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Krishna Holy Book Faces Ban in Tomsk

By Alexander Bratersky

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The “Bhagavad Gita as It Is” is the central text for modern-day Krishnas. **Igor Tabakov**

The book may be accused of expressing religious hatred, suppressing human dignity and declaring one religion superior to all others. But “Bhagavad Gita as It Is” can hardly be called Adolf Hitler’s “Mein Kampf.”

Still — if prosecutors in Tomsk have their way — the two may soon end up together on the Justice Ministry’s list of banned extremist literature.

Why the Hindu text central to the Hare Krishna faith has suddenly been targeted is unclear, but some suspect it is really an attack on the religious freedom of a group not well-regarded by the Russian Orthodox Church.

The case against the widely distributed book began in September when Tomsk prosecutors filed charges in the city’s Leninsky District Court saying the text attacks practitioners of other religions as “fools,” “demons” and “pigs.”

"'Bhagavad Gita as It Is' contains ... calls for hostile activities against different social and religious groups, among them women and people who don't follow Krishna," the complaint reads.

Authorities in the Siberian city cited specific passages as evidence of extremist thinking.

"Those who, out of envy, disregard these teachings and do not practice them regularly are to be considered bereft of all knowledge, befooled and doomed to ignorance and bondage," reads an excerpt of the book quoted in the complaint.

The prosecutor's office even included a note from the local Federal Security Service office, listing the address of the Tomsk bookstore where the book could be purchased.

Yury Pleshakov, spokesman for the Russian branch of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, said the whole case is absurd.

"It would be dangerous that along with [the book], a billion citizens of the world would be considered extremists," he said, referring to the population of India where the book is considered a national treasure.

A spokeswoman for the Tomsk regional prosecutor's office declined to comment, citing the ongoing investigation.

The case is currently on hold after Judge Galina Butenko ordered experts at Kemerovo State University in Tomsk to present further analysis, but it is expected to resume Thursday.

The actual "Bhagavad Gita" is vaguely dated between the fifth century BC and fifth century AD. The commentary included in the "as it is" edition, first published in 1968, was provided by guru Swami Prabhupada, founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness.

Curiously, the excerpt quoted by Tomsk prosecutors as extremist is from the original text and not Prabhupada's commentary, which could pave the way for banning the ancient Hindu scripture.

Since its first publication, "Bhagavad Gita as It Is" has been translated into 60 languages — including Russian — and is widely considered the best-selling Indian text in the world. It is also at the core of the modern Krishna movement.

Versions of the text have been given as gifts to world leaders for decades — including British Prime Minister David Cameron, who said earlier this month that he keeps a copy of the book in his office.

Prosecutors built their case largely around expert testimony from Tomsk State University professors who said the book expresses religious hatred and discriminates on the basis of gender, race, nationality and language.

But even the university's experts who prepared statements for the prosecutor's office have presented mixed and contradictory opinions in court.

Sergei Avanesov, dean of the university's philosophy department, told the court that all

interpretations of the book "depend on perception."

His statement was backed by assistant philosophy professor Valery Svistunov, who said the book is not "extremist" but could be viewed simply as "polemical."

At the same time, Avanesov said he agreed with the testimony of another expert, philology professor Valery Naumov, who said the book contained "hostile, humiliating and insulting" information.

Noted Hindu studies expert, Boris Falikov, told The Moscow Times that the testimony was absurd.

"The translation and comments made by Swami Prabhupada was called extremist because the quotes were taken out of context," Falikov said.

"Using such a nonscientific approach, you can even call the Quran or the Bible extremist literature," he said.

Indeed, the holy books of both Islam and Christianity contain norms no longer embraced by Western society, such as slavery and polygamy.

Falikov pointed out that the original "Bhagavad Gita" is widely considered one of the most respected Hindu books and was admired by the likes of Leo Tolstoy and Albert Einstein.

"I don't think that they would admire the book if it really spread religious hatred and humiliated human dignity," he said.

Russian anti-extremism legislation is notoriously vague, and the political opposition, especially nationalists, often accuse the authorities of manipulating the legal definition for crackdowns on unwanted groups.

If declared extremist by the court, "Bhagavad Gita as It Is" will end up on the Justice Ministry ban list alongside Nazi propaganda and anti-government leaflets.

Such a decision would automatically allow police to detain Krishna practitioners, who often sell the book on the street, Krishna society spokesman Pleshakov said.

Tomsk ombudsman Nelli Krechetova has criticized prosecutors, saying a possible book ban will destroy citizens' constitutional rights, religion freedom and freedom of speech.

Krechetova also worried that the legal proceedings would paint the city of Tomsk — generally regarded as a Siberian center of education and culture — in a negative light, the Rapsi legal news agency reported last month.

She also brought up an earlier conflict with the regional government over a proposed Krishna settlement that was halted under court order this spring.

Local Krishna followers had intended to build 59 houses at the settlement, but the local administration said the construction violated the law because the land was intended for agricultural use.

In that case, the regional government efforts were backed by local Orthodox Church archbishop Rostislav, who called the Krishnas a "sect" that wanted to "set its roots" in the region.

The relationship between the church and the Krishnas has long been tense, with local Orthodox officials complaining that the society seeks to lure Russians away from traditional beliefs.

In 2006, officials in the Tula Orthodox diocese filed a complaint after local Krishnas tried to involve residents in the celebration of a Krishna holiday.

That has led to much speculation in Tomsk media that the Orthodox Church was behind the attempt to ban the book.

But a spokesman for the Tomsk diocese, who only identified himself as Father Viktor, said church officials had nothing to do with the legal efforts.

He was also quick to point out that the case involved the newer "Bhagavad Gita as It Is," and not the ancient "Bhagavad Gita," but did not comment on the prosecution citing the original Hindu text, and not the 20th-century commentary, in their complaint.

He also said the earlier conflict over the settlement was an example of negative behavior by Krishna followers.

"We don't have any relationship with them. But there are traditional religions, and there are sects," he said by telephone.

Pleshakov, the Krishna spokesman, refrained from making any negative comments about the Orthodox Church, saying Krishna followers treat it "with respect."

Instead, he blamed the judicial system.

"If we live a country based on the rule of law, the laws should work ideally, but often even an educated judge can end up in dead-end situation," he said.

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