

Court Rejects Ban of Hindu Scripture

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A Russian court decided Wednesday not to ban a religious text central to the global Hare Krishna movement, rejecting claims that the text is "extremist" and ending a case that has angered Hindus around the world.

Prosecutors in the Siberian city of Tomsk had argued that the Russian translation of "Bhagavad Gita As It Is" promotes "social discord" and hatred toward nonbelievers, causing an outcry in India, where many considered the proposed ban a violation of the rights of Hindus in Russia.

The text is a combination of the Bhagavad Gita, one of Hinduism's holiest scriptures, and commentary by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, which is often called the Hare Krishna movement.

The prosecutors had asked the court to include the book on the Federal List of Extremist Materials, which bans more than 1,000 texts, including Adolf Hitler's "Mein Kampf" and books distributed by the Jehovah's Witness and Scientology movements.

Alexander Shakhov, a lawyer for Hare Krishna devotees in Tomsk, said the group is satisfied

with the court's decision.

"This judge's decision shows that Russia is becoming a truly democratic society," Shakhov was quoted as saying by the Interfax news agency. "We are very excited about this victory."

Yury Pleshakov, a spokesman for the group in Moscow, said the book in question has existed in Russia for 25 years and has never inspired violence or extremist activity.

"On the contrary, this book teaches humane attitude towards all living beings," Pleshakov said.

The trial, which began in June, followed this year's ban on the construction of a Hare Krishna village in Tomsk and was based on an assessment by professors at Tomsk University, who concluded that "Bhagavad Gita As It Is" includes strong language against nonbelievers and promotes religious hatred and discrimination on the basis of gender, race, nationality and language.

The ruling came a day after Indian External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna met with Alexander Kadakin, Russia's ambassador to India, and urged the Russian government to resolve the issue. Indian officials had last week appealed to high-level Russian authorities to intervene.

The Tomsk court had postponed the decision from Dec. 19, when protesters gathered outside the Russian consulate in Kolkata, and the speaker of India's lower house of parliament adjourned the body for several hours after members began shouting in anger over the proposed ban.

After hearing further testimony from academic experts on Wednesday, the judge ruled that the prosecutors' claims were unfounded.

The Foreign Ministry insisted the Tomsk court was not taking issue with core Hindu scripture itself, but rather with the author's commentary and poor translation in "Bhagavad Gita As It Is."

Still, followers of the Hare Krishna movement in Russia saw the proposed ban as a result of continued intolerance of minority religions by the Russian Orthodox Church. Pleshakov estimates there are at least 150,000 Hare Krishna devotees in Russia.

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