

Tomsk Court Rejects Call to Ban Hindu Holy Book

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Tomsk's top court rejected a call from prosecutors Wednesday to ban one of Hinduism's holiest books, avoiding a diplomatic tussle days before President Dmitry Medvedev's visit to India.

Indian lawmakers had criticized the case strongly. Russia and India have vibrant trade ties dating back to the Soviet era, and New Delhi is Moscow's top arms customer, buying several billion dollars in weapons every year.

Prosecutors argue that the book — a translation of the Bhagavad Gita — included a commentary that was "hostile to other faiths." Initial reports of the court case against the book caused Indian parliamentarians to adjourn in protest last year.

Medvedev will go to India next week for a summit of the BRICS group of emerging market powerhouses Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

The decision made by a top court in Tomsk on Wednesday upheld a ruling made late last year

by a lower district court.

"I believe that this is an absolutely fair, logical and most important of all — a law-abiding decision," Interfax quoted Alexander Shakhov, lawyer for a Hare Krishna society in Tomsk, as saying.

India's foreign minister condemned the case last year as "patently absurd" and said he had raised it with senior Russian officials.

Russia's Foreign Ministry later said the complaint was not against the Bhagavad Gita itself but a translation with a preface written in 1968 by a founder of the movement A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. The book was translated into Russian in 1984.

Rights activists say local officials have exploited Russia's vaguely worded law on extremism in recent years to persecute religious groups frowned upon by the Orthodox Church.

Following trials brought by prosecutors across the country, Russia's list of banned literature has grown to more than 1,000 texts including Jehovah's Witness texts, works by Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard and Turkish Islamic theologian Said Nursi.

The Bhagavad Gita takes the form of a conversation between Hindu god Krishna and a prince called Arjuna prior to a battle. The book, praised by Albert Einstein, forms the bedrock of the Hindu belief system.

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