

# Bad Taste Isn't Crime

Ashwin Sanghi



First, a few disclaimers. Your correspondent was a guest on a Ranveer Allahbadia podcast. He's never watched Samay Raina's India's Got Latent. And, yes, Ranveer's so-called joke was disgusting and unfunny. But did his words incite hate or call for violence? No.

Were they in poor taste? Absolutely. So are movies like *Grand Masti*, OTT content like *Gandii Baat*, TV shows like *Bigg Boss*, some Bhojpuri songs and

## ALLAHBADIA CASE

Bollywood numbers. Banning all these in the internet age would be to impose a Chinese-style firewall.

Your correspondent has often spoken of Bharat's civilisation and Sanatan Dharm as means to pluralism that doesn't comprehend the concept of blasphemy. It thrives on intellectual freedom, debate and reinterpretation. It embraces multiple philosophies – dvait, advait, nastik. Gods can be mocked. Sage Bhrgu kicked Vishnu on his chest in Srimad Bhagavatam with no adverse consequences. The Charvak philosophical tradition rejects existence of gods and scorns Vedic rituals. Rigved's nasadiya sukt questions the universe's origins, the creator's role, whether gods know the 'ultimate truth'. Debate, doubt, irreverence are never criminalised.

Gods are questioned, cursed, yet they embrace discourse, not punishment.

Temples in Khajuraho, Konark or Modhera depict erotic imagery including what may appear as bestiality and group intimacy. Our ancestors were broad-minded enough to interpret these depictions within the philosophical context of kama (desire) and moksh (transcendence). Tantra that influenced many such depictions believed in understanding all aspects of life, including sexuality, as part of evolution. Today, many of these would be viewed as bordering on pornography. Should we criminalise them?

Vatsyayan's Kamasutra is a sophis-

ticated discourse rooted in a cultural ethos that embraced desire as essential to life, viewing kama as one of four goals of existence, alongside dharm (duty), arth (wealth), and liberation (moksh). Kamasutra reflects a time when society engaged with openness and intellect, not repression or shame. But modern India gets swept up by moral indignation, and increasingly favours outrage over understanding, censorship over dialogue, and penalty over rebuke.

Far from moral condemnation, Chanakya's Arthashastra takes a pragmatic approach to prostitution, treating courtesans as integral to economy. Prostitution was state regulated, provided with protection and taxes levied on earnings. Present-day India stigmatises prostitution. A civilisation that once approached matters with realism has become a society obsessed with appearances.

Should there be an age limit for consuming explicit content online? Absolutely. Should there be a certification system for content? Probably, by an industry body. Should platforms be penalised for violations? Sure. Does one need to watch Samay Raina's show? Not at all. But does a YouTube sensation deserve arrest for a non-joke? A resounding no. There is a fundamental difference between immoral and illegal. Immorality can be handled by rebuke – social media outrage, withdrawal of sponsorships and subscribers. Illegality demands state intervention.

When we start criminalising bad jokes, crude lyrics, or tasteless cinema, we allow the loudest mob to dictate what's an offence. Today, it's a comedian's ill-conceived punchline. Tomorrow it could be a historian's analysis, a journalist's turn of phrase. In a democracy, right to take offence exists but so does the right to ignore, critique, or counter, just like Hindu traditions of debate. If our ancestors could thrive on tarka (reasoning), swatantrata (intellectual freedom), and samvad (debate), why turn every instance of poor taste into a criminal offence?

Do we want to go down the road that trivialises the law and empowers state to police thought, speech and artistic expression? If history has shown us anything, it is this – once such powers are normalised, they're rarely rolled back.

*Author of mythological fictions*

