

A black and white photograph showing a close-up of a hand holding a fountain pen, writing on a document. The document has some faint, illegible text on it. The pen is positioned over the text, and the hand is steady. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the paper and the metallic sheen of the pen.

Do We Need Cultural Policing?

There has been a spurt of protests and red-faced expressions against the deemed moral and ethical degeneration in the Indian society in recent times. Be it the uproar over the so-called bawdy on-field shakes of the imported cheerleaders in the just concluded Indian Premier League cricket matches or the ban on bar girls in Maharashtra, the moral policemen, with their holier-than-thou approach, have always been up in the arms to register their protests. What happened to be occasional outpourings seem to have become quite routine and regular, with the Culture Vultures finding more and more causes to take cudgels for as if we have got devoid of the real and basic issues affecting the common man.

Be it Nelson Mandela's paternal peck on Shabana Azmi, Richard Gere's Knightly smackers to Shilpa Shetty, sartorial choices of our tennis sensation Sania Mirza, the romantic liberties taken by lovers in Meerut or elsewhere to meet openly in public parks or the annual ritualistic remonstrations against the celebration of Valentine Day, the Moral Brigade has come down heavily against the same to spoil the party. These Talibani tendencies to dictate the basic nuances of culture to the common man definitely do not gel with the broader framework of a liberal democratic society.

What is surprising is the fact that such incidents of cultural policing are being reported with unceasing regularity now-a-days, quite surprisingly at a time when we are talking of further liberalisation and consequent freedom of choice for the creature called 'homo sapiens'. Such moral pangs take other hues in the form of attempts to ban smoking or drinking scenes or censoring substantive portions of a movie on silver screen on the specious plea that the same promotes these vices among the common public, even though there are various other and more effective ways to promote healthy habits among the citizens. One has a sinking feeling that such non-issues emanate from an unwholesome desire to either hog some cheap publicity or to create some controversies in a bid to cater to a select audience for some unseen political advantage.

Since eccentricities and inanities know no boundaries, such cultural policemen could be found throughout the world. So, even artistic freedom of expression exercised by such people as Salman Rushdie, Taslima Nasreen, Maqbul Fida Hussain, Ashish Nandy and the famous

European cartoonist who made a caricature of Prophet Muhammad have not been spared by these skin heads. Many of these people are the so called entrenched interests who try to regain their fast depleting acceptability or social respect by way of such dubious means.

While a section of our political class does batten and fatten on such class of politics, what surprises one is the tacit support extended to them by our intelligentsia by not registering their voice against such erratic, indiscriminate and misconceived curbs on the very basic human rights of the individual. How were one to dress up or who to marry ought to be best left to the sovereign desire of the individual in keeping with the law of the land. The numerous caste panchayats and their illegal fiats seeped in hoary moth-balled mores and customs have seen the execution or cold-blooded murders of many of the innocent men and women, something which should be shocking to the conscience of any civilised society. It is here that the state has to guard against any such incursion on individual freedom.

It is such cultural or intellectual policing that, on a different plane, also seems to dictate our reactions to such disparate phenomena as genetically modified food, human cloning or opening of retail chains. Believe it or not, all such reactions somehow and somewhere seem to stem either from entrenched vested interests or from a desire to bask in the evanescent media limelight to gain cheap brownie points in the political sweepstakes. But by doing so, we are only hurting the discourse of human development by blocking way to a more open and liberal society.

After all, if your motor car stops working or is environmentally polluting, you do not go back to the bullock cart. The best course of action would be to make the motor car more efficient or environment friendly rather than dumping it completely. So, when we have accepted so many other benefits of science and have already been interfering with nature enough, there should be theoretically no pangs to GMOs, cloning or stem cell research if the same could be used to better human life further without hurting the nature or compromising with the basic values. In fact, our ethics and values should also be living entities always evolving rather than being stuck in a time warp.

It is such feeling or tendency to benefit from ersatz popular revulsion or fear that has given birth to such entities as Taliban in Afghanistan or the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)-like entities elsewhere. It is the bounden duty of the societal leaders to inform and educate the unschooled masses about the various facets of collective social life. But, an irresponsible section of our leadership is busy wasting popular energies on such futile issues rather than mobilising and channelling the same into productive causes.

One just hopes that such protestations and remonstrations shall only further the debate typical of a liberal democracy, giving way to a more eclectic culture by way of a healthy discourse and paradigm on such issues. This is actually symptomatic of an India still being mired in history if we are to believe the postulates as averred by Francis Fukuyama in his celebrates thesis namely 'End of History'.

The minatory Delphic predictions by such prophets of doom as Samuel Huntington forecasting a 'Clash of Civilisations' may not eventually happen if one were to see the silver lining in the cloud. After all, as they say, every threat or difficulty is also an opportunity. So, such negative

expressions should actually further the democratic discourse including the need to debate the amount of freedom to be granted to the common man. However, one does feel that quite often some of these artistic freedoms of expression go overboard. Often such expressions could be easily tempered by the practical considerations of public morality by attempting a balance between the two and by stopping short of turning liberty into license. As John Stuart Mill would have said, 'Our freedom to move our hand stops where someone's nose begins.'

That such freedom and liberties reinforced by fundamental human rights, as also enshrined in our Constitution and Universal Declaration of Human Rights, should not be completely unchecked and unrestrained is something we all accept. If at all we decide to restrain them in the enlightened public interest, what should be the reasonable limit or curb on the same? But before we can actually see that happening, we have to ensure that the misplaced arrogance of a few does not lead others to react in a way which not only compromises the basic human rights of the silent majority, but can also be more prejudicial to the gradual maturing of human society. However, this is also important for this silent majority to prevent and pre-empt this loony fringe from being able to set the warp and weft of our cultural agenda.

Salient Points

- What happened to be occasional outpourings are becoming quite routine with the Culture Vultures finding more and more causes to take.
- Such non-issues emanate from an unwholesome desire to either hog some cheap publicity or to create some controversies in a bid to cater to a select audience for some unseen political advantage.
- State has to guard against any such incursion on individual freedom.
- Citizen ethics and values should also be living entities always evolving rather than being stuck in a time warp
- Duty of the societal leaders is to inform and educate the unschooled masses about the various facets of collective social life.
- Our freedom to move our hand stops where someone's nose begins.
- We have to ensure that the misplaced arrogance of a few does not lead others to react in a way which not only compromises the basic human rights of the silent majority.

Glossary

Cudgels: a short, thick stick used as a weapon

Sartorial: of or relating to clothing

Remonstrations: plead in protest

Pangs: a sudden feeling of mental or emotional distress

Hog: selfish person

Eccentricities: peculiarity, as of conduct

Inanities: lack of sense;

Evanescent: vanishing

Ersatz: artificial

Warp: twist out of shape

Minatory: threatening

Delphic: ambiguous

Loony: senselessly foolish