the same opinion expressed in our country by a columnist who strongly argued in favour of such liberalism. However shocking this seems, it is the logical end of pressing for a right that does not seem to have any corresponding duty. And how is society served by artists justifying crime, by standing up for pornography? I am even more deeply disturbed that while there are so many voices speaking out in defence of the writer's freedom of speech, not many condemn pornography. Pornography is intimately connected to crimes against women and children; yet it does not figure much in any liberal arguments, no, not even on the feminist agenda.

One of the questions I have to ask myself as a writer is: how free am I really? How free, indeed, is any writer? Are there not always restrictions we work against and within? Some are self-imposed. Tillie Olsen speaks of the "censorship of love and fear". We hesitate to say that which might hurt those we love, to say that which might invite anger from those close to us. Women, specially, have always had to be more careful, to stay within the lines drawn for them by social rules, by their own conditioning. Even men have to take care not to offend the social mores. Thomas Hardy stopped writing novels after *Jude the Obscure*, because of the hostility that he had to face, since the book was offensive to the sexual and moral climate of his times. He turned to poetry, instead. "If Galileo," he wrote later, "had said in verse that the world moved, the Inquisition might have left him alone".

When authors edit their own manuscripts, not all the factors that go into the final selection are connected to artistic criteria. Publishers ask for changes, writers themselves may think of the need to please critics and readers - consciously or unconsciously. Material dependence also takes away freedom; when you depend on others financially, you have to toe their line. What about government patronage? When writers or literary organisations take anything from the government, are they conscious of the need to retain government's favour? Prizes, awards and positions for writers are another form of government patronage that gives the government power over the writers. Let us be honest: writers who are in the good books of the government do get some benefits. And why not admit that some writers, knowing this, are careful to stay on the right side of the authorities?

I would never justify any kind of outside control. What I would like, and what I am speaking of, is self-control on the part of the writers themselves - this, in the name of morality, good taste and a healthy respect for one's

reader. This may sound a very confident statement, but I know things are not so easy. I can never be sure of my own motives. Is it really my right to the freedom of speech that I am protecting? Or is it my writer's ego - a cussedness that says, "I will have no one telling ME what I should write?" Or, am I being deliberately provocative, in the interests of catching attention? Or, is it just sheer nastiness, after all, using the public forum to wreak private vengeance? How can one be sure? I only know that one cannot make general rules. I can only take each thing as it comes, and hope each time that I am not going beyond the line I have to draw for myself. Always keeping in mind Camus' words: "We all carry within us our places of exile, our crimes, our revenges. But our task is not to unleash them on the world; it is to fight them in ourselves and others".

Send this article to Friends by [E-Mail](#)

Section : [Features](#)
Previous : [Rice of the rural kind](#)
Next : [Degrees of homelessness](#)

[Front Page](#) | [National](#) | [Southern States](#) | [Other States](#) | [International](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Business](#) | [Sport](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Miscellaneous](#) | [Features](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Employment](#) | [Index](#) | [Home](#)

Copyrights © 2001 The Hindu

Republication or dissemination of the contents of this screen are expressly prohibited without the written consent of The Hindu
