

India's Free-Speech Crisis

by *Basharat Peer*

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In incident after incident, Indian writers and activists have confronted violence and intimidation whenever they criticize the state or major political groups. Basharat Peer on the issue that won't be on Obama's summit agenda.

President Obama might not have a nuclear deal or a membership of the United Nations Security Council to offer India, but an important stop on his itinerary in India's financial capital, Mumbai, is high on symbolism. On his first morning in India, he will spend time at a modest house where Mahatama Gandhi used to stay in the city. His other hero, Martin Luther King, stayed there in 1959 with his wife Coretta King, who wrote in a visitor's book that staying there "has been almost like living with Gandhiji." But Gandhian ideals seem to have been forgotten, rendered irrelevant as India positions itself as a great power. Along with India's international clout and economy, intolerance for dissent in both Indian society and polity seem to be growing.



Arundhati Roy (Manish Swarup / AP Photo)

It was an illiberal India that an American academic encountered this week on his arrival in the country. On Monday morning, San Francisco-based academic couple Angana Chatterjee and Richard Shapiro arrived at the New Delhi airport. Chatterjee, an Indian citizen, was visiting India for work and to see her family. Her partner Shapiro, who does not work on India, was accompanying her on a tourist visa. The immigration authorities checked Shapiro's passport and honored his visa. Suddenly, on realizing that he was Chatterjee's partner, the immigration authorities recalled him, canceled his entry, and forced him to return to the U.S. by the afternoon. No charges were filed against Shapiro, but the reasons were clear to most of us who follow subcontinental politics.

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The Indian state can't afford to choose silencing or intimidating the writers and intellectuals who are critical of its policies.

For the past few years, Shapiro's partner Chatterjee has been working on the contentious question of Kashmir. She is part of a group of human-rights lawyers, activists, and researchers who published a report that documented the presence of hundreds of unidentified graves across the Kashmiri countryside. Most people in Kashmir suspect the graves to be of many of the around 10,000 men who were disappeared after being taken into custody by Indian troops and police. Barring Shapiro from entering India was an effort at intimidating Chatterjee.

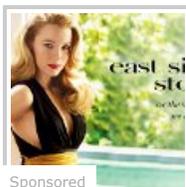
One early July day, news came that three young men, who were buried as unidentified Pakistani militants killed in a gun battle with Indian troops on the disputed border (in a graveyard named by Chatterjee and her colleagues in their report), turned out to be Kashmiri civilians who were lured by the military with the promise of jobs, taken to the border, and killed. Protests against their killings followed across Kashmir. Police attempting to disperse one such crowd of protesters in Srinagar killed a 17-year-old student, Tufail Mattoo. His death filled Kashmir with grief and rage. Echoing the Palestinian intifada, teenagers and young Kashmiris armed with stones battled heavily armed Indian troops, who responded with bullets. An intense military curfew was imposed and newspapers were forced to stop publication across Kashmir. Throughout July, August, and September, the Kashmir intifada raged on: 110 young Kashmiris had been killed by the Indian troops; a conservative estimate puts those injured by police bullets at around 1,500. Kashmir repeated its old slogan: *aazadi*, or independence from Indian rule.

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The question of Kashmir was being debated on every television channel, in every newspaper, at every possible venue in India. The Indian government responded with sending a team of parliamentarians to Kashmir, who met some key separatist leaders and later announced monetary compensation for the families of the slain protesters. The deadlock continued and around mid-October, the Indian government appointed a three-member panel of interlocutors to speak to Kashmiri separatists, politicians, and civil society leaders. Although the mediators were well-regarded people in their own professions—a former newspaper editor, a senior academic, and a top bureaucrat, their mandate was limited to talking and submitting a report at the end of their tour, which left out the crucial question of demilitarizing Kashmir and repealing laws that provide Indian troops stationed there a veritable license to kill without impunity.

It was against this tense backdrop that, at a seminar in New Delhi, novelist and essayist Arundhati Roy reiterated her support for Kashmir's independence and said, "Kashmir has never been an integral part of India." Kashmir is an international dispute and what Roy said was something that hundreds of thousands of Kashmiris have been saying since 1947. Intense outrage followed Roy's comments. The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party called upon the government to arrest her and file charges of sedition against her. The ruling Congress Party seemed to be in agreement. India's home ministry advised the Delhi police that it could proceed to file charges of sedition against Roy and other speakers, under which they could be sentenced to five years of rigorous imprisonment.

Roy was unbowed and responded, "Pity the nation that has to silence its writers for speaking their minds." Faced with the prospect of worldwide bad press weeks before the Obama visit and a mounting division of opinion for and against Roy, the [Indian government relented](#) and decided not to press charges. Last week, a mob from the [BJP's women's wing broke](#) through the gate of Roy's Delhi house and vandalized property.

Forcing Shapiro to return to the U.S., threatening Roy with sedition, and the Hindu right activists storming Roy's house illustrate two dangers to India as an open society: growing intolerance of dissent and critique by the government and the propensity of various political, ethnic, and religious parties to threaten with violence anyone they disagree with. A strange and vile example of this trend of punishing freedom of expression, occurred this month, when a Mumbai-based ethnic chauvinistic group, Shiv Sena, infamous for using and threatening to use violence against non-natives and minority groups, [bullied the Mumbai university](#) to remove from its curriculum Indian-born Canadian novelist Rohinton Mistry's novel, *Such a Long Journey*.

Mistry, who was born in Bombay in 1952, published the novel in 1991. Twenty years after its publication, the student wing of Shiva Sena burned copies of *Such a Long Journey* to protest what its leaders described as obscene and vulgar language and

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derogatory remarks about Shiva Sena and its leader Bal Thackeray. While Sena's behavior came as no surprise, concerns about competitive politics seem to have motivated the ruling Congress Party's chief minister of the Maharashtra state, who hadn't read Mistry's novel in its entirety, to describe some of its sections as "highly objectionable." This year, Shiv Sena threatened to stop the release of Bollywood superstar Shahrukh Khan's movie *My Name Is Khan*, about the post-9/11 travails of an autistic Indian-American Muslim man, because the actor Shahrukh Khan had supported the idea of Pakistani cricketers playing in India.

Last year in a lecture on freedom of speech in New Delhi, Salman Rushdie described this worrying trend as a "culture of complaint." Tragically, the long journey of banning *The Satanic Verses* and the *fatwa* on Rushdie began in India itself, as after reports in Indian press some Indian Muslims protested the novel and the Indian government became the first government to ban it. And six years later, when Rushdie had a laugh at the Shiva Sena leader Bal Thackeray in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, along with naming a bulldog Jawaharlal Nehru (after India's first prime minister), the novel was burnt by both the activists of Hindu right wing Shiva Sena and the officially secular Congress Party.

In Rushdie's speech about artistic freedom, he was clearly moved as he spoke about the great Indian painter 94-year-old Maqbool Fida Hussain, who had to leave India after the [Hindu right attacked him](#) for drawing several Hindu goddesses in the nude. "Can it be that India, at this high moment in its history, is forgetting its own narrative of openness and beginning to bring down the shutters?" Rushdie asked. After living in exile in London and Dubai, Hussain this year gave up his Indian citizenship and became a citizen of Qatar. Indian government had done little to provide Hussain a sense of security.

Letting hooligans get away without punishment encourages lunatics of all hues in India. At times, threatening well-regarded people in the name of religion or caste or region becomes a passage to notoriety, even a fleeting moment under the bright television lights. In the summer of 2006, an obscure mullah in Calcutta seemed desperate for some media attention. He issued a fatwa describing tennis star Sania Mirza's short skirts as anti-Islamic and urged her to follow the example of Iranian women who wore long tunics and headscarves in various international championships. Soon after that, Yaqoob Qureshi, a minister in India's biggest state, Uttar Pradesh, offered \$11 million to anyone who would "chop off the head" of the Danish cartoonists who had drawn the Prophet Mohammed. And the government responded by saying that the comment was made against a "person living in a distant country."

The litany of such incidents is a long one. To shoulder the burden of its vaunted democracy, the Indian state can't afford to choose silencing or intimidating the writers and intellectuals who are critical of its policies. At the same time, it has to ignore competitive, partisan politics and move against those who decide to curb the freedom of others.

Basharat Peer is the author of Curfewed Night, an account of the Kashmir conflict.

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