

Alarming erosion of intellectual and artistic freedom in India



Sanal Edamaruku

I feel worried about India's future. There is an alarming erosion of intellectual and artistic freedom in my country.

The fate of Kamal Haasan, great actor and rationalist, is yet another case in point. I heard his emotional statement the other day, considering exile as his last resort to further unfold his creative talent. I feel pained.

He said: "I have no religion, no caste, perhaps no money now. But I have my talent... I have nothing to lose, so I may as well choose... If I don't have a place here, I will find a place without religion. But if I don't find a secular state, I will move to another secular country like MF Husain."

Watching the snowflakes falling in front of my window in Helsinki¹, I deeply understand Kamal's dilemma.

Like him and so many other artists, writers and intellectual leaders, I am facing persecution and censorship in India, just because some fringe fanatic group is itching to silence me. In my case, they claim

that it is for the benefit of the Catholic faith to get me jailed. They are venting their anger that I exposed their silly "miracle" last March by taking a sharp look at their rotten pipeline system. The Mumbai miracle of the "weeping crucifix" faded away overnight with one television discussion on 10 March 2012. But the angry zealots who wished to harvest on the "miracle" decided to revenge. They dug up an old law to spit out fire and smoke.

In Kamal's case, the fanatics are shouting and clenching their fists in the name of Islam. And those violent groups that hounded MF Husain out of the country and destroyed his beautiful paintings claimed that what they did was in the honor of a Hindu goddess. While the mobs keep changing their colors, the drama remains the same.

Its veteran victim Salman Rushdie is still frequently banned from India's literary events, whenever the usual suspects start rolling their eyes. And be careful: who dares to express solidarity with him by publicly reading from his great classic is courting criminalization. Rushdie calls what is going on in India a "Cultural Emergency".

The parallel to the breakdown of Indian democracy in 1975 seems striking: Today, again, it is the maintenance of law and order that serves as justification to curtail the civil and the human right of Freedom of Expression. But is there any realistic base to such claims? We are invited to believe that the cinema halls in Tamil Nadu would burn, if Kamal Haasan's film was not banned. And that all efforts of our police forces to prevent a disaster were bound to fail. But doesn't this sound like a cheap and fragile pretext?

By no stretch of imagination it can be expected that the high profile Literary Festivals of Jaipur and Kolkotta could become bloody battle fields of communal riots would Salman Rushdie address the audience.

And as far as the blasphemy case against me is concerned: my public statements on TV9 that serve as its base have been taken so peacefully and benevolently by the Catholic community of Mumbai. It is absurd if some bishops, who promote home-made fundamentalist groups, feared possible public unrest.

Of course, all Emergencies have their bogeymen. Playing up the public turmoil to establish tough laws and get an opportunity to silence "dangerous" opponents is always part of the political game. But is Kamal Hassan an opponent of the Tamil Nadu government who has to be silenced? Or was Taslima Nasreen any danger for the Indian Government so that it would have made political sense to ban her books, force her into prison-like security arrest and deport her in the dead of the night to Europe?

I am the President of Indian Rationalist Association. Many former leaders of Indian Rationalist Association later became Chief Ministers, Education Ministers, Cabinet Ministers, Chief Justices and University Vice-Chancellors in India. I am a Resource Person to the National Science Centre, and to the Inspire Science camps for college-university students (supported by the Ministry of Science and Technology). I have been a frequent guest on government owned Doordarshan TV, and almost all reputed private Indian television channels. None of my TV appearances or public statements or my books or several hundreds of my articles made any public unrest. Still two police officers in Mumbai obliged to the wishes of the bishops and filed charges against me to soothe the "hurt" caused by my exposure of the weeping crucifix miracle of Mumbai!! My petitions for anticipatory bail were tur-

¹ Sanal Edamaruku lebt zurzeit in Helsinki im Exil, weil er in Indien durch ein von der katholischen Kirche eingeleitetes Verfahren von den Behörden wegen "Blasphemie" verfolgt wird. Er hatte nämlich einen katholischen Wunderschwindel aufgedeckt, siehe <http://www.atheisten-info.at/infos/info1257.html>

ned down in Delhi High Court and Mumbai High Court. My letters to the Prime Minister of India and to the Home Minister and Chief Minister of Maharashtra asking them to interfere and guarantee Free Speech were never answered. What or whom are they afraid of?

There is no reason whatsoever, why Indian government could be interested to silence Kamal Haasan, Salman Rushdie, MF Husain or Sanal Edamaruku.

But there are others who are interested. Those fanatic groups of all religious colors have in common that they are enemies of reason and bold fantasy, of creativity and individual freedom, self-determination and joy of life. They all strive doggedly and grimly to cut the world to measure, to fit it into the narrow grey pigeon box of their mind. No bright colors! No music! No wide and strong wings! No sharp arguments, no confidence, no brilliant ideas. Just fear and submission. And they insist: for god's sake no disturbance please!

Well, that is how all zombie groups in the pathological twilight zone of society have always been. Nothing new about it. It also wouldn't seem that these obscurantists have grown in number or social attraction. What is new and alarming, however, is the growing political squalor and unscrupulousness of corrupt politicians who don't mind to use any dirty instrument to play on people's fear and hope. These groups come in useful to them to handle and misuse religious and other communities to create handy vote banks for themselves. Taslima Nasreen is back in India, peacefully living and writing. She does not disturb anybody. She was just used as bait in those days to stir religious frenzy. Shunting her out was the price to be paid to the zombies whose services were needed on the eve of a crucial election.

We are the pawns in this obscene game. We are used as baits and fall guys for appeasement. One does not mind to quash our freedom, our art or intellectual position to grease dirty hands for their services, to pay agents for manipulating and misleading communities that they pretend to represent.

What we are currently facing in India seems to me no Emergency of Culture. It is an Emergency of the Culture of Politics. Our political system has abandoned the great ideals of Secularism and Democracy and is selling out Reason and Liberty. It is a perversion of the Idea of India. And we have to set the records straight now.

My childhood and youth were lightened by the spirit of our Freedom at Midnight. We were thrilled and enthused with the great ideals of freedom, democracy and secularism as they are enshrined in our Constitution. I learned that we have to cultivate reason, creativity and dedication towards great cultural, scientific and technological achievements to improve the lives of our people and to make India the best place in the world to live. I was so proud to be an Indian.

I am not willing to leave India to the zombies and their political masters. To revert the decline of civil rights, we need the help of the media who have to quit the dangerous trend to copycat corrupt politicians. Over many years of close cooperation with the Indian media, I have met many honest and brilliant people on all levels. I wish they find the courage to join hands with all those who want to break the political vicious circles now.
