

Rushdie has hurt Muslims, Dont make him a Hero

Jaipur, January 23: ON a day when the notables of the Jaipur Literature Festival steered clear of the name that has been lingering like a persistent fog, Chetan Bhagat refused to toe the party line. ? Let us not make heroes out of people who have been banned,? said the best- selling author whose books are said to have sold over six million copies. ? They have been banned for hurting people. They have been banned for hurting Muslims. They shouldn?t be banned but they are not heroes,? he added.

Bhagat did not name Rushdie, in deference to the diktat issued by the festival organisers on Friday night after the brouhaha over certain authors reading out passages from The Satanic Verses , but he left no one in doubt about whom he was hitting out at.

Then he made an incendiary statement that didn?t surprisingly get tweeted the way his attack on Rushdie was. ? You can say Muslims are backward, aggressive, that?s fine,? Bhagat said at his standingroom- only session titled ? In Search of a Story?. ? But they are right to get upset when their gods are attacked. I wouldn?t like it if my gods are attacked.? Bhagat?s sentiments were echoed by Madhya Pradesh chief minister Shivraj Chauhan, who said, ? I am in favour of freedom of speech, but I can?t bloody someone?s nose. Can I?? The writer?s grandstanding, however, did get some delegates worked up in Jaipur.

His classification of what was ? fine? to call Muslims was far more directly offensive than anything contained in The Satanic Verses, up- and- coming author Chandradas Choudhury said. To reduce the book to an attack on the ? gods? of Muslims, he said, showed Bhagat had clearly not read The Satanic Verses.

Choudhury drew comparisons between Bhagat?s ? superficial? reasonableness and the nature of his body of work ? ? deficient not just in terms of style, but also in its thought, in its grasp of what is going on in the world.? Well- known Malayalam poet and former secretary of the Sahitya Akademi K. Satchidanandan also didn?t spare Bhagat.

? It is a statist stand to say that authors of banned books shouldn?t be taken seriously,? he said. ? We should question and debate the efficacy of bans, and find out why the book was banned in the first place. Authors have the right to question the mechanisms of the state or the rigidities of tradition.? Exiled Iranian writer and journalist Kamin Mohammadi was as forthcoming. ? Whether it?s about banning books or the burqa, it?s two sides of the same coin,? said the author who now lives in the UK. ? There?s an inherent cruelty in banning that must be addressed.? Pakistani author Mohammad Hanif used the opportunity to question the credentials of the Indian State. ? I find it quite bizarre,? he said in a hard- hitting comment.

? This is the world?s biggest democracy, the most multi- cultural society you can have, yet Rushdie has not been able to come. I think it?s the State?s primary role to provide security to its citizens and visitors, and to me it seems it has failed in its most basic duty.? It was a controversy that the organisers would have loved not to happen.

Author and festival organiser William Dalrymple sent out a mass email on Friday night in which he wrote, ? You should know that unfortunately The Satanic Verses is still a banned book in India, and if you read from ~~it you make yourself liable to arrest and imprisonment, and put the festival in danger of immediate closure~~

? and hand us all, authors and festival, bound and gagged into the hands of any individuals or groups who wish to prosecute us. We are holding strong here, and are going to continue to fight for free speech and expression and the right to dissent, but we have to do so within the laws and constitution of this country.? The email followed a hasty behind-the-scene meeting that Dalrymple summoned following the rumour of a police crackdown on the festival following readings from The Satanic Verses by Hari Kunzru and Amitava Kumar in one session, followed by a similar action by Jeet Thayil and Ruchir Joshi in another.

Thayil emerged from this conversation, which went late into the evening, looking harried and worried, but said, ? I wouldn't want my actions to disrupt the gargantuan effort that has gone into organising this essential festival.? Even Rusdhie, at the distant eye of the storm, seemed puzzled at the progression of events. In a tweet, he asked, ?@ amitavakumar says organisers asked him not to continue reading from The Satanic Verses. Willie, Sanjoy: Why did this happen?? It's a question many delegates were asking even as Rusdhie continued to dominate the offstage chatter in Jaipur and exercise the minds of the Twitterati across the world.

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