

## NOTES AND COMMENTS

### Rights vs. Fundamentalist Pressure: Another Chapter in the Case of Salman Rushdie

This is another story of the ruling class succumbing to narrow and short-term political interests and abandoning in the process principles that might have helped to build a democratic polity.

The British Broadcasting Corporation had decided to make a five hour television series, tentatively entitled "Saleem's Story", from Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children*. The first choice for location shooting was of course India. The Government of India refused permission to shoot the film in any part of the country; the reason given was that it might exacerbate Hindu - Muslim tensions and lead to communal conflict.

*Midnight's Children* was a brilliantly creative exploration of the first 30 odd years of India's independent history - from the freedom envisaged by Nehru to the imposition of an emergency by his daughter, Indira Gandhi. Through the lives of Saleem and others born on that midnight so evocatively hailed by Nehru, Rushdie traces the decay and degeneration of India's democratic ideals. He performed a similar service for Pakistan in *Shame*. The ruling groups in both India and Pakistan certainly have no love for Rushdie. So the ban in India was in a sense to be expected.

The BBC's next choice for location shooting was Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan Foreign Ministry was approached and on October 6th., the Ministry replied, under the signature of Mr. Kiriella, Deputy Minister, that "the Government of Sri Lanka has no objection to your filming "Saleem's Story" in Sri Lanka". The letter went on to say that formal approval would have to be obtained from the National Film Corporation, the legal authority.

The Foreign Ministry was not unaware that some Muslims in Sri Lanka might raise objections to the filming, but thought that such objections could be contained. This is apparent from one paragraph of the Ministry letter:

I am confident that we on our own would be able to neutralize any prejudices the Islamic groups in Sri Lanka may have on this issue. We have already taken some steps in this direction and I feel there is no reason to be pessimistic.

The use of the word "prejudices" to describe Muslim feelings is quite interesting; it was also prove accurate, even though the Ministry's confidence in its own ability to deal with such prejudices was proved to be misplaced.

The National Film Corporation gave formal permission to the BBC on the 13th of October, subject to certain conditions, such as that no shooting was to be carried out in places of religious importance or in security sensitive areas.

The BBC accordingly went ahead with preliminary work. It is understood that by early November, locations and actors had been selected and work on some sets was under way. Everything was in place for shooting to commence in January 1998.

This matter was first raised in Parliament by Mr. Azver, a Muslim UNP MP, during the adjournment debate on the 8th of August when it had become known that Sri Lanka was under consideration as the location. He said that the Government of India had "refused permission to shoot this film in any part of India on the ground that the script contains several portions that tend to cause tensions and frictions between Hindus and Muslims." He then called on the government to disallow permission, alleging that this would "prevent any communal disharmony, acrimony and misunderstanding among the various ethnic groups that inhabit this island." Dr. Pieris, to whom the question had been addressed, took the normal step of asking for a month's time to answer.

Mr. Azver's reasoning was faulty; there has never been in this country the kind of feeling that stokes Hindu-Muslim discord in India; there was no ground for believing that the shooting of the film could create that kind of friction. Another part of his speech reveals the real reason for opposition: "Salman Rushdie had earned notoriety by authoring that infamous book 'Satanic Verses' defaming and defiling the personality of the Holy Prophet of Islam (Sal), which evoked international outrage against him, resulting in him being declared an apostate by the world of Islam, passing even the death sentence on him".

So, obviously, the opposition is to the author rather than to the particular novel. Mr. Azver, claiming to speak on behalf of the Muslims of Sri Lanka, says that Rushdie is an apostate and by implication, agrees with the Iranian sentence of death. That the Iranian sentence also provoked world wide outrage among all who value freedom of expression is something that Mr. Azver does not recognize.

The next public act was an announcement made to the media by Mr. Moulana, Minister of Provincial Councils and Local Government, on the 13th of November. He said that the President had agreed to withdraw permission given for the filming on the basis of representations jointly made to her by him and two other Muslim Minister, Messrs. Fowzie and Ashroff.

The exact nature of these representations has not been made clear. Nevertheless, in his own statement, Mr. Moulana says that Rushdie is an apostate, implying that all his works are anathema.

The Presidential Secretariat has now written to the BBC withdrawing the permission originally granted and the BBC crew has packed up and gone home.

What sense does this Presidential decision, which has been hailed by Muslims as a "magnanimous gesture", make? The novel is available in the bookshops and has been widely read and acclaimed. It is unlikely to make inter-ethnic relations any worse than they are. It is only likely to throw serious doubt on the government's professions to honour freedoms of expression. It can make sense only on the basis that it was not in the interests of the government's immediate short-term political agenda to miss this opportunity of placating Muslim leaders.

Of course, this is not the first instance that Muslim opinion, as represented by these leaders, has been placated. When Tasleema Nasreen's 'Lajja' was banned in Bangladesh, the UNP government was pressured, specifically by the same Mr. Azver, a member of the UNP then as now, into preventing that book from entering Sri Lanka. When the infamous fatwa was passed on Rushdie, similar pressure was exerted to prevent 'Satanic Verses' from coming in to the country. In their actions, these Muslim leaders betray an intolerance that totally ignores the rights of other groups in the country; they are also imputing to their community an arrogance which we are sure it does not possess.

We note with appreciation that some Muslims have spoken out against this display of intolerance. Mr. A.H.Macan-Markar wrote in the Sunday Leader of 16th. November:

But that is to assume that all Muslims subscribe to the outlook of Mullahism that has hijacked Islam today, and, as a result, given the faith an intolerant face. It would be worth mentioning here that when Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini issued the fatwa on Salman Rushdie, there were a number of Muslims round the world who found it quite appalling. They however were drowned out in the commotion of that period. Just as it has happened, here, now.

Some Muslims are exulting over their success and particularly of the fact that its leaders acted unitedly on behalf of Muslim interests, irrespective of party affiliations. But whether these leaders really represent Muslim opinion is questionable, since the number of Muslims who have publicly opposed the ban is large.

There is an ironic footnote to this kind of attitude. Dr. Martin Lings, a British scholar of Islamic philosophy and religion was recently presented with the Mohammed Sahabdeen Award. In his acceptance speech, according to the newspapers, he "called Sri Lanka a model country for religious co-existence where four of the world's major faiths exist in harmony.... the Holy Koran had advocated the retention of different cultural, racial and group differences...diversity was the product of creation." The leaders of the Sri Lankan Muslim community do not appear to agree with this vision of Islam.

As we have stated in the editorial, our governments are heavily dominated by concerns of state power: engaged in that quest, they

are proving incapable of resisting narrow and bigoted pressures that undermine all other efforts to move towards a democracy that will support and sustain all fundamental rights.

## Jaffna

Over two years have gone since the Jaffna peninsula was brought under government control and over a year since the people, forcibly evacuated by the LTTE, have returned. The peninsula is now reckoned to have over 400,000 persons.

We publish in this issue three articles concerned with various aspects of life in Jaffna today. The first concerns a serious problem that will have to be taken into consideration in planning the long-term reconstruction of Jaffna - the availability of sufficient fresh water. This is an ecological problem that was beginning to be felt even before the conflict disrupted the economy and life of the peninsula. It needs to be addressed in planning future developments.

The second is an impressionist account of a visit to Jaffna. It highlights some of the still meager efforts being made to win over the people of Jaffna to an acceptance of the political solution that has been worked out by the PA government. It also indicates that, despite years of conflict in which the idea of a homogeneous Tamil community has developed and taken shape, earlier forms of segmentation such as caste still remain powerful.

The third, by the indefatigable University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), portrays the difficulties that face the people of Jaffna in forming and giving expression to their own voice. The government has put some limits on information flows. The LTTE continues to be a presence, an ideological coercion, that stands in their way.

All these articles have one point: the need for relief and rehabilitation in the short-run, the need for restoring infrastructure and for reconstruction that can ensure a sustainable economy, the need for a civil administration with which the people can interact autonomously, the need for an atmosphere in which the people can think freely. They also illustrate the complexity of the situation.

The satisfaction of all these needs is a daunting task; yet, success in that task is an essential part of the process of reintegrating the Tamil people within a united state.

As we go to press, the government has announced arrangements to hold elections to local government authorities in the Jaffna and Kilinochchi districts including the Municipality of Jaffna. Elections will be difficult to hold with the area still under military control and little civil administration in place. Increasing LTTE infiltration might hamper the emergence of candidates and the conduct of election campaigns. That armed Tamil parties working with the military will be among the contestants will add to fears of manipulation. Nevertheless, in spite of all these factors that might militate against a free and fair election, they can be helpful if they result in the emergence of some kind of democratic opinion in Jaffna and in

working towards a political resolution. For this, what must not happen is the kind of election that Jaffna saw last, the district councils in elections.

### State Intervention in Cultural Activities

We have referred in earlier issues of *Pravada* to the attempts by the government to set up some statutory bodies dealing with various aspects of cultural activity. These bodies were, according to Bills presented to Parliament, to be controlled by political nominees and bureaucrats responsible to the Minister in charge of culture; they were thus seen by most cultural workers as instruments of control rather than as bodies that would promote and assist cultural activities. They were also seen as a strengthening and further legitimization of the current activities of the Ministry of Culture and the Department of Cultural Affairs; these are also bureaucratically controlled and involve very little consultation with actual practitioners.

The Minister gave a patient hearing to a delegation representing cultural activists in various fields on more than one occasion and listened to their apprehensions. According to some members of the delegation, the Minister was far more sensitive to the issues raised than his bureaucrats.

The Ministry has now announced that the Bills will not be proceeded with.

This is a small victory; but the result can be more dangerous in the long run. A withdrawal of the bills and carrying on as they are doing now can be stultifying for the development of cultural activities.

All those concerned with the arts and cultural activities admit that, given the exigencies of the present situation in Sri Lanka, some intervention is necessary. They believe that the state has a crucial role to play in developing the infra-structure for cultural activities and in funding artistic activity. However, these activities must be guided by bodies that are independent of government and at a critical distance from political processes; their policies and strategies should be developed in consultation with artists and practitioners and should concentrate not only on preservation of what is seen as indigenous but on the development of cultural practices consonant with the needs of a modernizing multi-ethnic polity.

Cultural activists are now asking the government to live up to the rhetoric of its election manifesto. This emphasized "the importance of culture as a necessary dimension of total development" and said that "the autonomy of arts and literature" will be respected with "minimum of interference by the state but with substantial assistance."

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**A statement protesting at the withdrawal of permission to the BBC to film a televised version of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* has been issued by 122 Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim intellectuals, artists and human rights activists.**

The statement reads:

### The BBC and *Midnight's Children*

We, the undersigned, are deeply perturbed by the decision communicated to the BBC by the Presidential Secretariat withdrawing the permission originally granted to them to film a television serial based on Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in Sri Lanka.

We feel that the original decision was correct and that its withdrawal is an arbitrary decision resulting from unwanted pressure by a small group of Muslim politicians who have sought to ponder to bigotry.

We urge the government to rescind this unfortunate decision, and, adhering to the liberal principles of freedom of expression enshrined in the constitution and to which the government has repeatedly affirmed respect, permit the BBC to go ahead with the film.