

## Resisting censorship in India

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Censorship in India comes in various forms. There is, of course, the ubiquitous censorship of the state, which censors films and plays before release, [bans websites](#) <sup>[1]</sup> and decides what is in the national interest.



There is also the censorship of the market, which decides what Indians should see and have market access to, and leaves little space for content that is seen as commercially unviable. And of course there is the vigilante brand of censorship, which is ever ready to defend any so-called attack on 'Indian culture'.

The notion of censorship is closely linked with the moral panic that informs India's popular debate about media and new technologies. Many Indians are prepared to take on the role of the 'moral police'. They are everywhere: in the legislative assemblies, boardrooms, courtrooms, colleges, cinemas, cyber cafes, gardens and pubs, on the street, and even in police stations. The Hindu right-wing parties and groups which demonstrate their love for 'Indian culture' by molesting girls wearing jeans and vandalising Valentine's Day celebrations are unfortunately only the tip of the iceberg.

Both censorship and moral policing are premised on the creation of a less powerful 'other' who is easily influenced by the seductive power of the media. There is also the fundamentally flawed assumption about the immense harm that images can cause to the hearts and minds of impressionable cinema-goers, driving them to commit acts of violence, sexual depravity and the like. Justice Hidayatullah's formulation in the *K. A. Abbas vs Union of India* (1970) case is one example of this simplistic understanding: 'The motion picture is able to stir up emotions more deeply than any other form of art. Its effect particularly on children and adolescents is very great

since their immaturity makes them more willingly suspend their disbelief... They also remember the action in the picture and try to emulate or imitate what they have seen. A person reading a book or other writing or hearing a speech or viewing a painting or sculpture is not so deeply stirred as by seeing a motion picture’.

In other words, the Central Board of Film Certification acts as a patriarchal filter on the state’s behalf, protecting all those unfortunate less-powerful ‘others’ (including children, women, poor people, villagers and illiterates) who lack the necessary judgment and discrimination — and who are thus easily swayed by the power of the image. Needless to say, this notion of direct impact has been seriously discredited within the field of media studies; there is a lot of research and writing which establishes that relationships between spectators and media texts are complex, unpredictable and a result of negotiations between the agendas of both the text and the spectator. Those who plead the case for censorship also make the assumption that cinematic text is a simple message in a bottle, tied to a singular meaning. But meanings are more elusive. Like eels, they slip easily out of one’s grasp.

More pragmatically, how will the censors deal with someone who chooses to read forbidden words in the *Oxford English Dictionary*? They have been able to do precious little with film songs that boast double entendres. A recent example is the song *Bhaag D.K. Bose* (Run D.K. Bose) in the film *Delhi Belly*. When repeated as a loop, D.K. Bose turns into a Hindi expletive that has offended the sensibilities of many. And during the Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi in 1975, all newspapers were under a tight regime of censorship — but the *Indian Express* simply responded by leaving its editorial column blank.

Censorship is unfortunately not the sole prerogative of right-wing parties and groups. It is enthusiastically espoused by leftist parties, women’s groups and liberals, all regarding censorship as the only way to cope with anything that offends them. It is a common belief that if there were no censorship, society would have little control over the proliferation of hate speech or pornography, for instance. According to this argument, a moderate degree of enlightened censorship helps to ensure that certain universal values are upheld. This argument casts state censorship as a panacea for such ills, but the Indian experience tells us that despite the rigorous regime of film censorship, neither hate speech nor pornography are on the decline. Media technologies have developed in ways that make it difficult, if not impossible, for any centralised agency to control the flow of images and words.

There are several examples of resistance to the regimes of silence and control that censorship engenders. Documentary filmmakers from across India organised a parallel film festival as part of a campaign against censorship in 2004, responding to the introduction of censorship at the Mumbai International Film Festival. This was the start of a collective, incorporating over 250 filmmakers, that continues as an e-group even today and mobilises around issues of freedom of expression.

The Pink Chaddi Campaign, launched in 2009, was a peaceful campaign launched by the Consortium of Pub-going, Loose and Forward Women that used Facebook and other means of mobilisation to counter virulent attacks by the right-wing group Ram Sene. In a satirical response, the consortium asked people to send Pramod Mutalik, the head of Ram Sene, pink

underwear on Valentine's Day. The campaign garnered much support and media attention.

One characteristic of these campaigns is that they tend to focus on a somewhat elite section of society. They have done much to create discussion around issues of censorship, but a much larger effort is needed to destabilise the dominant codes of censorship which are pervasive in Indian society.

Censorship in general, and media censorship in particular, has [no place in a democracy](#)<sup>[2]</sup>. Article 19 of India's Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of expression. This right has been seriously eroded in our times. India needs to move beyond platitudes of offended sensibilities and national interests. It need to think in terms of media education that helps viewers engage critically with media texts, that opens up spaces for dialogue and debate, and that helps us to 'listen fearlessly'.

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[1] bans websites:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2010/06/19/internet-censorship-the-iron-firewall-of-the-21st-century/>

[2] no place in a democracy:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/02/26/indias-churning-democracy-future-directions/>

[3] Tata Institute of Social Sciences: <http://www.tiss.edu/>

[4] East Asia Forum Quarterly: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/quarterly/>

[5] *Ideas from India*: <http://epress.anu.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/EAFQ-4.1.pdf>