

In the Light, and In the Shadows: Censored Writers in Independent India

Devika Sethi, IIT (Mandi)

Mini Chandran, *The Writer, The Reader and the State: Literary Censorship in India*, New Delhi: Sage, 2017, pp. xxxv + 190, Rs.695.

Are writers a cohesive community? And even if they are, can they be conceptualized as a marginalized community under any circumstances? Censorship – whether of the regulative (state, market, or mob imposed) or the constitutive (self-imposed) variety – is an act of attempted exclusion and/or excision that complicates our understanding of marginality itself. Writers who are global celebrities – Salman Rushdie and Taslima Nasreen, to mention two writers discussed extensively in the volume under review – are, by the act of censorship, relegated to the margins even as they occupy centre-stage in trans-national political dramas. Censorship enjoys a paradoxical relationship with modernity too: even as modernity bolsters state power by providing enhanced technologies of surveillance, yet other technologies facilitate subversion of censorship as proscribed material is circulated through new channels.

Academic research on censorship in India has so far been conducted primarily by historians (Gerald N. Barrier, Robert Darnton) and members of the legal profession (G. D. Khosla, Rajeev Dhavan, Gautam Bhatia). Mini Chandran's book, written from the perspective of literary studies is, therefore, a welcome addition to the field. Of the six chapters of the book, half are based mainly on a synthesis of, and the author's commentary on, studies by other scholars ('The Writer and the State: The Indian Literary Tradition', 'Banned in India: Books Denied to Indian Readers', and 'Of Shame and Silence: The Emergency, 1975-77'), whereas the other half are primary source research based ('Censorship Laws and Colonial Roots', 'The Bhasha Fights: Censorship in Regional Languages', and 'The "Democratization" of Censorship: Books and the Indian Public'). These sources include legal judgments, personal interviews and translations (by the author) of press reports in Malayalam newspapers.

The strength of the book lies in its focus on both English

language and regional languages. The chapter titled 'The Bhasha Fights' contains case studies of litigation featuring books in Marathi, Bengali, Tamil, Kannada and Malayalam ranging in time from 1962 till 2016. The author includes a wide variety of perspectives on artistic freedom: from Plato and Milton, to the Arthashastra and the Natyashastra, to Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault and back again. Inclusion of research by G. D. Khosla (Pornography and Censorship), Nivedita Menon (the First Amendment) and Neeti Nair (The Rangeela Rasool case) would have further enriched this book.

The author begins her study in ancient India, with a survey of the 'Kautilyan' and 'Bharatan' traditions with regard to the normative principles governing the relationship between artists (not writers alone) and the state. She defines the 'Kautilyan' attitude as one of haughty indifference to the arts, and the 'Bharatan' one as a sympathetic one. She compares and contrasts this with the position of artists vis-à-vis the state in ancient Greece. While the attempt to delve deep into Indian history to locate examples of censorship is commendable, it is questionable whether present day censors (very often judges asked to pronounce on the validity of bans) see themselves as links in the chain of historical continuity with the ancient Indian past. The discussion of censorship in medieval India only spans a couple of pages, itself a pointer to the paucity of concrete examples of state regulation of literature in the pre-modern, pre-colonial, period. Chandran's contention that the 'baffling lack of overt regulation of literature in pre-modern India' (p. xxix) was on account of internalization of norms governing aesthetic representation is a hypothesis that is interesting, but unproven, and, perhaps, un-provable. This does not really tell us much about the state of the arts (and the state-and-the-arts) in the ancient and medieval periods of Indian history. Since Chandran herself refers to 'an admittedly nebulous continuity in the literary practices of India from antiquity to medieval to contemporary times' (p. xxix), it is unclear why she chooses to devote a chapter to this discussion. This is not

to say that the discussion itself is not of value (it is, in fact, of interest and meticulously detailed and well-written) but merely to indicate that perhaps it did not belong to this particular book.

Chandran's book reveals the many forms in which 'marginality' has affected Indian writers since Independence and some of the forms are rather unexpected. For instance, she provides ample evidence of several prominent writers' and artists' active support of the Emergency (Amrita Pritam, Harivansh Rai Bachchan and M. F. Husain among others) as well as the deafening silence of most prominent writers of Kerala, for instance, precisely at a time when they were expected to protest the loudest. This is not, therefore, a book that peddles lazy stereotypes about heroic resistance by a community en masse. As Chandran puts it (referring to contemporary times), 'Writers have abjured their responsibility and are more like the court poets of yore who did not speak disturbing truths to power. This could also explain why there have been relatively few cases of governmental control on creative writing and writers in India recently; the government has only bowed to public demands for more control or censorship of writing'. (p. 31).

Another form of marginality Chandran identifies is the indifference of the state to literary creations unless they are deemed 'seditious' or 'blasphemous'; in the latter scenario, she posits, pressure groups and mobs have taken on the onus of banning-by-intimidation. Marginality is thus interpreted in this book in various ways: marginality-as-silencing (the conventional understanding of censorship), marginality-as-silence (of writers), and perhaps the cruelest of them all: marginality-as-indifference (of the state, towards writers). This leaves the field open for what she quite rightly terms the "democratization" of censorship'; as Chandran puts it (referring to mob censorship): 'In that sense, India seems to be functioning like a true democracy at least in the matter of literary censorship where the will of the people is being executed for the people *by* the elected representatives of the people' (p. 150; italics in the original).

Although the title of the book promises inclusion of the reader in the discussion (in whose name, after all, most

books are banned), the creature makes no appearance in this book apart from a brief discussion of theories of reception, and the paternalistic attitude of the Indian state towards that shadowy (if not mythical) abstraction: the 'average reader'. The focus is firmly on writers and on the state. Censorship studies pose a dilemma for its practitioner: should one merely describe and analyse? Should one take clear personal positions on contemporary controversies? Or should one prescribe solutions to free speech vs. hate speech conundrums? This book is on strongest ground when it attempts the first two, but on weak ground when it attempts the last. The author's contention (following A. K. Ramanujan) that India is a context-sensitive society and that censorship therefore ought to be context specific is something that is easy to agree with, and impossible to enforce in an exercise as subjective as censorship.

References

- Barrier, Gerald N. (1976). *Banned: Controversial Literature and Political Control in British India 1907-1947*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Bhatia, Gautam (2016). *Offend, Shock or Disturb: Free Speech under the Indian Constitution*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Darnton, Robert (2014). *Censors at Work: How States Shaped Literature*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Dhavan, Rajeev (2008). *Publish and Be Damned: Censorship and Intolerance in India*. New Delhi: Tulika.
- Dhavan, Rajeev (1987). *Only the Good News: On the Law of the Press in India*, New Delhi: Manohar.
- Khosla, G. D. (1976). *Pornography and Censorship in India*. New Delhi: Indian Book Company.
- Menon, Nivedita (2004, 1 May). 'Citizenship and the Passive Revolution: Interpreting the First Amendment', *Economic & Political Weekly*, 39 (18): 1812-19.
- Nair, Neeti (2013). 'Beyond the "Communal" 1920s: The Problem of Intention, Legislative Pragmatism, and the Making of Section 295A of the Indian Penal Code', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 50 (3): 317-340.