

Cancellation of Javed Akhtar event sparks row in Bengal

Source - TH

The core issue is the **cancellation of a state-sponsored cultural event (featuring Javed Akhtar) by the West Bengal Urdu Academy**, allegedly under pressure from religious groups. This incident highlights a critical tension between:

1. **Freedom of Expression & Secularism:** Civil rights groups (like APDR) accuse the state government of betraying its constitutional duty to uphold secularism and free speech by capitulating to the demands of fundamentalist forces. They see it as a politically motivated move to appease a specific voter bloc ahead of elections.
2. **Communal Harmony & Sentiments:** The opposing groups (like Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind) argue that the cancellation was necessary to prevent potential communal disharmony, claiming that the speaker had a history of making comments that insult religious sentiments.

The event's postponement is thus not just an administrative decision but a **symbol of the state's dilemma in balancing ideological principles with pragmatic political and social considerations.**

HOW TO APPLY – A LITTLE LONG ANALYSIS BUT THIS WILL HELP YOU MORE THAN SHORT VERSION

GS Paper I: Indian Society

1. Salient Features of Indian Society (Diversity)

- **Question it Raises:** How does this incident reflect the challenges and tensions inherent in managing India's immense diversity?
- **Balanced Short Answer:**
 - The incident highlights the constant tug-of-war between **India's pluralistic, composite culture** (exemplified by Javed Akhtar's syncretic work in Hindi-Urdu cinema) and **assertive identity politics**.
 - The challenge for the state is to manage this diversity by fostering a common civic culture where differences are celebrated, not used as tools for political mobilization. The cancellation represents a failure to manage this tension,

allowing particularist identities to override the shared public space.

2. Communalism

- **Question it Raises:** Is this a case of managing communalism or exacerbating it?
- **Balanced Short Answer:**
 - **Exacerbating Communalism:** The act of cancellation can be seen as "**competitive communalism**" – appeasing one community to secure its votes, which may in turn alienate or provoke another community, leading to a vicious cycle of grievance and appeasement.
 - **It blurs the line** between *actual* violence and the *threat* of violence. When the state legitimizes the latter as a reason for action, it empowers fringe elements and tells society that mobilization on communal lines is an effective political strategy.
 - **Conclusion:** Instead of dousing communal flames, such actions provide oxygen to the idea that communal mobilization yields results, ultimately strengthening the very forces that threaten harmony.

GS Paper II: Governance, Constitution, Polity, Social Justice

1. Fundamental Rights (Article 19(1)(a))

- **Question it Raises:** Did the cancellation constitute a "reasonable restriction" under Article 19(2) on grounds of "public order," or was it a preemptive suppression of free speech?
- **Balanced Short Answer:**
 - **Suppression Argument:** Critics view this as a classic case of the "**heckler's veto**," where the state, instead of protecting the speaker's right and maintaining order, capitulates to the threats of a vocal group. This sets a dangerous precedent where any

event can be shut down by claiming offense, eroding the fundamental right to expression.

- **Reasonable Restriction Argument:** Supporters argue that the state has a paramount duty to prevent violence and maintain public order. Given the sensitive communal fabric, the government made a pragmatic choice to avoid a potential law-and-order situation, which is a valid ground for restriction under the Constitution.

- **Conclusion**

The cancellation appears more like suppression of speech than a legitimate restriction. Without evidence of an immediate and serious threat, the state's decision is difficult to justify under the Constitution."

2. Indian Secularism

- **Question it Raises:** Did the state's action uphold the Indian model of secularism, or did it take sides in a religious dispute?
- **Balanced Short Answer:**
 - **Failure of Secularism:** By canceling the event, the state moved from being a neutral umpire to an active regulator of religious sentiment. It privileged the subjective feelings of one group over the constitutional right of an individual to speak, effectively appeasing majoritarian or organized sentiments.
 - **Practical Secularism:** The state might argue that its primary duty is to keep the peace, and in a diverse society, this sometimes requires making difficult choices to prevent communal flare-ups, which is ultimately in the interest of all communities.
 - **Conclusion:** True secularism requires the state to protect the rights of all individuals (to speak and to practice religion) from the aggression of groups, not to negotiate those rights away based on potential displeasure.

3. Role of the State and Pressure Groups

- **Question it Raises:** Does such decision-making reflect good governance or the subversion of state policy to populist and electoral pressures?
- **Balanced Short Answer:**
 - **Poor Governance:** The incident shows how elected governments, fearing electoral backlash, can allow **non-state actors** (like religious groups) to dictate state policy. This undermines the rule of law and replaces it with **populist majoritarianism**, where governance is driven by vote-bank calculus rather than constitutional principles.
 - **Political Pragmatism:** Governments operate in a real-world political environment. Heeding the concerns of significant sections of society, even if based on sentiment, can be seen as a form of democratic responsiveness to avoid larger social unrest.
 - **Conclusion:** While governments must be responsive, capitulating to pressure groups sets a dangerous trend where organized threats override legal and constitutional mandates, weakening the state's authority.

3. GS Paper IV: Ethics, Integrity, and Aptitude

This paper requires you to analyze dilemmas from an ethical standpoint.

- **Ethical Dilemmas in Governance:**
 - **Use it to discuss:** The conflict between **Constitutional Morality** (adherence to the principles of the Constitution like free speech and equality) vs. **Public Morality** (majoritarian or group sentiments).
 - **Questions to ponder:** Should a public official prioritize maintaining immediate law and order or upholding a

foundational constitutional principle, even if it carries a risk? Is the cancellation an example of pragmatic governance or ethical capitulation?

- **Challenges of Corruption:**

- **Use it to discuss:** A broader definition of corruption. Beyond financial corruption, there is **political corruption** – the subversion of institutions and processes for political gain.
- **Argument:** Canceling an event to appease a vote bank, rather than for genuine public interest, can be framed as an ethically corrupt act by the government.



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