A billboard for the Bollywood film “Aarakshan,” or “Reservation” is displayed outside a cinema in New Delhi. The film was banned by 3 Indian states. — AP photos

British documentary. A YouTube comedy clip. A book on Hinduism. Each offended some segment of Indian society, and each was banned or suppressed as a result. Over the last year, at least two books and two films have become off-limits in India. “The Satanic Verses” has been forbidden since the 1990s. And the film censors board has issued a list of unacceptable words.

India is the world’s largest democracy and has made huge economic leaps in the last few decades to become a key Asian power. But politicians in this massive, chaotic country are still largely focused on identity — religious or ethnic.

“Religious communities, ethnic groups, historical figures are all off-limits,” says Shiv Vishvanathan, a social scientist at OP Jindal Global University. “The state is electorally subservient to any ethnic or religious group that holds a majority.” The most recent example of what Vishvanathan calls “India’s ban epidemic” took place last week when the government halted the screening of “India’s Daughter,” a British documentary on a 2012 gang rape, an attack so brutal that it sent shock waves through this nation long inured to violence against women.

Ostrich-like behavior

The reasons for banning the film were never spelled out, but officials seemed to suggest a range of possibilities — from fears that the film denigrated India to anger that it aired an interview with one of the convicted and condemned attackers. Santosh Desai, a social commentator and newspaper columnist, said that instead of tackling serious issues such as sexual violence, the government often turns ostrich-like, banning attempts to provoke discussion. “Women’s safety is a complex problem and banning a film that draws attention to it is like sticking a finger in an open wound,” Desai said.

Bans are also a result of the politics in this massive, chaotic country. They are still largely focused on identity — religious or ethnic. While the constitution protects the right to freedom of expression, the country’s penal code threatens up to three years’ imprisonment against those who appear to act “with deliberate and malicious intention of outraging religious feelings. Indian intellectuals reacted with outrage and condemnation in the aftermath of the jihadist attacks on the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, but few showed support when books and artists were banned in India, largely because they knew the state often won’t step in to protect them. India-born writer Salman Rushdie’s book “The Satanic Verses” has been banned here since 1988, since many Muslims consider it blasphemous. Rushdie was forced to cancel a 2012 appearance at the Jaipur Literary Festival amid protests and threats by prominent Muslim clerics. Last year, the publishing house Penguin India pulled from shelves and destroyed all copies of American historian Wendy Doniger’s “The Hindus: An Alternative History,” after protests and a lawsuit from a Hindu right-wing group. The group’s main objection was that the book described Hindu mythological texts as fictional.

Politics lead India to ban books and films

Movie stars and producers have been served legal notices for offenses ranging from using the word “lesbian” in a Bollywood film released last week. The Internet is no safe haven, as a comedy group’s roast of several well-known movie stars recently showed. The roast was equal parts crass, vulgar and hilarious. None of the stars seemed offended, but the language offended several religious and political groups.

Within weeks of the Jan 20 roast, the group had been forced to pull the video off YouTube and all participants, including the movie stars, had been served legal notices for offenses ranging from using vulgarity in front of women to circulation of obscene content on the Internet. It’s unlikely anyone will actually serve jail time, but it’s added a layer of caution in a society where there’s already a great deal of self-censorship.

Bans can even extend to food. A newly elected Hindu right-wing government in Maharashtra state recently made all slaughter, sale and consumption of beef a criminal offense punishable with a five-year prison sentence. While Maharashtra’s ban is one of the most stringent, similar bans are in place in several Indian states because the cow is revered in Hinduism. “Banning beef is like banning books,” says Vishvanathan. “We can, so we will.” — AP

No safe haven

Vishvanathan said no one stood up to defend Murugan: “Our institutions don’t have any teeth and our intellectuals don’t stick to their guns.” Movies are another common target. India’s film censor board rejected the erotic drama “Fifty Shades of Grey,” and a Bollywood movie that did appear on Indian screens are routinely scrubbed of sex scenes. Religious content also can draw censorship: “The Da Vinci Code” was banned in the Indian state of Goa, which has a large Christian population, because religious groups objected. The censor board recently issued a list of words it considered too racy — mostly expletives but also “masturbation” and any “double meaning words” in any language. The list is currently on hold, but the board did mute the word “lesbian” in a Bollywood film released last week. The Internet is no safe haven, as a comedy group’s roast of several well-known movie stars recently showed. The roast was equal parts crass, vulgar and hilarious. None of the stars seemed offended, but the language offended several religious and political groups.

A copy of the book ‘One Part Woman’ stands on display at The Bookshop in New Delhi. Tamil writer Perumal Murugan was hounded from his home after right-wing Hindu groups began calling for his death, and burning copies of the book saying it offended members of the Gounder caste.