

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Anniversary of the Fatwa and the Freedom of Expression

It is 8 years this March now since the ayatollahs of Iran issued a fatwa - a religious decree - which demands the death of Salman Rushdie and others associated with the publication of his novel, *The Satanic Verses*.

The death sentence on Rushdie has been reaffirmed many times. In June 1990, a senior official of the Iranian Foreign Ministry said: "Nobody can revoke or amend the fatwa of the Imam Khomeini; it cannot be modified." In May 1993, the Speaker of the Iranian Majlis declared: "The verdict of death against Salman Rushdie is irrevocable.....his execution is the duty of Moslems throughout the world." In September 1996, the Iranian government newspaper stated: "Despite the wishes of the supporters of Satan, the apostate Rushdie will always be condemned to death and made to pay."

The 15 Khordad Foundation in Iran offered a bounty for the killing of Rushdie and in 1994, announced an increase of the bounty and promised, in addition, "necessary, including financial, support to all those who may come to any loss or harm in their support of the Imam's fatwa".

So Salman Rushdie remains in hiding but alive and well, unlike William Nygard, the Norwegian publisher of *The Satanic Verses*, who was attacked by unidentified gunmen and wounded in October 1993. Investigations have not established any reason for the attack except the publication. The translator of the novel into Japanese was killed; once again investigations have not revealed any motive for the murder other than the connection with *The Satanic Verses*.

The International Rushdie Defence Campaign has continued to lobby governments, particularly those in the West, to exert political, diplomatic and economic pressure on Iran to have the fatwa lifted. These governments have chosen to adopt a programme of what is called quiet diplomacy for this purpose, not including any form of economic pressure. So far to no result. It is not that they are unaware of the implications of the fatwa.

Salman Rushdie was awarded in November 1992, by the Swedish Academy, the Kurt Tucholsky prize given to writers in exile. Swedish Deputy Prime Minister Bengt Westerberg said at the ceremony:

Freedom of expression is a means of power. Thus every ruler who seeks to insulate himself from the threat of losing his power, has as his prime objective to close the rooms of the voices, to sew up the lips of his people. And the boldest and the most brilliant - who stand first in line both in the use of the freedom of speech and in the defence of it - must be removed

or silenced. When these people are persecuted - when you are persecuted, Mr. Rushdie - it is an attack upon us all.

It is our good fortune that the fatwa does not appear to have affected Rushdie's imagination, as is witnessed by his new book, *The Moor's Last Sigh*.

As far as Sri Lanka is concerned, *The Satanic Verses* still remains unavailable. The Customs, acting on government directions, is vigilant in preventing the entry of the book into the country. A few Muslims are happy, but the enormous damage that actions like this do to the fabric of human rights in our society is largely ignored. Rights are still not a matter of principle; they are observed or violated as demanded by political expediency.

Another Kind of Anniversary

March marks another anniversary - the winning of the World Cup for limited overs cricket by the team from Sri Lanka.

Cricket has now become an indispensable part of South Asian life. Barclay's *World of Cricket* begins its essay on cricket in India thus: "If the American abroad is puzzled by the English attachment to cricket, he is dumbfounded by the Indian passion for it". They might just as well have said South Asian.

The game has been so internalized by Indian (South Asian) players and spectators that Ashish Nandy, in his delightful book *The Tao of Cricket* says that "Cricket is an Indian game accidentally discovered by the British".

So, to host the World Cup in 1996 and then to have the team from the smallest and least favoured country in South Asia winning it was certainly something to be celebrated.

But this almost obsessive concern with cricket has its downside. As was evident in the match between India and Pakistan, cricket has become intimately enmeshed with nationalism; the game did become, in George Orwell's phrase "war minus the shooting".

Cricket has indeed become the surrogate for war; success or defeat in a cricket match for either India or Pakistan has become the test of national superiority.

It has been argued that the countries of South Asia have very little cause for celebration in other fields - riven as they are by barbaric ethnic conflicts even as the larger parts of their populations are mired in poverty. Cricket is one thing they have learned to do well and success in cricket must then compensate them for all their other failings. Such an analysis is probably too facile. But the opprobrium heaped upon the Pakistani players when they were defeated in the

match against India at Bangalore and the attacks on the Indian players when they lost to Sri Lanka in the semi-final at Calcutta do illustrate the weight of nationalism that cricket carries. Defeat is tantamount to a severe bruising of the nationalist ego. There are of course other reasons as well in this age of media hype and multinational sponsorship of sports.

As Mike Marqusee says in his very entertaining book - *War Minus the Shooting* -

The over-reaction in both Pakistan and India to elimination from the World Cup revealed not only the depth of feeling the game engenders in the sub-continent but the forces that threaten to disfigure it there. The Indian mood swing, from elation in Bangalore to enraged despair in Calcutta, would be categorized by psychoanalysts as a symptom of paranoid schizophrenia. And the virulent manner in which the erstwhile gods of Pakistani cricket were turned upon by their devotees displayed the same syndrome. Both Azhar and Wasim came under heavy fire from their home supporters and both were accused of selling the World cup to gambling

interests. The accusations were groundless, but, in the era of hawala, it was not surprising to find cricket fans in both India and Pakistan ready, almost eager, to believe that their heroes would sell their country for a fistful of rupees. For their own reasons the media, the sponsors and the advertisers had turned these fallible human beings into super-heroes who, unlike the rest of us, could never commit blunders or experience failure. No wonder the backlash was so intense.

However, this phenomenon of obsessive nationalism and the use of cricket as a surrogate for other things are present in other regions too. C.L.R. James, in his fine book *Beyond a Boundary* said: "West Indians crowding into tests bring with them the whole past history and future hopes of the islands".

Nevertheless, cricket is good game to play as well as to watch. It has recently acquired some nationalist characteristics in Sri Lanka too. These are deftly analyzed in the article by Quadri Ismail that we publish in this issue. We applaud and support his attempt to carve out a space for cricket that is unmarred by nationalism.

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Ranji's place in the annals of Indian cricket is a more complex affair. He allegedly believed at one time that true competitive cricket could be played by Indians only in England, because in colonial India one could not afford to defeat the English nor could the English afford to lose. Though honoured by Indian nationalists as the father of English cricket, as the cricketer who first showed that the English could be beaten at their own game, the prince remained through most of his life a blatant apologist of the raj.....

He, however, was the darling of the English society in England. And he reciprocated this adoration. His only book on cricket was dedicated 'by Her Gracious Permission to her Majesty The Queen Empress' and even the description of an imaginary game in the book is peopled only with players having English names. But though he was widely respected, it is doubtful if Ranji as a person ever won the full acceptance of even the cricket-loving gentry of England. They admired him mainly as a gentleman cricketer of esoteric background, preferring to ignore the personal and cultural experiences he lived with or tried to transcend. All the biographies and biographical essays on Ranji by his English contemporaries show a singular insensitivity to his loves, hates, fears, hopes and anxieties. He emerges from them a two-dimensional man: a cricketer and a gentleman. It is said that once when playing a test he hit a mighty six off an Australian bowler. An English spectator proudly clapped and turned to the Australian sitting next to him said 'He is a prince, you know. Do you have a prince in your team?' The Australian had to admit, rather shamefacedly, that they did not. The very next ball Ranji was clean bowled. This time the Englishman muttered under his teeth 'bloody nigger'. All his life Ranji had to live out the reality of his apocryphal story. The clapping and the pride was genuine; so was the swearing Ranji heard the former; he pretended that he had not heard the latter.

Cricket, Nationalism and the Banishments of a Prince

By
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