Removing fear

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The private member's Bill aimed at protecting literary freedom from threats is welcome

- Literary freedom is taken for granted in democracies, but forces that threaten or undermine it are always at work.
- Each age has to fight the battle afresh.
- In recent times, several attempts to get books withdrawn, pulped or sanitised of offending content have achieved full or partial success in India.
- Public order, national unity and social or religious harmony are the principles commonly invoked against the practice of literary freedom.
- Threats to free expression, especially artistic freedom, in our times mainly come from those claiming to espouse the interests of a particular religion or social group.
- It is in this context that Shashi Tharoor, Congress MP and writer, has introduced a private member's Bill in the Lok Sabha seeking to protect freedom of literature.
- Its objective — that "authors must be guaranteed the freedom to express their work without fear of punitive action by the State or by sections of society" — commends itself to any society that upholds liberal values.
- It seeks the omission of three IPC sections, including 295A, in effect a non-denominational blasphemy law, as it targets deliberate or malicious acts to outrage religious feelings.
- Section 295A is a grossly misused section, often invoked in trivial ways to hound individuals, harass writers and curtail free expression. It deserves to be scrapped.
- Sections that relate to the sale of obscene books and uttering words that hurt religious feelings are also sought to be omitted.
- However, it is unclear why Section 153A, which punishes those who promote enmity between groups on grounds of religion, race or language, and Section 153B, which criminalises words and imputations prejudicial to national integration, do not draw Mr. Tharoor's attention.

- Seen in this light, Mr. Tharoor's initiative is most welcome as a step towards removing or diluting penal provisions that inhibit literary freedom.

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