

## THE RIGHT WAY(S): UNIVERSITY THEATRE AND DISSENT

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper elongates and gets validated with the augmentation of repression of spaces/ universities of dissent and criticism. Hence, the paper shall explore how the response to this repressive culture has been manifested through students' theatre that has generated a tradition of dissent amongst the theatre societies which has been/ is being threatened at all levels. To endow this research I chose to rely on the newspaper articles, conversations with student artists, live performances and the scripts of the plays.

**Keywords:** Censorship, Dissent, Neo-liberalization, Polarization.

**Introduction:** India, a nation that rests on multiple cultures, is also a land of multiple histories and belief systems. The diversity of these beliefs when saddened and recoiled delves into a confined ambit of homogeneity by nurturing the means of censorship, legitimizing restricted notions of Religious Nationalism(s) and propagation of neoliberal ideology seeped into nation-building. The aim of this paper therefore is to capture the narrative and articulation of institutional theatre and how it has been responding to the state pogromed acts of censorship, killing of dissents, polarizations and vandalism. The paper begins with word 'Right' that emphasizes on a correct, that is, a democratic way of functioning. It also means the ways of the right wing. The paper shall construct a comparative analysis of four student productions- 'Welcome to the Machine' and 'Untitled' by the theatre society of SGTB Khalsa College, 'Chacha Chaudhary aur Dinanath Batra' by Gargi College and 'Alie-n-ation' by third year students of National School of Drama. The aim is to elucidate the need and recognition of such theatre productions which thrive on secularism, freedom of speech, rationale and, awareness of state oppressions and its dissemination in the last three years, post the ruling party came to power, representing the larger frame of political ethos of the country.

Two years ago, a notice was issued by the Delhi University Students' Union (DUSU) to the authorities of SGTB Khalsa College seeking "a ban with immediate effect" on the theatre society for "presenting a fake drama on Hindu and Hinduism." The notice was issued to curtail the performances of the play 'Welcome to the Machine' which investigated how the religious forces assert their dominance by the means of culture, education and institutional structures. This is depicted in the last scene of the play where a 'saffronised' (Saffronised here means an act of colouring/imposing one's ideology on the women by making it part of their conditioning and being. The word saffronised has been used instead of saffron to clearly understand the process of construction of women bodies that are only meant to reproduce/function a certain way)

vagina is forced to reproduce, how the offspring undergo a mechanized saffron machine and come out as right wing members with *khaki* (colour of RSS uniform) pair of shorts and caps (See Fig. 1 and 2).

**Fig. 1 'Saffronized' Vagina**



**Fig. 2 Right Wing's Produce**



It principally articulates manipulation of religion for vested interests to polarize, gain and maintain political power, and pinning it a false garb of a communal riot which otherwise is a pogrom/genocide sponsored by the state- controlling machinery. William Mazare and Ramininder Kaur in the chapter 'Between Sedition and Seduction' writes, "Regulation is self-reflexive: it cannot help but articulate the terms and foundations of its own legitimacy. For this reason, regulation is performative too: the silencing gesture is not only often quite public, but also simultaneously invokes an entire socio-cultural dispensation" (21). Colouring the institutes in their own colour, this is the nefarious design of the fascist to destroy the plurality of thought and existence from the very foundations of education. The stupor to which the ruling student body of the university reduced itself highlights the truth exhibited in plays like 'Welcome to the Machine'. The functioning of the system which is critiqued subsequently becomes the reality when the theatre society is threatened to be banned. The emergence of such plays was dealt with a critical eye initially since there was not any such trend to directly criticize the state. A year later, the same theatre society makes a production 'Untitled' responding to the previous year's threats to ban them. The play began with the following scene-  
Two men representing Ankur-the theatre society of SGTB Khalsa College enter the periphery, holding a script in their hands.

PERSON 1: मैं बोलूंगा (I will speak.)

PERSON 2: नहीं, मैं बोलूंगा (No, I will speak.)

PERSON 1: तू बोल ले चल. (Ok, you speak)

PERSON 2: नहीं तू ही बोल ले , अब (No, you speak now.)

PERSON 1: ठीक है ! अंकुर , श्री गुरु तेग बहादुर खालसा कॉलेज की नाट्य संस्था प्रस्तुत करती है...

(Ok, Ankur, The theatre society of Sri Guru Teg Bahadur Khalsa College presents...)

PERSON 2: अरे ! ज़रा अथॉरिटीज को दिखा देता हूँ .

(Oh! Let me get it approved by the authorities)

A character representing Authority enters the periphery.

PERSON 1: सर , हम यह प्ले कर रहे हैं , और इसकी स्क्रिप्ट ये रही आप पढ़ के देखिये .  
(Sir, we are doing this play, you may read it once.)

SIR: ओहह अच्छा! (Examining the script) डी.यू. की एक्स्ट्रा करीकुलर एक्टिविटीज काफी स्ट्रॉंग हो रही हैं , आए एम प्राउड ऑफ़ दिस , पर ये सब क्या लिखा ह ? सफ़्रोनिज़ेशन? फैक्ट्स मोल्डिंग? अरे कैसी बातें कर रे हो ?

चलो ये 2-3 लाइन्स काटो यहाँ से . पुट गुड थिंग्स लिखे , पोल्लुशण सैनिटेशन .

(Oh okay! ECA activities of D.U are getting stronger day by day, I am proud of this, but what is this? Saffronization? Facts moulding? What sort of script have you written? Delete these lines. Put good things like pollution, sanitation.)

Sir exits.

PERSON 1: चलो ये दो बातें कट. तो अंकुर प्रस्तुत करती है...

(Okay! Those two lines are deleted. So Ankur presents...)

PERSON 2: अरे ...भाई लोगों से तो अप्प्रोव करवाया ही नहीं.

(Oh! We did not get it approved from *Bhaiya ji* (the member of students' union..))

A person (*Bhaiya ji*) from an elected student body comes and the script is handed over to him.

*BHAIYA JI*: ओए यह का लिखा सु ? मोदी ? हिंदुत्व ? और ये क्या राम राम का नाम ले रा खुल्ले में ? चल काट रे काट दे छोरे इन लाइनों को

(What is this? Modi? Hindutva? Why are you taking names of Lord Rama in a public space? Cut them...cut these lines my boy.)

*Bhaiya ji* exits.

PERSON 1: अच्छा, तो फाइनली ये रही अंकुर की नई एडिटेड स्क्रिप्ट . (Stops) ले भाई तो ही सुना दे.

(So, finally we have the new edited script of Ankur. Take it brother, you only narrate it)

PERSON 2: (Shows an empty sheet in his hands)

The scene depicts how the idea of silencing and censoring has been perpetrated through institutions. The question hence emerges is what has led to the making of such theatre productions. The direct impinging and exploitation that theatre societies have been receiving for last three years particularly from the students' union has led to making and performing of such plays. The student body which otherwise should have been associated with redressal of students' grievances' has become a form of vandalism and censorship. Walter A. Davis mentions in the chapter 'Mendacity: Prospects of Progressive Theatre under Capitalism' in the book *Art and Politics: Psychoanalysis, Ideology and Theatre*, Art begins when traumatic experience seeks an aesthetic form adequate to it...

Thereby an experience that would otherwise be subsumed under the oppressions of ideology breaks free from it. (17)

Threats like these which primarily aim to inculcate fear amongst theatre artists of universities are injected and maintained through self-censorship. These threats function on a pre-requisite of fear of the other/ the potentially suppressed of not being

fearful but rebellious. Very few theatre societies though responded creatively to the previous year's ban threats, many colleges simultaneously adapted the safe route which they thought would dissociate them from the ban culture. Suvir Kaul in his essay, 'At the Limits of Post-Colonial Nationalism' in *What Nation Really Needs to know: The JNU Nationalism Lectures* says, "What is important is that these conversations should happen and that they should become part and parcel of our understanding..." (327). This statement imbibes the fear of self-censorship and the gradual dismal of dissent within. The problematic is not only the introjection of system of beliefs to survive to continue performing but the repercussions it generates. This self-censorship of thought occurs even before the censorship of a theatre production occurs. This is dangerous because it destroys the purpose of theatre performing its socio-political function. The hazardous effects would lead to excluding a certain section of art and artists and their eventual categorization as inappropriate since the conditioning to be receptive to such dissenting performances would steadily vanish. The censorship therefore changes the perspectives of watching and associating with a play, which otherwise could be conceived without any grudge-something necessary and usual. The categorizations such as radical plays or progressive performances clearly manifest realities which a certain section of universities are not ready to deal with nor do they want the rest to associate with it. The plays are progressive because the university spaces have not become so, so far; are curtailed to be so. The erstwhile President of the theatre society of Khalsa College Guneet Singh in an interview with Youth ki Awaaz said, "I believe what troubles the issuers of this notice the most is that our play is very direct, it names the names. It says that there is no difference between the 2002 and 1984 pogroms, to see them in the binaries of Congress and BJP is to be a part of the process of polarization...This regressive idea to ban our theatre society is a threat to the democratic culture of Delhi University." The idea behind this kind of form- to be direct in depicting the ethos of suppression as it is- is a reply to the immediate sources of exploitation, to show them the mirror, to show the student community the mirror so that one does not effort to derive the crux out of satires. The aim was to generate the helplessness of being ignorant of their immediate surroundings. This kind of form though led to a lot of debates and discussions questioning the creativity of the students, these debates were subsumed in the larger chaos. These discussions, but had the audacity to initiate an unrest to respond creatively which happened a year later. 'Untitled' the street production that captured the minds of the youth, a year later critiqued the neo-

liberal sensibilities. The scene depicts six men wearing *khaki* pair of shorts enter in the periphery, and very slowly puts separate cages around all these three frozen characters representing writers, artists and hen (jealous of cows being protected). Another man with the same costume enters and steps over on one of the cage and puts on the RSS cap depicting an act of self-coronation. A board is then established "HINDUSTAN PRIVATE LTD., since 1925." The conversation is as follows

CEO (On top of the cage): Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen. Welcome to our company HPL - Hindustan Private Limited. Today, I shall make sure that you meet the Heads of the departments of our company who shall explain to you the working of the company. Marketing Department, what is your progress these days?

Head Of Marketing Department: सर आप इन ग्राफ्स को देखिये ,सब ऊपर ही जा रहे है , हमारी पॉपुलैरिटी ऊपर , जनसँख्या ऊपर , और स्वच्छ भारत अभियान तो अंतरिक्ष पोहँच गया है सर ! देखो मेरे कच्छे पे मेक इन इंडिया लिखा है , घड़ी पे टाइम्स नाउ और माथे पे ज़ी न्यूज़ का चन्दन लगा हुआ है सर !

(Sir look at these rising graphs- our rising popularity, growing population and look at the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Cleanliness campaign runs by the NDA government) data sir, it has reached the space. Sir, look, my underwear also says 'Make in India', my watch says 'Times Now' and my forehead is shining because of the 'Zee News' sandalwood.)

CEO: Make sure we are always in news.

Head (Human Resource and Development Department(HRD)): अरे सर , बस टाइप कर कर के हाथ थक गए है , किताबो की एडिटिंग फुल फ्लो पे चल रही है , हिंदुस्तानी इतिहास को हमने अपने हिसाब से किताबो में ठूस दिया है , पुष्पक विमान से लेकर कुतुब मीनार तक सब हमारे हिसाब से पढ़ाया जा रहा है. सर आल थैंक्स तो बत्रा जी , एंड NCERT वाले किताबे तो किताबे सर हमने ट्रेनिंग सेंटर्स के हेड्स भी नए बैठा दिए है।

(Sir, hands are painning due to rigorous typing. Books are getting edited. The way we have incorporated the history of India- everything, from *Pushpak Vimaan* (the flying chariot of King Ravana in the *Ramayana*) to *Qutub Minar* is being taught the way we have wanted to. Sir all thanks to Batra ji, and what of NCERT- not only books sir, we have even changed the heads of the training centres.)

CEO: Well done, keep trashing the internet with your facts; I hope all my departments are getting good monetary support for all this. Any problems or



glitches that you face Finance department?  
 Head (Finance Department): नमस्ते साहब! माँ लक्ष्मी की चिंता करने की आपको कोई आवश्यकता नहीं है . बैंक से लेकर गोदना तक- गोरी हो या काली , माँ लक्ष्मी की कृपा हम पर पूरी बनी हुई है . श्रीमान अम्बानी व अडानी दोनों का हाथ हम पर पूरा है . और वो EWS स्कीम्स, वो स्कीम्स तो बस लोगो का विश्वास जीतने के लिए थी उसपर कोई भी खर्चा नहीं हुआ .

(Greetings Sir, you need not worry about goddess Laxmi. Be it white or black (white and black money more than the complexion of the goddess(es)., her blessings are bestowed from banks to godowns. We are blessed to have Mr. Ambani and Mr. Adani with us. And those EWS schemes are only to gain peoples' trust otherwise no money has been done devoted to those schemes.)

CEO: और वो अयोध्या से बार बार जो कंप्लेंट आ रही तह वो?

(And what of those repetitive complaints from Ayodhya (considered to be the birthplace of Rama) we have been receiving?)

Head (Finance Department): राम मंदिर के ईंटों के लिए हमारे मार्केटिंग डिपार्टमेंट ने इतना बढ़िया प्रचार करा की लोगो ने दिल खोल के डोनेशन दिया . तो वो मटर भी सॉल्व होगया .

(Our Marketing department has marketed so well for the bricks of Rama Mandir that people have donated immensely. So that matter has been resolved.)

CEO: Good. Keep it up.

Head of Customer Care: एक मिनट सर (पिक्स उप फ़ोन ) हाँ कॉलेज में मूवी चल रही हे ? कोई टेंशन नहीं अभी भेजते हैं लॉडो को . अभी रुकवाते हैं ! हाँ तो सर हमारा काम बढ़िया चल रहा हे . जो भी कोई कस्टमर ज्यादा शू शान की चा करता हे ... धर के देते हैं कान के नीचे . और जो भी इनफार्मेशन हमें HRD देता हे ... वही हम आगे पेलते जाते हैं पेलते जाते हैं .

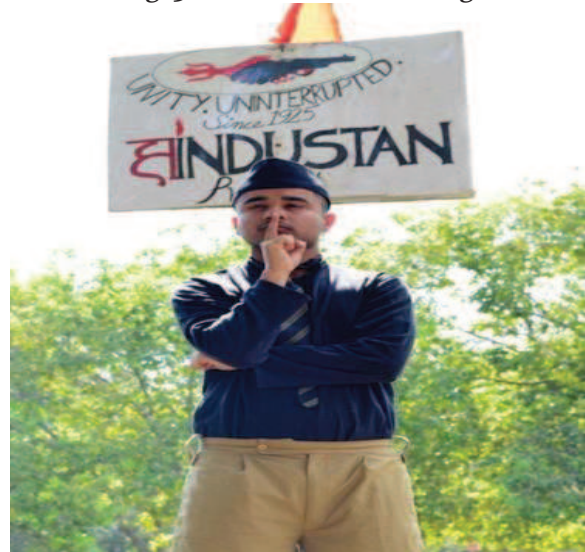
(One minute sir (picks up phone). Oh! Movie screening in college? Do not worry. I am sending the boys. We shall get it stopped! Yes, sir. Our work is running smooth. Whichever customer tries to hinder or question...gets a tight one on the ear. And whatever information we receive from Human Resource and Development Department we transfer it as it as.)

CEO: So that's how brilliantly my company functions. I hope this company sustains forever and ever, हैरान क्या हो रहे है ये देख के?

(Why are you surprised at it?)

Hindustan Private Limited, my company-for the people, by the people and from the people. (Pays RSS salute to the board and smirks) (See Fig. 3).

Fig. 3 Silent Nation Building



This scene blatantly criticizes the neoliberal agenda entwined with the Hindutva Nationalist agenda. This happens with the reduction of social processes to individual choices where all these choices are met through utilitarianism and human resource is reduced to utility maximizing individuals. Therefore, if the individual maximizes its ('it' suggests the neoliberal economy's consideration and treatment of individuals as utilities or objects to feed economic utilities) own utility, it falls under the category of being a Hindu Nationalist- the ideal that the state aspires to produce. The place of Hindu nation, hence, also corresponds to the idea of the market- larger the number of utility maximizing individual, greater the economic and political benefit. This is the most feasible way to negate the undemocratic and circulate the religious intent and to legitimize hierarchies in the garb of development. Romila Thapar in her essay 'Reflections on Nationalism and History' in the book *On Nationalism* mentions,

The argument that a religion-based state, drawing on majority and minority religious communities as its units, militates against democracy is of little concern...the undemocratic intentions of such religion-based nationalisms are brushed aside by them and more so now that we are enmeshed in a neo-liberal market economy that reiterates hierarchies of inequality. Movements from below demanding equal rights are described as threats to the state. (32)

National School of Drama's third year diploma production 'Ali-e-nation', a devised theatre production shows how the state very conveniently sets its agendas into the psyche of the masses by

diverting a certain thought and action and replacing it with another. This too is a kind of censorship. One of the scenes depicted how students of universities are seeking freedom to dissent, discuss and debate and immediately their placards seeking freedom are replaced by Jio (the telecommunication service provided by the Reliance Group of Industries) telecommunication service cards and subsequent eating (refers to the literal eating of freedom placards and also holds the metaphorical meaning of killing freedom in lieu of free telecommunication services) of freedom. The purpose of freedom thereby gets forgotten and dissolved from the minds and bodies. This portrays how the state generates its own benefits at the cost of its own citizens. This other-ing of the state thus becomes an integral part of the neo-liberal economy where it becomes alien to its own citizens. It shows how censorship does not inform the India about the Other India. Shankar Gopalakrishnan in his article 'Neoliberalism and Hindutva – Fascism, Free Markets and the Restructuring of Indian Capitalism' featured in Radical Notes mentions, "It is at this point that it becomes apparent that neoliberalism has a strong common agenda with the other project discussed here – Hindutva. This is not in any sense to downplay the obvious differences and tensions between the two projects (most centrally around their conceptions of "freedom"). It also bears repeating that this does not imply that an alliance between the two was or is "inevitable." Yet, as living political projects, shaped in a dialectical relationship with their social foundations, their common goals offer a space that can be exploited." It seems that this production by National School of Drama has not been challenged by the state machinery because of its less circulation in the media and audience as compared to advertising and circulation of other productions, inhabiting and defending in the name of limited seats. Gargi College's play 'Chacha Chaudhary aur Dinanath Batra' addresses the ban on Wendy Doniger's *The Hindus: An Alternate History*. This book under attack has dealt with the representations of aspects of Hinduism that the Victorian Protestant British scorned a filthy paganism- polytheism, erotic sculptures, spirited mockery of Gods, and rich and earthly mythology. As history says, in the wake of the British, many Hindus who worked with them came to share the same sentiments. Doniger terms them as Sepoys. They too took on the preference of the British for the Sanskrit texts created and propagated by upper-caste male elite, considering the vast oral and vernacular literatures enriched and animated by the voices of women and lower castes as beneath contempt. The play says,

*PUJARI* (Priest of a Hindu Temple): इसी के साथ भोले बाबा और माँ पारवती का विवाह , सारे रीति रिवाजों के

साथ सम्पन्न हो गया है . इस खुशी में , हम सब एक दुसरे को रंग लगाकर , होली खेलकर , एक नयी सुबह का स्वागत करेंगे !

(With this we come to the end of marriage ceremonies of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. Hence, we shall welcome the new sun with colours and playing Holi. (The devotees go in a trance while playing Holi when a lady, Wendy Doniger, enters the temple space and is mesmerized by seeing the festivity around her. The music transposes down to a lower volume.)

WENDY DONIGER: My name is Wendy Doniger, I'm an Indologist and the author of *The Hindus: An Alternative History*.

(CHARACTER 1, representing Dinanath Batra enters the space and takes a position opposite Wendy Doniger)

I want to celebrate the diversity and pluralism for the Hindus that I have loved for 50 years!

CHARACTER 1: BAN! बंद करो यह सब!

(Stop all this!)

WENDY DONIGER: I love the sexual openness, and eroticism in Hindu mythology!

CHARACTER 1: BAAAN!

WENDY DONIGER (pointing towards the *shivlinga* (the erect penis of Lord Shiva, worshipped in the play)): This is an iconic representation of the male sexual organ in particular, the erect penis of Lord Shiva!

CHARACTER 1: BAN! यह सब बैन है!

(All of this is banned.)

WENDY DONIGER: Shiva joyously made love to Parvati, night and day, but without shedding his semen!

CHARACTER 1: (Resisting the abuse) BBB...Ban! (See Fig. 4)

**Fig. 4 Censoring Alternate Histories**



This scene highlights how the standards of perceiving cultural beliefs have been set resisting any alternative formulations in the section 295(a) of Indian Penal

Code (Deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs.—Whoever, with deliberate and malicious intention of outraging the religious feelings of any class of citizens of India, by words, either spoken or written, or by signs or by visible representations or otherwise, insults or attempts to insult the religion or the religious beliefs of that class, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to 4, three years, or with fine, or with both.) The issues it deals with also negotiate with the aspects of how mythology has been conceived as history. Even if it is conceived as History, the idea of history has been very static and standard for the right wing bodies. Wendy Doniger mentions in an interview with *The New York Times*, 2014.

Batra and I have been talking past one another, playing two different games with the textual evidence. But he thinks there is only one game, and is determined to keep me off my own field. To debate a book you disagree with is what scholarship is about. To ban or burn a book you regard blasphemous is what a fascist bigotry is about. (4-5)

Also, one needs to locate martialism in Dinanath Batra's argument, "We have won the battle, we will win the war. (8)" in A.G Noorani's article *Penguin and the Parivar*. This highlights how people like Batra have consolidated on religious bigotry of Hindu Nationalism. It raises the question of who actually should talk/ talks of Hinduism? It shows Batra's contentions of disbaring comparative religion such as the study of Hinduism by someone who does not belong to the religion. It is not an inter-religious dialogue, in which only Hindus can publically speak for Hinduism. The issue therefore is the lack of understanding the difference between Inter-religious dialogue and academic scholarship in Comparative Religion.

The right wing student body paid immense focus on RSS as the only body thinking about the welfare of the nation. This remark blatantly revealed how the

process of saffronising and religious nationalism is being speedily performed. It also shows how history and nationalism is reconstructed in a way that comforts the ideology of the ruling state. This colonial history perpetrated by the right wing and the dominant narrative of Hindutva of Hindus being the original inhabitants rest in sharp contrast with the idea of nationalism which is exclusive of its own people and intellect and wishes to thrive on neo-liberalism which invites the foreign universities to nourish Indian education. This play has been an eye sore for the right wing students' body as it critiques what is banned. This makes one realize that the very idea of censorship thus is very ironic in nature. It somewhere propagates what it tries to prohibit. Judith Butler writes in the chapter 'Implicit Censorship and Discursive Agency' of *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*,

Language that is compelled to repeat what it seeks to constrain invariably reproduces and restages the very speech that it seeks to shut down. In this way, speech exceeds the censor by which it is constrained. (129)

Thus, the aim to restrict the plays and the dissenting voices delves into its proliferation. The consequences of such threats and censorships seek to produce subjects as they function as a productive form of power that not only confines a particular voice but also shapes the norms henceforth for the future theatre productions in the universities and educational institutions.

**One also observes that these kind of responses to the deteriorating dissent in the country, generated performatively, may have become uncathartic for the general masses due to exhibition of estranged truths and their diminished reception, yet what relieves the spectator, who still believes in dissent, is the continuum of the production of such theatre performances amongst students who do not wish to conform despite every institutionalized fear being thrown at them. Through political theatre they keep the survival of hope alive!**

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