

*Jerry Springer: The Opera – nothing is sacred*  
Credit: Dan Goldsmith/Arvon



# DISEASE OF INTOLERANCE

When we succumb to notions of religious offence, we stifle debate, writes **Salil Tripathi**

In December 2004, the Birmingham Repertory Theatre staged a play called *Behzti* (Dishonour), which featured rape and murder in a Sikh community centre. Before the opening, the company held discussions with leaders of the local Sikh community to gauge their feelings and likely response. Those discussions did not really help; once the play was performed, a group of angry Sikhs protested, and they stormed the theatre. Fearing escalating tension and further public unrest, the authorities suggested to the theatre company that it should reconsider the programme. The Birmingham Rep closed the production.

Instead of standing up for Britain's 'ancient liberties', Fiona Mactaggart, then minister in charge of racial equality, said: 'When people are moved by theatre to protest... it is a great thing... that is a sign of the free speech, which is so much a part of the British tradition.'

In a post-modern twist, the minister had transformed the notion of protest theatre – one which forces audiences to think again and demand social change – into one where those resisting change, protest against the play to prevent it from being staged in the first place. And somehow, in Mactaggart's Orwellian universe, that protest, which stifles free speech, becomes a sign of freedom of expression, and, weirdly enough, a part of the British tradition. Suddenly, it is no longer traditional to tolerate views you disagree with; tradition has come to mean that you impose your views violently on others, or prevent people from hearing views with which you disagree.

And yet, if tradition is to mean a set of customs or practices that have evolved over time, then Mactaggart may have been on to something. For acquiescing with bullies seems to have become the emerging tradition in Britain 20 years after Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa. Some blinked at that time, so others taking offence believe they, too, will get the rest of us to blink. Lack of resolve, and even rewarding those who called for a ban of the book, has emboldened others: they think they, too, should get away with it. No British newspaper published the Danish *Jyllands Posten* cartoons of Mohammed, and, in the ultimate kowtow, Iqbal Sacranie, the former head of the Muslim Council of Britain, was honoured with a knighthood, even though he had not objected to calls for Rushdie's death. This is mutually assured madness.

It is almost as if having acquiesced with Islamic intransigence, we must extend equal opportunity principles to other faiths, and accommodate their recalcitrance, thus narrowing our public dialogue and discourse.

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It has now become acceptable for anyone upset over anything to demand an apology at best, or a ban, at worst. That they don't succeed each time is a good thing, but for how long?

It is time to say enough.

The same month Sikhs were expressing their disapproval in Birmingham, James Anstice, a lecturer, was upset because Madam Tussaud's museum in London displayed a nativity scene in which the football star David Beckham and his wife Victoria, 'Posh Spice', were dressed up as Joseph and Mary. Actors Hugh Grant and Samuel Jackson were shepherds, Kylie Minogue was an angel, and George W Bush, Tony Blair and the Duke of Edinburgh stood in as the three wise men. Anstice was angry and destroyed the Beckham statue. The next year at his trial, he was given a light fine and discharged conditionally. In early 2005, some 47,000 Christians complained to the British Broadcasting Corporation over its screening of *Jerry Springer: The Opera*, and a Christian group even launched a private blasphemy suit against the corporation. If the show is not blasphemous, a spokesman of the group Christian Voice said, 'nothing in Britain is sacred'.

In 2006, a group of self-proclaimed Hindu activists attacked Asia House, an art gallery in central London, which was showing the works of Maqbul Fida Husain, who is 92 years old, and easily India's most widely known painter. The reason for their anger: Husain had depicted Hindu deities in the nude. Husain has been the target of a vicious campaign in India where over a thousand spurious cases against him have been filed.

Again in 2006, on a Sunday afternoon, the most famous street in the city's East End, Brick Lane, saw a bunch of 60 men and women marching up and down, seeking to stop the filming of Monica Ali's acclaimed eponymous novel. They alleged *Brick Lane* dishonoured the Sylheti Bangladeshi community. They succeeded partly; the production company had to move elsewhere, but the film was made. However, when it was premiered, the royal family avoided attending the event for fear of offending the Bangladeshi community.

The protesters in Brick Lane were careful to emphasise that their problem with the novel was not so much about faith, as about the way Bangladeshis were presented in the novel. This takes the notion of such protests to a different level, moving it beyond faith, and into the realm of any specific interest group. Indeed, intolerance has moved beyond religion: in 2002, Paul Kelleher (since jailed for causing criminal damage) beheaded a statue of former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher using his cricket bat at

London's Guildhall. The Conservative Party at one point forced its then MP (and now London mayor) Boris Johnson to apologise to Liverpoolians because a *Spectator* editorial (he edited the magazine at that time) said Liverpool's residents wallowed in victimhood – a remark that upset Liverpoolians.

This is what we have come to, two decades after the fatwa. And to understand why, let us go back to that day in Bradford, when a group of Muslims decided to burn copies of Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*. Rushdie's novel is a post-modern fable about migration and the hybridisation that follows, where identities no longer remain pristine and pure, but intermingle, transforming themselves and the society around them.

Rushdie dared to imagine an alternate universe, with a central character hallucinating and going mad, who thinks he is at the focal point of the birth of a great religion, and pictures himself at its centre, visualising himself as the messenger. In so doing, he goes deep into the abiding mystery of Islam: did Satan, at any stage, deceive Mohammed into believing that there was nothing wrong in worshipping Lat, Uzza and Manat, the pagan goddesses of the pre-Islamic world? Did Mohammed realise the mistake when Archangel Gabriel told him so, and then disown the verses, bringing Islam back to its monotheistic path?

If those who wanted to burn *The Satanic Verses* cared to read the novel, they would have realised that far from being an insult, here was an imaginative way to explore the nature and meaning of inspiration. Indeed, in 1987, before the publication of the novel, in an interview with my colleague Dina Vakil and myself, Rushdie had said: 'The main character [an Indian movie star] is going insane. He decides to step out of his life and step away from it. He is losing his mind and is becoming convinced that he is, in some way, the Archangel. . . . [The novel] is about angels and devils and about how it's very difficult to establish ideas of morality in a world that has become so uncertain that it is difficult to even agree on what is happening. When one can't agree on a description of reality, it is very hard to agree on whether that reality is good or evil, right or wrong. Angels and devils are becoming confused ideas. . . . What is supposed to be angelic often has disastrous results, and what is supposed to be demonic is quite often something with which one must have sympathy. It [the novel] is an attempt to come to grips with a sense of the crumbling moral fabric or at least for the reconstruction of old simplicities. It is also about the attempt of somebody like myself, who is basically a person without a formal religion, to make some kind of

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accommodation with the renewed force of religion in the world; what it means, what the religious experience is.'

In other words, Rushdie was exploring the notion of our blended, hybridised, complex personalities, and what makes us what we are, and what inspires us to act the way we do – an attempt to come to grips with the disunities and discontinuities around us, to discover an inner moral core, binding our fabric. This was misinterpreted as an attack on a faith, and that interpretation has tended to cloud any meaningful discourse on the novel. As Rushdie would probably infer from another of his great novels, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, what he was saying was P2C2E, or a Process Too Complicated To Explain. Far easier for the imam, then, to proclaim: 'Death to Rushdie' for raising doubt – for his certainties must prevail.

To be sure, once the fatwa was declared, many authors, politicians, editors, and academics came to Rushdie's defence. The advocacy group Article 19, which was founded in 1987, proved not only its relevance, but also its integrity by standing up for the novelist during those difficult years. Rushdie has described those years of exile as his 'plague' years, when few wanted to associate with him. This was the time when bookshops were being threatened with bombs, and a few retailers decided not to stock the novel. (Some staff at retailers like B Dalton's in the US protested; they insisted that their management should not cave in.) Police on Indian streets shot at demonstrators, killing over a dozen people, some of whom wanted to march to the British Council library in the city of Rushdie's birth, then known as Bombay, and raze it, because they mistakenly thought the library carried copies of the book. I remember it vividly: as a young reporter I walked alongside that procession; I also spoke to police officers who had given the orders to shoot.

Elsewhere in the world, there were demonstrations in front of British embassies. Tragically, Hitoshi Igarashi, the Japanese translator of *The Satanic Verses*, was murdered. Ettore Capriolo, its Italian translator, was wounded in an attack, as was William Nygaard, its Norwegian publisher. That attack shook the senses of Oslo residents: driving me to his home one day in 2000, a former classmate of mine called Tore, an international investor who wishes he had more time to read good books, slowed his car near the spot where Nygaard was attacked, and shook his head as he told me: 'That was wrong, very wrong. How can anyone attack a publisher?'

India has the dubious honour of being the first country in the world to have banned *The Satanic Verses*. Without any sense of irony, the officials who banned the book helpfully suggested that the ban did not in any way

reflect on Rushdie's talents or stature as a writer. (Rushdie, with a sardonic sense of humour, thanked the bureaucrat for a kind review.)

Since then, 'me too' intolerance has grown significantly in India. Adherents of Islam are not the only ones demanding bans. In India, the right to be offended has taken a spectacular trajectory, with all sorts of litigants from small towns challenging people for their conduct. Politicians are imposing arbitrary bans on films, and vigilantes are attacking academic institutions and art galleries. The state does nothing. A lawyer sued Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty and Hollywood star Richard Gere after Gere kissed Shetty on her cheek at a concert in New Delhi – the affectionate peck in some way offended the lawyer's sensibility about being an Indian. (Several years earlier, actress Shabana Azmi was criticised for kissing Nelson Mandela on his cheek.) In December 2007, two state governments in India banned a film called *Aja Nach Le* ('Come, Let's Dance'), which marked the return of Bollywood star Madhuri Dixit to the big screen, because a song in that film ridiculed a particular community. In February 2008, a lavish production of *Jodhaa Akbar*, about the Mughal king Akbar, was banned in four states because their governments feared communities that felt they were misrepresented might turn violent. The Supreme Court of India later overturned the ban.

## The fatwa was the time to stand up for free speech, creativity and imagination

These governments anticipated violence because vigilantes have twice, in recent years, attacked institutions. In 2004, a mob of activists attacked the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, destroying valuable manuscripts, because an American academic had conducted research at the library while preparing his book on Shivaji, a local warrior-king. The book raised inconvenient questions about Shivaji. In 2007, Hindu activists attacked the Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda because it was exhibiting the work of an award-winning student – Chandramohan – who had depicted deities in the nude. And in early 2008, Hindu activists stormed the office of the head of the history department at the University of Delhi, because one of

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the professors had recommended an essay that suggested that the Hindu epic *Ramayana* had many different interpretations and variations.

The fatwa was the time to stand up, unequivocally, for free speech, free expression, creativity and imagination. It was not just about Rushdie, although he had become the poster boy for the cause, a role from which – to his great credit – he has never shirked, even if that has distracted critical attention from his work, perhaps distorting the understanding of his contribution to literature.

A roll call of those who blinked, then: in India, Khushwant Singh, himself never one to shun controversy, told Penguin India, as its editorial advisor, not to publish the book, because doing so would invite violent repercussions. In Britain, Germaine Greer refused to sign the petition supporting *The Satanic Verses*, because it was ‘about his own troubles’, adding that Rushdie was ‘a megalomaniac, an Englishman with a dark skin’. While not condoning Rushdie’s persecution, John le Carré called the novel an affront to Muslim sensibilities. He then added there was ‘no law in life or nature that says great religions may be insulted with impunity’. Edward de Bono, the lateral thinking guru, suggested that if Rushdie had the right to speak – and in the process offend some – then the reader had the right to feel offended. Roald Dahl, John Berger, Paul Johnson and Hugh Trevor-Roper thought writing the book was somehow Rushdie’s mistake and he had invited trouble.

Would they also blame the young girl wearing a miniskirt for attracting wolf whistles, if not a sexual assault, for inviting trouble?

The comparison with the miniskirt is not coincidental, nor facetious. As Rushdie noted in an essay subsequently, those who opposed his work were also against rock music, miniskirts and kissing in public. They were against individuals who stand out, who take charge of their own lives. (As Christopher Hitchens astutely noted after the failed bombs at London’s nightclubs that greeted Gordon Brown coming into office as Britain’s prime minister, the terrorists had targeted locations where young people gather, precisely because they objected to hedonistic liberalism).

Writers noted that danger: if *Brick Lane* has a message, it is of the gradual assertion of an immigrant woman’s identity, even in claustrophobic surroundings. Ali’s protagonist is a 19-year-old woman called Nazneen, who has come to London in an arranged marriage. Her husband wants her to stay at home and bear children. Ultimately, he leaves Britain, but she chooses to stay on. If anything, the predominantly male protesters against the filming were troubled by this portrait of an emancipated woman, because she threatened their hierarchy and control over their lives. ‘This is England,’ a

YASH CHOPRA  
PRESENTS



# MAA JAA CHALI

DIRECTED BY ANIL

MUSIC SALIM-SI

PRODUCED BY ADITYA CHO

SAHNI & RAVI SH MISHR



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friend, Razia, tells Nazneen. 'You can do whatever you like.' Ten years earlier, in *The Black Album*, Hanif Kureishi had warned us of what lay ahead if the fundamentalists were ignored. In *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie had presciently called that ghetto 'the city visible but unseen'.

No one was questioning a reader's right to feel offended by Rushdie's scepticism. The issue was what the offended person would do in response. You don't kill a chef who produces a bad meal. You don't tear up the movie screen when a film disappoints you. You don't demand your money back if a novel you buy turns out to be not to your liking. You switch the channel you don't like, you turn off the radio or you close the book. You don't go to that restaurant again. You move on.

And yet, such reasonable responses were considered irrelevant by the fundamentalists, and their liberal supporters felt it was wrong on Rushdie's part even to imagine an alternate universe. And why? Because doing so would offend some people, and they might act irrationally. In so doing, they were being hugely patronising about millions of Muslims whose main concerns in life are completely different from what self-nominated leaders of their faith may assert. How offensive that paternalism sounds to my many Muslim friends across all continents!

The very idea of curbing one's freedom over perceived offence was preposterous; it ran counter to the very notion of dialogue, argument and debate on which liberal, democratic, civilised societies were built. And yet, when the crunch came, a few Labour Party MPs marched in solidarity with bearded Muslims, protesting against Rushdie. Worse, Iqbal Sacranie claimed: 'Death, perhaps, is a bit too easy for him...his mind must be tormented for the rest of his life unless he asks for forgiveness to Almighty Allah.' To its shame, the Labour government knighted Sacranie before knighting Rushdie, indicating a peculiar sense of priorities.

The fatwa has made the taking of offence the norm. The beheading of a statue in London, the attack on a theatre in Birmingham, the killing of a filmmaker in Amsterdam, the assassination of a translator in Tokyo, the ransacking of a research institute in India have all occurred with relative impunity, because such attacks don't appear surprising anymore. We have come to expect that if someone writes or paints or imagines something that others find offensive, the offended party will take the law into their own hands and impose silence.

This should outrage us. Instead, some have been telling writers to think more pleasant thoughts, artists to curb their imagination, playwrights to tackle safer topics, and not provoke the beast within all communities and

religions. The next step will be to tell the student not to approach the Chinese tank commander or ask the Burmese monks to accept their fate and not confront the authorities.

When prison guards refused to give him a pencil or a notebook, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn began memorising the novel he wanted to write, while in the Soviet gulag. On the island of Buru, Pramoedya Ananta Toer did the same, and when he was finally released, the world was richer, with his *Buru Quartet*. They lived in extreme, closed societies, where words were precious, where words had to be smuggled in – and out. (I took several copies of Pramoedya's books to Indonesia during many visits there during the Suharto era, for friends in Jakarta who could not buy the banned books). In Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, after books are obliterated, people walk around an island, reciting great works of literature. When words are suppressed in one form, they emerge in another form – to keep books alive.

In *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, the Prince of Silence and the Foe of Speech is called Khattam-Shud, ruling a land called Chup (silence), which has a cult that promotes muteness. It is a land at peace, in harmony. But that outward stability conceals inner fragility. Such societies force people to live a lie: that their contrived cheer and forced harmony are superior. Open societies appear brittle and frail because they are cacophonous, where everyone can contradict everyone else, and where nothing is sacred. But, Rushdie wrote: 'All those arguments and debates, all that openness, had created powerful bonds of fellowship between them... The Chupwalas (those from the silent land) turned out to be a disunited rabble, suspicious and distrustful of one another. The land of Gup (talk) is bathed in endless sunshine, while over in Chup, it is always the middle of the night.'

Twenty years after the fatwa, it is time to move firmly on the side of noise and light, if we are not to continue to circumscribe our thoughts, watch our words, and swallow our meanings. The alternative is the middle of that dark night. □

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