

## Shot down

### A case of ban the 'damned' or damn the ban comes to an end

*Was the BBC filming of *Midnight's Children* in Sri Lanka shot down after being given the greenlight, a victim of party politics?*

*Very clearly this seems to have been the fate the BBC had to face after having got permission from the Foreign Office in Colombo, the National Film Corporation and the Media Ministry to film the five part television serial based on the book written by Indian-born Muslim author Salman Rushdie, now under a Fatwa (death sentence) issued by the late Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran.*

*The question that has arisen in this reversal of the earlier decision is not so much as to whether the late Ayatollah's fatwas have jurisdiction in Sri Lanka where only seven percent of the population are Muslims and not all of them followers of the Ayatollah.*

*The question seems to be whether petty politics once again got enmeshed in the filming.*

By Dilrukshi Handunnetti

The protests commenced much before the BBC crew's arrival here. Unlike in India where then Prime Minister Dev Gowda refused permission at the outset, Sri Lanka had taken a different view on Rushdie and his works.

UNP Parliamentarian A. H. M. Azwer, who was the Muslim Affairs Minister during the UNP rule raised the issue in Parliament recently. Interestingly, it is during this period that the Foreign Affairs Ministry gave clearance for the massive BBC production, and the National Film Corporation approved the script of the tele series, welcoming a BBC team led by Producer Christopher Hall to visit Sri Lanka to select locations.

An official from the National Film Corporation confirmed that approval was granted by the NFC for the shooting, after serious consideration of what he called the Rushdie factor, and said they were satisfied with the script not being injurious to the religious sensibilities of the Muslim community.

Two weeks ago, three senior Muslim ministers met President Kumaratunge to press for a ban on the film immediately, following the example set by India. This move was largely supported by many Islamic organisations. Immediately, a statement was issued by Minister of Provincial Councils and Local Government Alavi Moulana, one of the main protesters, announcing that the BBC production had been banned by the President. In the aftermath of this release, several organisations vociferously protested, calling for the preservation of freedom of artistic and intellectual freedom.

According to Nilendra Deshapriya, the local producer, the BBC had duly sought and received approval for the project. No project gets special Presidential approval, but receives the state approval through the relevant authorities—the Foreign Ministry and the NFC.

In India the situation was different. The Indian Ministry of Information and Broadcasting refused permission initially, unlike in Sri Lanka where approval was promptly granted. The Indian reaction is also understandable for the story is somewhat uncomplimentary to India, specially to revered Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Indian authorities stated that the book contained several portions which could lead to tensions and friction between Hindus and Muslims.

UNP Parliamentarian A. H. M. Azwer raised the question of good diplomacy here, saying that not banning the filming would tarnish Indo-Lanka relations. If this is the reason, there would be few things to read, and fewer films made.

*Midnight's Children* is the story of Saleem Senai, and three others who were born on the night India and Pakistan became independent states. Saleem, according to the story, has magical powers of communicating with others who were born at the stroke of midnight using telepathy. In fact, it is the story of India during post independence, and its struggle to shed its colonial ties.

Was the fact that Rushdie may have antagonised certain countries good enough reason to prevent the filming of another of his works here? The Free Media Movement (FMM) and the organisation called "Prajathantra", Foundation for Freedom of Expression and Democracy protested strongly against a possible ban.

The Muslim viewpoint, by and large, seemed to base its objections on the author. Nihil Fazal, an economics graduate said the issue had nothing to do with freedom of expression, but was about a man who blasphemed the religion practised by the majority of the world's population.

"What we see today in Sri Lanka is the typical Muslim reaction to Salman Rushdie. The writer is bound to attract a lot of criticism and antagonism. We did not want to get embroiled in this controversy of deciding who and what is right. All we wanted was to successfully complete this production here, which would also bring many benefits to the country in different ways," said Nilendra.

Former Deputy Minister of Housing and Construction and Kalutara District Parliamentarian Imtiaz Bakeer Marker said that the issue of Rushdie was very sensitive to those professing Islam.

"We are not being petty, or failing to understand the concept of artistic freedom. What would Christians feel if Mother Mary was portrayed as a woman with low morals. Would Buddhists remain silent, if the revered mother of Prince Siddhartha was evilly portrayed," he queried.

He believes there was good reason for Muslims to oppose this production, though the story content of the book concerned is not supposed to be blasphemous of any religion. He admitted that he never read the book, but said it was a sensitive issue to Muslims as a "fatwa" has been imposed on Rushdie.

Imtiaz says the West would have a different perspective, as their culture and practices also differed. The South Asian life style is interwoven with religion so much that separation would seem impossible. Therefore the reactions would also be strong.

Faizal Sherrifdeen has a different view. He says that Muslims should not think that the world revolves around them. "I personally take a holistic view on religion, but am not bothered about Rushdie or the BBC crew," he said.

Naufer Rahaman, a lawyer said each country, community and religious group should have the right to determine what is important to them. Islam is not easily understood by the majority of the people, he says. According to Islam, apostasy attracts death penalty. It is the Islamic ethic which others cannot judge. Rushdie was declared an apostate, and whatever he does is considered inimical to Islam, says Naufer.

Responding to the query whether the contents of *Midnight's Children* were blasphemous, author and educationist Prof. Reggie Siriwardene said he has read both *Satanic Verses* and *Midnight's Children*. "This work was written before *Satanic Verses*. It is not blasphemous nor is it contrary to Muslim susceptibilities. But the Indian reaction is understandable for it portrays Indira Gandhi in an unflattering manner."

Authoress Monika Ruvanpathirana believes that Rushdie's works should be evaluated on their literary merits, leaving the religious factor aside. There were many Muslims who felt the same way, and were appalled when fatwa was imposed on Rushdie, she pointed out.

Tele film director Saman Athaudahetti refutes all charges raised against the argument with an effective argument that Rushdie has nothing to do with the BBC presentation, which is after all the creation of the Director. Finally it is his impression, and the author has no claim over it.

The pertinent question here was if *Midnight's Children* itself is not injurious to Muslims, what harm is there in letting the filming proceed?. Or was the decision guided by more political reasons, namely the invaluable Muslim votes at a crucial time? If so, whither artistic and intellectual freedom?

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