
Censoring the Nation: Regional Variations and Historical Shifts in Indian Book Regulation since 1857

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Abstract:

Book banning is not new. It has occurred throughout the history. It is driven by political, religious or moral driven forces that challenges norms of the society or the state. The paper examines that temporal trajectory of censorship has shifted from the colonial-era sedition laws to contemporary concerns regarding national security and ideological supremacy. The study shows that how censorship, once a tool of colonial era has become fragmented state led tool to a tool of national interest.

The spatio-temporal analysis of book censorship in India reveal that during colonial rule censorship was primarily a centralized tool of political survival. However, after independence, censorship shifted to diversification of motives, where the state began to act as a go-between of religious and cultural viewpoints. Spatially, censorship is not uniform but rather clustered around different regions where spatial identity narratives are challenged.

Key words: Censorship, spatio-temporal analysis, gagging act, colonial, rebellion, publications

Introduction:

Censorship is restriction on a person's right to express his views in any form, on the ground that such expression would be harmful. Banning of books, suppression of facts, prohibition, removal of publication, words, images or ideas that is/are considered to be offensive to a particular section of a society, religion or to the state, all come under the preview of censorship. Content is deemed to be harmful, immoral, offensive or seditious.

In the oldest democracy, in Greece and Rome censorship was in force to prevent orthodoxy. Freedom of speech was for those who were holding some position in the state.

History of book censorship goes back to the British era. The Revolution of 1857 is considered to be genesis of book censorship in India. Censorship was a direct after-effect to the revolt of 1857. In rebellion, Lord Canning introduced Licencing Act of 1857 (*Gagging Act*, in British history it is referred as *Treason Act 1857*). For publishing or printing of any document govt. permission was required. After ten years of it *Press and Registration of Books Act 1867*, was formulated which made immense scrutiny of every printed book. In the year 1878, Vernacular Press Act of 1878 was begotten (*Dacosta*). This act targeted publications made in Indian languages. And since than we are having censorship in different forms.

Temporal variations of censorship:

Censorship in Colonial Era: (1857-1947):

To curb anti-British sentiments censorship was introduced. Censorship was concentrated in the centres of rebellion. Censorship was enforced to monitor publications of subversive content. The act established mandatory registration of printed books. To curtail non-English press, Lord Lytton, viceroy of India, proclaimed Vernacular Press Act in the year 1878. It was to control and censor regional newspapers published in Indian languages. Publishers were forced not to print anything against the British. Punitive actions were taken and there was no right to appeal in a court of law. British Raj viewed the printed word as a direct threat to stability after the 1857 uprising. Newspapers like *Samachar*, *Bharat Mihir*, *Dacca Prakash* etc. faced punitive actions. Books questioning the British supremacy were banned. As country advanced towards the freedom struggle, censorship became more intensive and freedom movement specific. The Indian Press Act 1910, was introduced to restraint presses to publish any type of literature regarding freedom. In the early 20th century focus of censorship shifted to supressing freedom moments.

In the year 1910, under the pretext of sedition, book *Hind Swaraj* written by Mahatma Gandhi was banned. Books like *Yug Bani* written by revolutionary poet Kazi Nazrul Islam was banned in the year 1922, *Sindhoo*, a collection of nationalistic poems by Zaverchand Meghani was banned in the year 1930 and he was jailed for two years. Similarly, *Netaji ke Saathi* written for revolutionary spirits by Imdad Sabri was banned for writing about *Azad Hind Fauj*.

Beside freedom movement, books were also banned for religious and social reasons (*Devika 2019*). In the year 1924 an urdu booklet *Rangila Rasul* written by Pandit Chamupati was about Prophet Muhammad's life. Chamupati wrote it anonymously. It was banned due

to its widespread protests. Similarly, *Aangaarey* a collection of short stories by different writer including Sajjad Zaheer et.al; in the year 1932 was banned for religious reasons. Books were banned not only of Indian authors but they were also banned of foreign authors. The book *The Face of Mother India* by Katherine Mayo was banned in 1936 due to poor depiction of Indian culture. Books like *Hindu Heaven* by Max Wylie (1934) and *Old Soldier Sahib* by Frank Richards (1936) were also banned. *Satyarth Prakash* written by Maharishi Dayanand Saraswati was banned in the Sindh Province of present day Pakistan for religious reasons.

The Post-Colonial Paradox:

Instead of repealing book censorship independent India retained it. Book censorship in post-colonial era reflects a continua of state control of the British Raj. Practices adopted by the British are followed in the independence India. Focus shifted from era of political suppression to bans driven by national security, religious sentiment, immoral acts and political sensitivity concerns. Main focus was on securing borders and to protect national leaders. It is retained to maintain public order, social harmony, national security, religious, cultural sensitivities and morality (*Konig 2013*). Censorship in the country is not uniform but it is decentralized. The Indian Constitution has guaranteed freedom of speech under Article 19(1) a, but it also allows some restrictions under article 19(2) where Govt. can impose censorship.

Regarding censorship First Amendment to the constitution was done in 1951 on the free speech (Article 19(2) giving state power to ban books in the interest of public order and decency. The book *Rama Retold* was written by Aubrey Menen. It was banned due to irreverence shown to the holy book Ramayana. Similarly, *Ramayana: A True Reading* written by Periyar E.V. Ramasamy was banned in Uttar Pradesh in the year 1969. *The Lotus and the Robot* by Arthur Koestler was banned in 1960. *Nine Hours to Rama* by Stanley Wolpert (1962), *Unarmed Victory* by Bertand Russell (1963) were banned. Anti-religious publications were considered to be offence (*Kumar N. 2023*). During 1960s Chinese books were banned due to geopolitical conflicts due to Sino-Indian war.

Politics and political leaders:

1950 Agha Babar's *Cease Fire* was banned as it depicted tense relations of partition. *The Lotus and the Robot* by Arthur Koestler (1960) was banned as it rendered poor picture about Mahatma Gandhi and democracy. For criticism of Indian leadership during 1962 Sino-India war, book *Unarmed Victory* by Bertrand Russell was banned in the year 1963.

In the history of Indian democracy, Emergency period (1975-77) is considered to be the darkest period when Emergency was proclaimed. Censorship was imposed on print media and presses. Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) was imposed by the state. Books

were seized. Censorship reached its highest peak. Books like *Nehru: A political Biography* by Michael Edwardes and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong* were banned in the year 1975.

Due to religiosity many books were banned (*Hannabuss and Allard 1994*). *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie and *Understanding Islam through Hadis* of Ram Swarup were banned in the year 1988 and 1991 respectively as these books were considered to be of religious sensitivity.

Bhavsagar Granth in Punjab (2001), *Dwikhandito* by Taslima Nasrin in West Bengal (2003), *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown in Nagaland (2006) were banned due to religious reasons. *The Hindus: An Alternative History* by Wendy Doniger (2014) was withdrawn by the publisher. Due to depiction of Santhal culture in poor light *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar was banned in the year 2017. For national security and sovereignty reasons, in a large number, twenty-five books were banned in the Jammu and Kashmir authorities for promulgating false narratives in the year 2025. Books like *Azadi and Kashmir: The Case of Freedom* by Arundhati Roy, *The Kashmir Dispute: 1947-2012* by A.G. Noorani, *A Dismantled State* by Anuradha Bhasin etc. were banned.

The temporal analysis of book censorship does not reveal any clear and specific pattern of geographical concentration. There are hot spots of censorship in every direction of the country which are not spaced uniformly.

After the revolt of 1857, censorship appears spatially concentrated in the centres of rebellion. Major publishing centres such as Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai functioned as nodal points of surveillance, reflecting a territorial strategy aimed at suppressing anti-imperialist discourse. Temporally, this phase coincides with the rise of nationalist movements, indicating a direct correlation between political mobilisation and intensified censorship. Bengal Presidency (Kolkata) was an early nationalist writing centre. The dramatic Performances Act of 1876 was censored to stop political activities and theatre (*Bhatia 2004*). Journal edited by Bal Gangadhr Tilak and other Marathi presses in Bombay Presidency (Maharashtra) were censored for anti-government writings. Similarly, in Meerut, Varanasi and parts of Uttar Pradesh presses were forced for checking. In Lahore, united Punjab, pamphlets of *Rangila Rasul* were banned for anti-religious feelings.

The mid-twentieth century marks a spatial shift in censorship hotspots to ideologically rigid states. Unlike colonial censorship, which targeted political dissent in occupied territories, censorship operated within national boundaries and was driven by

ideological conformity. Censorship shifted from political rebellion to religious and moral sentiments. (*Barrier1974*).

After independence in 1947, censorship becomes increasingly fragmented and region-specific. The spatial pattern transforms from uniform national bans to localized hotspots shaped by religious sensitivities, cultural identity and regional politics. States such as West Bengal and Tamil Nadu emerge as prominent zones of literary restriction, while enforcement varies significantly across regions. This decentralisation reflects changing governance structures, where state governments, courts and social groups play an active role in regulating literature. (*Ganguly et al. 2024*)

The Northern Region:

In northern India censorship is to maintain religious and territorial integrity. In Jammu & Kashmir book censorship has moved from blasphemy to national security. Due to false narratives and secessionist literature twenty-five books were banned by administration in the year 2025 (*Govt. of J&K*). Books of Arundhati Roy (*Azadi*), A.G. Noorani (*The Kashmir Dispute*), Anuradha Bhasin (*A Dismantled State*), Hafsa Kanjwal, *Independent Kashmir* by Christopher Snedden and many more books were banned.

In Punjab book censorship is mainly to maintain communal harmony. *Bhavsagar Granth* was banned in 2001 due to anti Sikh feelings.

The Southern Region:

Censorship in southern India is of linguistic type. It reflects conflict between morality and social movements. *Madhorubhagan* written by Perumal Murugan was banned for morality reasons. The Dravidian movement also lead to banning and burning of books for Aryan impositions in 1950s and 1960s.

The Western India:

In the western region, specifically in Maharashtra and Gujarat, censorship revolves around historical figures. Biographical works which are derogatory to their heroes like Shivaji, Sardar Patel, Mahatma Gandhi are banned.

In Maharashtra book censorship was mainly because of historical icon protection. The book *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India* by James Laine was not only banned in 2004 but all copies were also physically destroyed. *Great Soul* by Joseph Lelyveld was banned in Gujarat, in 2011. In 2009, *Jinnah: India-Partition-Independence* by Jaswant Singh was banned as it portrayed Sardar Patel not in good picture. Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* was banned as it depicted character resembling to Bal Thackeray. It was banned in 1995.

The Eastern and North-eastern Region:

West Bengal is known for intellectual liberalism, yet West Bengal has banned many books to maintain communal harmony in the state. *Dwikhandito* autobiography of Taslima Nasrin (2003) was banned due to religious sensitivity.

In Nagaland books were banned due to religiosity. In the year 2006, *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown was banned for hurting religious sentiments of Christians. *History, Religion and Culture of North East India* by T. Raatan was in Manipur in 2018. It was banned due to protests by Kangleipak Students Association. *Smash and Grab: Annexation of Sikkim* by Sunanda K. Datta-Ray was banned in 1984 due to political history of North-East.

Conclusion:

The spatio-temporal study shows that censorship has increased from 1857 till today. Study shows that objectives of censorship have changed from political rebellion of colonial era to religious and immorality reasons. Different state governments have used censorship to please masses. National security, religion, politics and morality are the major reason for censorship. In northern parts of India censorship is mainly due to national security and religious concerns while in western parts of India censorship is mainly of biographic concerns, mainly against the national heroes. In the eastern and north-eastern parts of the country censorship is anti-religion concerns while in southern parts of the country censorship is mainly of linguistic and religious concerns.

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