The C-word

Swaha Bhattacharya

2023-02-08

The resurgence of blatant censorship in recent times has become a weapon for governments to withhold information from their citizens, even in the biggest democracies. India, the largest democracy of the world, today faces this new threat to its democracy.

Less than 1000 people in India have been able to watch a new BBC documentary on Narendra Modi, India’s current prime minister, and his role in the 2002 Gujarat riots – a mere 0.000071% of the population. For a country of 1.4 billion, that would be like one person in the whole population of the city of San Antonio, Texas.

The Indian Government was quick to ban this documentary, dismissing it as propaganda. Within a week of its release in January 2023, citizens were banned from sharing any of its video clips on social media and students who tried to watch it were either detained by the police or faced power cuts at their college ([1](https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/26/india-banned-a-documentary-its-students-have-other-ideas-modi-bbc-jamia-jnu/)).

This shocking percentage is just an example of the rise of censorship not only in India, but across the globe.

The United States saw a ban of over 1600 books in school libraries in just the 2021-2022 academic year ([2](https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/the-50-most-banned-books-in-america/35/)), of which 41% address LGBTQ themes ([3](https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/whos-behind-the-push-to-ban-books-in-schools-180980818/#:~:text=About%2041%20percent%20of%20the,22%20percent%20of%20the%20titles.)). This is the highest number of book bans in the US in 21 years, as recorded by the American Library Association ([4](https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/04/07/book-bans-congress-student-library/)). 2022 also saw the ban of classics like ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’ and ‘The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn’ in response to parent complaints about the use of racist epithets in these books ([5](https://www.marshall.edu/library/bannedbooks/the-adventures-of-huckleberry-finn/#:~:text=After%20parent%20complaints%20about%20the,from%20required%20classroom%20reading%20lists.)).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has also proved to be a flash point for censorship in the United States. This field of study that demonstrates the legal codification of racism in the United States and the country’s racist past ([6](https://www.endasianhate.org/critical-race-theory)) has faced serious criticism by Republicans in the country. Many Republican-governed States have enacted laws to regulate the discussion of racism and other forms of systemic inequality in classrooms ([7](https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/map-where-critical-race-theory-is-under-attack/2021/06)). In fact, in Arkansas, Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders signed an executive order as recently as January 11, 2023 banning any material promoting ideas discussed by CRT.

The reaches of censorship can also be far more insidious – it is one of the defining characteristics of a totalitarian regime. Hungary has seen a decline in citizens’ rights, including the suppression of media and academic freedom, and has gone from being categorized as a ‘consolidated liberal democracy’ to a ‘transitional regime’ ([8](https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2021/04/11/hungarys-transformation-and-the-complicity-of-the-eu/)) since the election of Prime Minister Viktor Orban in 2010.

“I believe I should be able to watch or read anything I want or at least have access to it,” said Vatsala Ramanan, an international student from India at Smith College. “It is disturbing to see the government banning media from such credible sources; what are they trying to hide?”.

The ban of the BBC documentary in India is just one instance of the rise of censorship in India. Ever since Modi was elected as the Prime Minister of India for the first time in 2013, freedom of press in India has been at stake. There were at least 198 serious attacks on reporters between 2014 and 2019, of which 40 were fatal ([9](https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/40-journalists-killed-india-198-serious-attacks-last-five-years-finds-study-114646)). Seven journalists were arrested in India in 2022, a record high for the second consecutive year since the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) began its prison census in 1992 ([10](https://thewire.in/media/cpj-jailed-journalists-india-seven)).

Countries like India have fought long, hard battles against imperialism and colonialism to achieve democracy. This rise in censorship presents a threat to their existing social fabric. It is imperative for individuals and institutions alike to gauge the gravity of the situation and take necessary precaution against such censorship.