

A blatant attack on artistic freedom:

Bengali writer, Taslima Nasreen assaulted by mob led by Indian legislators

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The renowned Bengali writer Taslima Nasreen was physically assaulted August 9 by a group of Islamic fundamentalists led by three members of the Andhra Pradesh state assembly, Syed Ahmed Pasha Quadri, Afsar Khan and Moazzam Khan, from the All-India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (United Council of Muslims). The All-India MIM is a member of the Congress Party-led coalition that governs the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh.

Born on 25 August 1962 in Mymensingh, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Nasreen is a physician-turned-author with an international reputation as a feminist and human rights activist. A Muslim by birth, she has been repeatedly harassed and threatened by Islamist groups for her writings.

Initially gaining popular attention as a poet and columnist, agitating for equal rights for women, Nasreen has twenty-eight works of poetry, essays, novels (most importantly, *Lajja*, or “Shame”), and short stories to her credit, all written in her native language, Bengali. Her work has been translated into twenty different languages and is internationally acclaimed, as attested by her winning a number of prestigious literary and human rights awards.

The MIM leader Akbaruddin Owaisi justified the attack against Nasreen, telling the press that, “We are not bothered about our Member of Legislative Assembly status. We are Muslims first. And it is our responsibility to test those who have said anything against Islam in which every way possible. We are proud of our members as Taslima Nasreen needs the harshest punishment for her writings against Islam. The next time she comes to Hyderabad, we will implement the fatwa of death against her.”

According to press reports, flower pots and chairs were thrown at Nasreen, who was at the Hyderabad Press Club launching the Telugu-language translation of her novel *Shodh* or “Getting Even.” Nasreen escaped physical injury due to the intervention of her hosts and supporters. She condemned the most recent attack as barbaric and pledged that she would not be cowed by such acts of intimidation.

Declared Nasreen, “I am only a writer. I am not trying to hurt anyone. In all societies, through the ages, there have always

been differences of opinion. Everyone does not have the same view; neither is it possible for me to keep everyone happy all the time with my opinions, particularly when you consider the subject matter of my writings—social traditions and the rights of women. Those who wish to deny women their rights in the name of tradition will obviously oppose me; those who wish to remain in the darkness of superstitions and religious blindness will obviously oppose me. I have seen that attitude in all fundamentalists; be it Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, whatever, it is the same.”

“I have never thought of apologising because I never felt I had done anything wrong,” commented Nasreen in an interview with the Indian magazine *Frontline*.

The Andhra Pradesh government responded to the attack in a shameful manner. The police filed a complaint against the victim, Nasreen, while the three Members of the Legislative Assembly have been released on bail. This response is the product of a definite political calculation, as the Andhra Pradesh Congress Party leadership does not want to upset their MIM coalition partner, whose support is deemed crucial in securing votes from the state’s large Muslim minority. This political concern is especially pressing with the approach of the Greater Hyderabad Municipal elections.

The Andhra Pradesh Police charged Nasreen under the Indian Penal Code Section 153 (A) for “promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, race, language etc.” This action mirrors the response of the state government of Gujarat, which is formed by the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), to an incident last May. In that case, the state of Gujarat imprisoned an art student at the M.S. University, Vadodara, on the some charge of “promoting [religious] enmity” after his work was attacked by Hindu fundamentalists (See “India: Art student targeted by Hindu right and Gujarat authorities”).

The Andhra Pradesh police confirmed that the case against Nasreen was registered based on a complaint made by MIM leader Akbaruddin Owaisi. In newspaper articles, Owaisi has brazenly threatened Nasreen with physical annihilation on the grounds that she has hurt the sentiments of the Muslim

community with her writings and speeches criticizing Islam.

After the international media began to report on the case, Union Broadcasting and Information Minister Priyaranjan Dasmunsi, was forced to condemn the assault: "It's a very shameful thing if any person is attacked. We criticise this incident in the strongest of terms."

Nasreen has been the target of censorship, harassment, and death threats since she wrote a series of newspaper columns in 1993 that criticized the oppression women suffer in Bangladesh and the sanctioning of various discriminatory practices by Islam.

Soon after some Islamic fundamentalists issued a fatwa calling for her death, Bangladesh's government, which has increasingly pandered to the religious right, banned her newly published novel *Lajja*. It tells the story of members of Bangladesh's Hindu minority who were brutally attacked following the December 1992 razing of the Babri-Masjid Mosque in Ayodhya (Uttar Pradesh, India) by Hindu supremacists, who had been encouraged by UP's then BJP state government. The publication of the novel precipitated more calls for her death, and the government immediately confiscated Nasreen's passport.

In 1994, other Islamic groups demanded her execution after she was quoted in the Indian daily, the *Statesman* stating, "...the Koran should be revised thoroughly." In a further move to curb free speech and artistic freedom, the Bangladeshi government, whilst taking no action against those who had threatened Nasreen with death, filed a court case charging her with blasphemy and issued an arrest warrant which forced her to go into hiding and later into exile.

After living in exile in Europe for about a decade, Nasreen moved to India and sought asylum there. She has said that she needs to live in a South Asian environment to be able to write. But since taking up residence in Calcutta, the world's most populous Bengali-speaking city, she has repeatedly been threatened by Islamic fundamentalist forces. In March of this year, the "All India Itehad Council" offered 500,000 rupees (US\$5,000) for her beheading. The group's president, Taqi Raza Khan, said the only way the bounty would be lifted was if Nasreen "apologises, burns her books and leaves."

Parallel to the threats of violence issued by various Islamist groups in South Asia, successive Bangladeshi governments have imposed bans on Nasreen's writings: *Amar Meyebela* or "My Girlhood" in 1999, *Utal Hawa* ("Gusty Wind") in 2002, *Ko* ("Speak Up") in 2003, and *Sei Sob Ondhokar*, ("Those Dark Days") in 2004.."

A week after the latest assault in Hyderabad, S.M. Noorur Rehman Barkati, a prominent Imam from Calcutta, met other clerics, to reiterate his demand that Nasreen be deported.

The broader context of the latest attack against Nasreen is the increasing reliance of all the ruling elites of South Asia on communalism as a means of diverting social discontent and dividing the masses.

In India, the rise to political prominence of the Hindu supremacist BJP closely paralleled the bourgeoisie's abandonment of the post-independence state-led development project in favour of neo-liberal policies that have resulted in increasing social inequality and economic insecurity and a plague of peasant-suicides.

Under conditions where the Indian state has failed to ensure equal access to jobs and education for Muslims (see "Government report concedes India's Muslims are a socially deprived, victimised minority") and has connived in communal pogroms against Muslims (as in 1992-93 in the aftermath of the razing of the Babri Masjid and in 2002 in Gujarat), Islamic fundamentalist groups have been able to find an audience for their reactionary politics among some of India's 150 million-strong Muslim minority.

The Indian Stalinists, who are propping up India's Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance government even as it pursues the social incendiary "reform" agenda of big business and a "strategic partnership" with the US, play an especially cynical role in this process.

While the Communist Party of India (Marxist) has formally condemned the latest attack against Nasreen, they themselves have abetted the campaign to silence and scapegoat her.

In November 2003, the CPI (M)-led government of West Bengal banned the sale, distribution and possession of Nasreen's book *Dwikhandito* or "Split in Two," the third part of her autobiography, on the claim that it was "hurting [the] religious feelings of the people." The government ban was only lifted when the Calcutta the High Court, acting on a petition by human rights activists, struck it down in September 2005.

In an exclusive interview with the *Hindu* in January 2004, Nasreen commented on the Stalinists' attack on democratic rights: "I am used to being issued such fatwas since 1993 even before my book *Lajja* was banned by the Bangladesh Government and hartals [mass work-stoppages] were held against my views on Islamic fundamentalism ... But this would not have happened [in India] had the West Bengal Government not proscribed my book. The ban has only encouraged the mullahs and this should be stopped right now."

According to BBC News, in 2005 the West Bengal government counselled New Delhi not to accede to Nasreen's request she be granted Indian citizenship, warning that her continued presence in Calcutta could result in communal tensions. The West Bengal Home Secretary subsequently denied that the state government had ever been asked by the Union government for its views on the matter.



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