

The Times of India, Mumbai, 19 Feb 2008

## Stand And Deliver

*It is the government's duty  
to protect liberal values*

Sumit Ganguly

**Bloomington:** India, quite justifiably, likes to promote its democratic credentials. It holds regular elections which are mostly free and fair, its press is unfettered, the higher echelons of its judiciary have made contributions to modern jurisprudence and civil and personal rights, except under conditions of great duress, find constitutional protection. Yet its leaders, while loudly proclaiming the country's democratic achievements, seem singularly weak-kneed when faced with the possibility of illiberal protest or the possible defection of a voting constituency.

It is particularly tragic that this was brought home yet again in the 60th year of the nation's independence. The professedly secular UPA government shamelessly caved in to the threats from some obscurantist members of India's Muslim community when French President Nicolas Sarkozy proposed awarding the Simone de Beauvoir Prize to Taslima Nasreen during his state visit on Republic Day.

The UPA government's record, not to mention that of the communist regime in West Bengal, has been nothing short of appalling. Taslima had to flee from exile in Kolkata because of the thuggish behaviour of some segments of the Muslim community of the city. Subsequently, the UPA government hustled her off to some undisclosed location ostensibly out of concerns for her own safety. Worse still, an otherwise sensible and seasoned minister for external affairs, Pranab Mukherjee, felt compelled to publicly warn the hapless writer that she must avoid public commentary on issues that might "hurt the sentiments of the people".

In a democracy, free speech occasionally involves hurting the "sentiments of the people". Otherwise all speech would become circum-spect, boring and eventually deadening. There is nothing that Taslima has uttered or written that could not be said about another faith. Her views may offend some members of the

Muslim community and they are at complete liberty to disagree, debate and argue with them with as much intellectual vigour that they can muster. They may even verbally condemn her remarks as well as her writings. However, in a country that professes to be a liberal democracy, they simply do not have the right either to call for her extradition, to threaten her physically or resort to street violence to hasten her imminent departure.

The failure of the West Bengal government to forthrightly rein in the Muslim zealots who ran amok on the streets of Kolkata baying for her blood was nothing short of cowardly and smacked of the most pathetic resort to political exigency. Some commentators, in fact, have argued that the regime in West Bengal allowed



the demonstrations to proceed apace in a crude attempt to divert attention away from Nandigram.

The responses to this form of unreasonable and irresponsible behaviour both on the part of the country's left-wing intellectuals and the central government has been craven. Left-wing intellectuals, who never lose an opportunity to berate the obvious shortcomings of Indian secularism have, with marked exceptions, maintained a stony silence on this issue. Their silence speaks volumes about their conduct. Two issues, that their deafening silence raises, are salient. On the one hand they fear that any criticism of the nation's largest religious minority could strengthen the forces of resurgent Hindutva. On the other, they have always betrayed a curious propensity

to overlook minority communalism. Such behaviour is both intellectually untenable and morally reprehensible.

It is intellectually flawed because such silence actually bolsters the position of the Hindu zealots. They can easily take potshots at this form of selective criticism of loathsome behaviour. It is morally dubious because it undermines one of the central tenets of democratic discourse namely the defence of ideas that may be offensive to some members of the community. Over time, the failure to take a firm, unyielding and clear-cut position on issues of this order will help corrode whatever moral authority that the intellectual Left commands.

The UPA government's choices and actions are equally indefensible. It has failed to show that it has sufficient courage to stand up to a small number of well-organised thugs who should face the full brunt of the law of the land. Instead, it has chided the victim of their outrageous behaviour and has curbed her right of free expression. In the process they have trampled on the principles of free speech, they have given comfort to the intolerant and they have provided political fodder to the Hindu right. In sum, their policies abjectly fail the tests of both moral courage and political astuteness.

It is time for the government to dispense with its pathetic equivocation, assume a firm stance against intellectual thuggery and grant her political asylum. Only then will it have redeemed

the moral high ground and demonstrated its commitment to the principles of liberal democracy. Any posture that falls short of this principled position will simply corrode the very foundations of what most Indians so cherish: their hard-won rights of democratic speech, however unpalatable to some.

Finally, it does no good to suggest that Taslima, a foreigner, does not enjoy the same rights and privileges of an Indian citizen. If India cannot uphold the rights of someone who has sought solace and refuge from persecution in its midst, it will soon be unable to protect the rights of its own citizenry from the howls of shrill mobs. The time to act is now.

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