

The UK Play “Behzti” – A Personal View

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THERE IS A WIDESPREAD assumption that in a secular society, such as ours, there is only one cardinal value, namely, the right to personal freedom of choice, freedom of speech and that morality is a private matter.

Freedom of choice and speech are indeed crucial. They are part of the culture of a democratic society and need to be relentlessly defended. I am an inveterate advocate of these values, but they are not the only values. **They need to live alongside values, no less crucial, which bind society together and which are expressed through our laws and institutions.** Society implies a community of ideas. Without shared ideas on politics, morals and ethics, a civilised and compassionate society cannot evolve. We all have ideas about what is good and what is bad, right or wrong; they cannot be kept private from the community in which we live or of which we are a part. Society is held together, not physically but by the indispensable bonds of common beliefs. Relaxation of a society’s beliefs may result in seeds of its disintegration.

Britain is a democracy in which Parliament, elected by the majority, makes laws applicable to all. Respects for the rule of law is a principle on which our nation stands. The present common law offence against blasphemy covers forms of communication which “contain any contemptuous, reviling, scurrilous or ludicrous matter relating to God, Jesus Christ, or the Bible or other formularies of the Church of England as by law established.” It is not blasphemous to speak or write *against* Christianity. What is critical is the manner in which it is done, and not the views advocated. The Sikh religion is not covered by the laws of blasphemy, but that is not the complaint. Sikhs might be unhappy but would not cavil at criticism which was constructive, reasoned and made in a spirit of enquiry. Although the religion is only 535 years old, Sikhs are sufficiently robust and committed in their faith to withstand and answer such criticism. They accept that freedom of speech, except in exceptional circumstances covered by specific laws, is an essential part of the culture of a free, democratic society. So are freedoms of expression and a *tolerance* of differing opinions. But freedom of speech is not an absolute right. Libel laws, for example, take precedence over freedom of speech. Society would find it difficult to accept the strictures if such a freedom were pushed to its limits. Democracy is built on the rule of law which arguably is a systematic curtailment of some of our freedoms. We acknowledge official censorship in the country without a sigh, but cry foul when some citizens object to prurient material.

I have not seen the play “*Behzti*” (Dishonour). The fact that I have not seen it may be a handicap, but it does not detract from the cogency and validity of the points I am going to make. According to reports in the press, it depicts scenes of sexual violence and depravity by a Priest (Granthi) in a Sikh temple. It offended a large number of people, and not only Sikhs, on grounds that outweigh the urgency of any artistic message. What was the message that the author was trying to convey? In her own words “There can never be any excuse for the demonising of a religion or its followers. But, I did not write *Behzti* to offend. It is a sincere piece of work in which I

wanted to talk about what is beneath the surface of triumph – all that is anonymous, despairing, human, inhumane and absurd – and to explain how human frailties can lead people into a prison of hypocrisy. Though that play is set in a gurdwara, its themes are not just about Sikhism.....I feel that the choice of setting was crucial and valid for the story I wanted to tell and, in my view, the production was respectful to Sikhism.” She goes on to say “Religion and art have collided for centuries and will carry on doing battle. It is my right as a human being and my role as a writer to think, create and challenge. Only when we face our imperfections truthfully can we have hope. Theatre is not merely a cosy space, designed to make us feel good about ourselves. It is a place where the most basic human expression – that of the imagination – must be allowed to flourish.”

I ask, if the theme is not just about Sikhism, but about people generally, whether or not in holy places, why select a gurdwara to convey that message? How did the selection of the gurdwara help to make the message more effective? What are the “imperfections” that she suggest the community ought to face? One cannot get away from the conviction that the harm is out of all proportion to the good, if there is any good. Sikhs reacted, as might Christians to a play depicting priests sodomising choirboys on the altar in a Church, with shock and horror. We do not need to be told that hypocrisy sometimes goes hand in hand with sanctity in holy places. Sikhs’ opposition to the play was generated not by a desire to control freedom or because they are thin-skinned, but by sanctity besmirched.

As Simon Jenkins said recently in The Times “Art is entitled to a special plinth in the temple of liberty. It has a right to speak and be defended by the law in doing so. But it has no right to offend. If you do something that shows no courtesy or consideration for the feelings of others, you do not forfeit the protection of the law, but you should forfeit public sympathy and support.”

The author of the play does not claim that the acts depicted in the play take place or have taken place in a Sikh place of worship. She accepts, I understand, that the play is fictional, not factual. Sikhs, like others communities, are no strangers to murder, rape or to “honour killings.” **And these are legitimate topics for discussion. The community does not object to the author raising these issues in the manner she has done. It is her choice of the forum, a holy place, as her setting that is objected to. This, in my view, makes the play offensive; it violates the sanctity of a holy place.**

Just as freedom of speech is considered essential, so is the freedom to protest – peaceful protest. Violent protest is to be condemned; it has no place in civilized society and Sikhs condemn it unreservedly, just as they should condemn any threats of personal violence against the author. The Sikh stance does not derogate from their commitment to the principles of civilized conduct. **It is unbecoming – and to be deeply regretted – that what started off as a peaceful demonstration was, towards the end, high-jacked by some rowdy elements.** It has dented the Sikhs’ image and it is to be hoped that it has not, at the same time, weakened the potency of their justifiable anguish. No one takes kindly to religious frenzy in the streets, whatever the offence. Only mob rule lies down that route.

The decision to stop the play was the right one to take. But it is a pity that it was taken in consequence of the threats of physical violence rather than in recognition of

the validity of the views of the Sikh community supported, as we know, by representatives of other communities and religions.

Recently, the authors of a comedy show 'Little Britain' agreed, apparently at the BBC's prompting, to modifications in the show after complaints from the Women's Institute, who objected to their members being portrayed as racists. 'Little Britain' clearly demonstrates that even fiction can offend. How do you reconcile that with the critics of the Sikh community whose legitimate complaint was that the play was offensive in that it violated the sanctity of the holy place?

Early this week Mr. CB Patel, Editor and Publisher of *Asian Voice*, organised a discussion to which a number of people, from the world of media and others, had been invited. The discussion was chaired by Professor The Lord Bhikhu Parekh.

As one would expect, views were freely expressed. Nor surprisingly, there was no consensus. There was reference to the perennial conflict between art and religion, that the author had a story to tell and should be free to do so, and that what had happened in relation to the play amounted to censorship. Some advanced the view that Sikhs and their religion were now so well-known that there was no risk of the faith's basic tenets being misunderstood or compromised, or of anyone seeing the play and going away believing that it accorded with reality.

Some were of the opinion that even if the play was set in a Church, Synagogue, Mosque or Hindu Temple, it should be permitted to be staged. The holders of this view were naive to think that in any of these settings the play would go unnoticed and without protest, and were not prepared to countenance the reaction of the followers of these religions. Some questioned the author's motives. They were in no doubt that, despite her disclaimer, her intention was to shock in order to sell the play.

I do not dispute their right to hold these views nor do I impugn their sincerity. I believe that they are misguided, and have failed to appreciate that this is a case of sanctity besmirched.

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