

Theatre Censorship: The Gujarat Experience

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In this age of contradictions, the initiative taken by the 'Campaign against Censorship' is not just welcome, but also necessary, both for the freedom of artists and cultural practitioners as well as for the health of our society, and to realise the democratic principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Contradictions may be social, economic or political - but it is only art and culture that can be the key of understanding these contradictions. It is art and culture that can take us to the heart of the contradictions and also, become the means to end the struggle.

The question is - who holds the key? If those classes that wield power and the administrative machinery use art and culture as a *lathi* under the guise of maintaining "law and order", then we will steadily move towards a fascist and autocratic system. The resistance to oppression, injustice and discriminatory processes within the social and economic structures will be weakened. But what if the key were to be placed in the hands of the people? We can see the consequences in the modern societies of developed countries. We know that even there, there are certain questions about the political and economic systems on which people's "freedom of expression" has been curtailed. But those are the compulsions of today's capitalist conditions.

If we stop here today and turn our gaze towards our country and society's social, political and economic reality, it is clear that 56 years after attaining freedom, the struggle for "freedom of expression" is still a long way from achieving what it means in societies of the developed countries.

First of all, we have to take this struggle to the people. We have to take it to their hearts and minds.

As a cultural practitioner, it is with this belief and hope that I join this campaign begun by our comrades who make documentary films. My field is

theatre and “theatre censorship” is a reality that turns an artist like me into an activist. In the last 20 years, some of us in Gujarat have been engaged in a struggle against theatre censorship. I want to share some important experiences from this struggle. But first, let’s understand what theatre censorship is and how it operates.

The British government enacted the Theatre Performances Act 1876 for purposes of theatre censorship. Even after attaining independence the laws of the imperial administration were incorporated into our democratic constitution, more or less the way they were. Under this law, the government can stop the performances that –

- 1 Attempt to provoke violence or violent rebellion against a government established by law
- 2 Incite a person to commit murder or other acts of violence
- 3 Distract any member of the armed or police forces from discharging his duty/loyalty, or prevent enrolment in the forces or attempt to spread indiscipline in the forces
- 4 Spread hatred among the different communities or classes that reside in the country or attempt to dishonour the nation or any religious community
- 5 Plays those are improper or obscene

Under British rule, the police censored plays. In independent India, this continued for a while. Then, in Gujarat and Maharashtra, the Theatre Censor Board was set up. The board comprises a government appointed committee of experts but it is one or more members of the committee who censor the script of plays submitted to the Board for approval. Until you have the censor certificate from this Board, you cannot get permission from the police to perform. We should make a note of the fact that although plays are an audio-visual art form, even today the theatre censor board censors plays based on their scripts. So, this is actually not censorship, but pre-censorship.

The police Act which censors plays is enacted across all the states in India but it is only in Gujarat and Maharashtra that the Censor Board has been established

and it functions with great alertness. That too, to stop plays which are of a democratic and progressive nature. In 1984, for the first time, voices were raised against theatre censorship in Gujarat. And the *Gujarat State Censorship Abolition Committee* was set up on the initiative of young theatre practitioners like us. As a part of this, a struggle against theatre censorship was launched. The immediate context was a play, "*The Other Side of History*" that shed light on the life, beliefs and work of Shaheed Bhagat Singh. I had written that play and more than eighty artists had worked on the production. The Censor Board asked for cuts in two important scenes. One scene was about the conflict within the Congress leadership on the Gandhi-Irwin pact and what the common people of the country thought about it. The second scene had a conversation between three senior British officials which referred to Viceroy Irwin's plan of trapping Gandhi and the Congress, while deciding the date on which Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru would be hanged. The fact is that Gandhiji did fall into that trap. He had an emergency meeting with Irwin and requested that the date for the hanging of the three revolutionaries be changed. Irwin succeeded in his plan and Gandhiji agreed to his proposal of hanging the three revolutionaries a day before the date that had been decided.

We met separately with the officials and members of the Censor Board with all the evidence that proved the facts of these two scenes. They all had only one thing to say - the facts presented in the play were undoubtedly true. But Gandhiji is the Father of the Nation and he could not be criticized in the play.

The play's performance was stalled for about two months. During this period, the *Gujarat State Censorship Abolition Committee* was formed which threw an open challenge to the government and the Censor Board. It declared that the play would be performed at a public auditorium on Aug 6, 1984 without a single cut asked for by the Censor Board. The government was free to take any action it wanted to.

The play was performed in that very auditorium on that very day, without a single cut. In an auditorium with a seating capacity of 1200, more than 2000 people sat through the four and a half hour long play. Government officials, some members of the censor board and the police were all present in the hall. Nobody took any action. During the debate surrounding this play, some people with blind faith in Gandhi criticised the play without seeing it or reading the script. One young Gandhian theatre critic went so far as to say that after *Operation Blue Star*, the artists who had insisted on performing the play were in some way connected to the Khalistani terrorists.

In 1990, the Garage Studio Theatre group adapted Franz Kafka's "The Trial" into a play. The Censor Board expressed its bias and made some suggestions in a scene of the script. We revived the *Gujarat State Censorship Abolition Committee*. The Committee organised a special show of the play and invited some members of the Censor Board, artists, activists and intellectuals. After the play, there was an open discussion on the cuts demanded by the Censor Board. The discussion embarrassed the Censor Board officials into apologizing and retracting their demand for the cuts.

This time, the *Gujarat State Censorship Abolition Committee* did not stop here. It continued the debate on theatre censorship with the government and civil society, through meetings and seminars in different fora. We began to get support from different sections of the cultural community in Gujarat. Then the governments of Gujarat and Maharashtra tried to break the struggle by holding out the temptation of a huge rebate in Entertainment Tax for theatre tickets. The support for the struggle immediately started to wane. Finally, in 1993, the *Gujarat State Censorship Abolition Committee* filed a petition in the Gujarat High Court, challenging the legality of the theatre censor board. The hearings continue even today. No decision has yet been taken*.

Once the petition was filed in the High Court, again the *Gujarat State Censorship Abolition Committee* began to get scattered. Theatre work began to

slow down like in other parts of the country. During this period, in 1997-98, the state government of that time amended the rules of the censor board to exercise greater control over the censorship issue. Through the new amendments, a Censorship Committee was set up in each district.

Then happened the Gujarat Genocide 2002-the naked dance by fascist forces. The extreme limits of communal madness. Many cultural, political and economic questions emerged for Gujarat and the entire country from that. Questions that challenged what we'd been fighting for, for many years.

Among the many initiatives in Gujarat that sought answers to these questions, an important one was '*Samvedan Cultural Programme*'. This was a cultural programme begun by artists, cultural practitioners and voluntary organisations, believing in the democratic values and working to resist cultural fascism. The programme simultaneously took up the task of sensitizing people about cultural forms and of looking at cultural interventions, in the context of important issues confronting society. It was decided that Youth Cultural Cadres would be formed from communities- oppressed and marginalized, from a socio-economic perspective. So, in 2003, under this programme, 20 Dalit Muslim young men and women were chosen from Ahmedabad's working class and communally sensitive areas that were considered, for a one year sensitisation initiative.

In 2003, the Sabarmati River Front programme began in Ahmedabad. More than one lakh people from 81 poor settlements were to be uprooted from both sides of the Sabarmati. *Samvedan* decided to prepare a proscenium play, clarifying the links between the displacement under this development scheme and what the poor of these settlements had undergone during the 2002 genocide. Well-known poet and writer of Gujarat, Dr. Saroop Dhruv wrote a new play - "*Listen to What the River Says.*"

The first show of the play was announced on Feb.6, 2005. The script had been submitted to the censor board on Dec 30, 2004. On the evening of February 3rd,

Samvedan received a letter from the censor board. The board had cut more than 30 percent of the script and had given a warning that the play could not be performed until the script was rewritten and submitted again for censoring. *Samvedan* decided once again to launch a struggle for freedom of expression.

On Feb 4th, *Samvedan* performed the play in front of the media and raised important questions about the behaviour of the government and the censor board. On Feb 4th and 5th, the play was performed before a few invited guests. On Feb 6th, the authorities of the auditorium that we had booked for the public performance expressed difficulty in handing over the auditorium without police permission. That very day, a meeting was held outside the hall and a signature campaign against censorship was launched.

We had anticipated that the censor board would reject the script. Very few would have been unaware of the ways of the Gujarat government in 2002. The reports that we were receiving from the censor board from January itself were also clear. We had started preparations for the struggle from January itself. Many artists and filmmakers who had come for the Mumbai Resistance 2004 and WSF had sent in their signatures in advance protesting against the stoppage of the performance of *'Listen to what the river says'*.

But this time, our struggle confronted not just the Theatre Censor Board and the Gujarat government. We also had to face those fascist forces, over the past few years which had turned Gujarat into a laboratory for communal-fascist politics and those sections of Gujarat's civil society that had been saffronised. And on the third side there was a large section of Gujarat's civil society that had retreated into a culture of silence, after the 2002 genocide. We tried to revive the *Gujarat State Censorship Abolition Committee* but not succeeded. The struggle received little support from artists as well. From a well-known organization, *Samvedan* had hired a room for training purposes. During that period, *Samvedan* forced to leave the room. According to the organisation, *Samvedan* was working against the government. The campaign has subsided

for a long, but even today, no organisation is willing to provide a room on hire for *Samvedan's* cultural wing/cadre.

Despite all this, the struggle continues. Some political activists, artists and organisations in Baroda sat on a *dharna* where *Samvedan* presented songs and some scenes from that play. Support was gathered through an online petition from across the country and the world. The full play was performed at a national seminar on Arts & Activism, organised by the Fine Arts Department of MS University. There was also a public performance of the play in Ahmedabad. The National Forum for Housing Rights and Chatri (an organization working with those affected and displaced by the Musi river scheme in Hyderabad) organised a show of the play in Hyderabad. In this way, discussion on theatre censorship and the play continued for three months.

So these are a few important experiences of the 20 year long campaign against theatre censorship in Gujarat. From 1984 till today, I can only see one alternative to censorship - that there should be no censorship for art, literature and culture. Like literature, theatre artists should be free to exhibit their work, when it is ready, without any hurdles in society. If society or the government has any problems with what is said, there are laws in the constitution and these are invoked to file cases against works of literature. The same can be done for film or theatre and let the court decide.

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*(*the high court had given the decree against the petition filed)*