

Rushdie splits Indian Muslims

New Delhi, January 25: The Salman Rushdie saga has divided Indian Muslims with some saying he should have been allowed to participate in the Jaipur Literary Festival, if not in person then via satellite link, and others saying his 1988 book "The Satanic Verses" was indeed offensive and preventing his India visit was justified. Still others saw UP elections behind the cancellation of his visit while some called for more debate.

India's leading Islamic theologian Maulana Wahiddudin Khan described calls for banning Rushdie or his book "alien to our secular constitution" and un-Islamic. "It's against the Islamic spirit," he wrote in his TOI's Speaking Tree column. He quoted a verse from the Quran to make his point. "It reads: 'If any of the non-believers seeks your protection, then let him come so that he may hear the words of God, then convey him to a place of safety'." The Maulana wrote that Muslims should engage and put their points of view in a rational manner. "If Rushdie is not convinced, they should make 'dua' for him and, according to the Quranic teaching, see him off amicably, without rancour."

Journalist Seema Mustafa said "the role of media and particularly TV" was "reprehensible" for they "strengthened the Muslim stereotype by bringing unidentifiable mullahs to say what they want to reinforce this stereotypes". She echoed a growing number of Muslims who are sore about the tendency to present reactionaries as the sole spokespersons of the community while ignoring saner voices.

Activist Javed Anand said the controversy is bound to create the impression of being politically motivated, ahead of UP polls. "(More so) when the author has visited India five times since the publication of "The Satanic Verses" without problem." He criticized Muslim leaders over the issue and asked them "to grow up and appreciate the sensibilities of the modern world". Punishment for things like blasphemy rest with none but Allah, he said.

National Minorities Commission chief Wajahat Habibullah echoed Seema Mustafa in part, saying, "The whole thing seems a publicity effort." He said while serving under threat in J&K to say that Rushdie should have come. "While I was posted in J&K, I was told that I should not even move out of my house. But I had to do my job."

But Jaamat-e-Islami Hind's S Q R Illiyas stuck to his guns insisting they have the right to oppose Rushdie who has "insulted the Prophet and Muslims around the world". He said India is a very religious country, where religious sentiment should be respected. "We are protesting as it is our legitimate right. We are doing it within the Constitution's framework." Lucknow's leading cleric Maulana Khalid Rashid Firangi Mahli said "no civilized individual would use the kind of words Rushdie used against the Prophet's wife for any woman".

Poet Manzar Bhopali says they were opposing Rushdie without even reading his books. But Vadodara-based professor J S Bandukwala called for understanding why the book has hurt Muslims. "The book describes the Holy Kaba and the Prophet in extremely derogatory terms." Mumbai lawyer Yusuf Muchala said he had read 'The Satanic Verses' and found it "offensive". But he insisted that Rushdie should not be banned from the fest where he was to discuss literature.

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