

The Rights and Wrongs of Free Expression

POINTS TO DEVELOP

Putting 'free expression' in context.

Communication integral to the development of society and civilization, but complete freedom of expression never possible.

Freedom of expression has two forms- giving information and creative work; benefit of information, and of a free press.

how bias enters presentation of information; the problem of censorship.

Complex matter of setting limits on freedom of expression; how free expression often clashes with the status quo loving society, and how in the conflict is born change, the basis on which society evolves.

limits on freedom of expression should be set with sensitivity and liberal outlook.

a one-sided approach can be a problem; a middle ground also exists.

Liberal outlook not to be confused with license or a 'free for all' situation.

Disagreement need not be acrimonious.

Rigidity to be avoided, and tolerance for different views to be encouraged.

free expression not an absolute entity.

The first cry of a new-born infant is an expression of its response to the outside world. The desire to express oneself is a corollary to the human capacity for feeling, imagination and thought. The need to give vent to our ideas and feelings is at times so great that we have no hesitation in talking to ourselves, when alone. The consideration of the rights and wrongs of free expression, however, arise only when such expression takes the form of communication – between individuals or among groups.

Communication of ideas has been basic to the very development of society and civilization. Exchange of thoughts contributes to the growth of an individual's personality even as it helps him or her to understand the world around and the society of which he or she is a part, and, perhaps contribute a little to that society. However, complete freedom of expression has never been entertained in any society; indeed, it is doubtful if it could ever be countenanced given the imperfect nature of human beings.

Freedom of expression relates to two forms of communication: purveying of information which is a major function of the media, and the creative aspect which involves the expression of an individual's imagination or ideas. There is no doubt that free flow of information helps entire nations to progress, and this relates specially to scientific and economic matters. In a democracy, a vigilant press is considered to be an effective watchdog of political behaviors: it plays an important role in both building up and disseminating public opinion. And if a government has national and social interest at all, it will be glad to get a true feedback on its policies and their implementation.

In the presentation of information, however, bias can enter- political, racial or social. The opinion of the controlling authority, be it the government or a private party, often colors even what goes by the name of 'news'. The question of media censorship of material which criticizes the controlling authority or that which does not agree with the declared 'editorial policy' is part of the complex issue of media autonomy and editorial prerogative. But broadly speaking the freedom of expression is not an absolute freedom anywhere in the world. Our own constitution puts "reasonable restrictions" on it in the interests of "the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the state, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence". A pretty long list of restrict define the boundaries; the controversy over free expressions rages as furiously as ever.

No sane person would disagree if one requires freedom of expression to stop short of abusing or maligning any person or community. However, it is not quite so easy to set limits on freedom of expression in so far as it conveys subjective ideas, thoughts and views. One's thoughts are free- at least one hopes so – but can all one's thoughts be expressed freely? If one has ideas greatly in variance with what society believes in and cherishes, there is bound to be a conflict between the individual and society. Most people like a smooth routine and cling to old beliefs; it gives them a sense of security; they look with suspicion on anything that might cause a change. And yet change is essential for a society to be dynamic, if it is not to stagnate and be fossilized. It takes a brave individual to speak out pour fresh ideas and views uncaring of consequences on a personal level. Ironically enough, religion which today is made an excuse to curb free speech has progressed mainly because individuals have, from time to time, questioned existing norms and tenets. The Buddha, Mahavira, Christ, Prophet Mohammad, Martin Luther, Sankara, Rmanuja, Nanak- all dared to express ideas which were at variance with the then widely prevalent beliefs, and either reformed religion or set up new sects. But their distinguishing trait was that

they had something positive to offer, and did not merely indulge in destructive criticism of existent beliefs.

Generally, liberal and progressive opinion all over the world is against attacks on freedom of expression, especially artistic expression. It is averred that a prudish establishment can hardly be expected to be an arbitrator on art and obscenity. Very few people quarrel with the idea that crude vulgarity and unwonted or pointless violence should not find a place in creative work however, when artistic expression appears to conflict with conventional morality, liberal thinkers would want informed critical opinion from respected persons in the arts to guide the restrictions or any censorship. On the whole, people should be free to see a film or read a book and arrive at their own opinion. By the same yardstick, an artist has a right to express his or her viewpoint which has its own validity

If authorities bowed to the wishes of each and every group to ban this or that work because it hurt some susceptibility or other, there would come a time when little artistic work would be produced, and that little would be insipid and not worth reading or viewing. Of course, every individual or group has a right to protest if it feels injured, and it would be within its rights to insist that its views too be aired in a suitable media. But it is wrong to insist that its views alone should be given importance and anything opposing it should not be expressed.

In the debate over free expression and restrictions over it, the champions of freedom tend to be seen as 'broadminded'; the other side is supposed to be full of prudes and bigots. However, let us not forget that a bigot is anyone who clings to the idea that his or her group alone can be the arbiter of taste or decide what is right and what is wrong. Today, we have bigots on both sides- those who champion the cause of absolute free expression under any and every circumstance irrespective of the audience or its likely impact and those who are equally rigid in the view the 'believers'. Both sides seem to think that they alone know the answers, and that these are valid for everyone, everywhere and for all times. What we see today is a sharp attacking the other as wholly wrong and showing supreme intolerance for any view but its own. There is no place for a viewpoint that is neither uncompromisingly for nor uncompromisingly against an issue. Things are viewed as pure black or pure white, and no place is left for grey where even if opposing views do not exactly meet, they could at least talk to each other.

A call for a liberal outlook is not to be confused with license to legitimize nay and every point of view – one must guard against fascism and racial and communal ideals on which compromise must be avoided. But even if we cherish

certain ideas, and some things are basic to our identity should we simply be debarred from questioning them? We may love and cherish our parents and friends, but in case they quarrel with others, would it be wrong to want to hear the other's point of view? It need not mean condemning our parents or friends. Similarly, we can raise questions about the limits of concepts like secularism and democracy even while not invalidating them. But when we raise those questions, need the language and tone be acrimonious – the language of combat, rude and offensive?

In an environment of liberal tolerance there would be freedom of expression for all points of view and room enough for dissent with all opinions, whether held by fanatics, intellectuals or the ordinary man in the street. Religious fundamentalism and intellectual fundamentalism are both examples of rigidity which hamper a healthy exchange of views and ideas. Freedom of expression should ordinarily be circumscribed by self-restraint, just as freedom of movement does not allow one to deliberately step on another's toes. There are times when good sense requires freedom of expression be checked, even if it goes against the grain of liberal thinking. In a situation where communal elements are waiting for the smallest provocation to set the country aflame, perhaps artistic criteria and the principle of letting people judge for themselves have sometimes to be set aside. The prevailing cultural and moral ethos do exercise a restraint on freedom of expression, though one may question whether such restraint is justified. However, for freedom of expression to flourish and contribute towards the improvement of human beings and their milieu and society, there is a need not for establishing "competing truths"- for truth has many equally valid facets – but for "open –ended and flexible" conversation. And freedom of expression must be exercised with caution, keeping in mind others' sensitivity, as well as the possibility of vested interests and rabble-rousers taking advantage of the situation. Or the precious freedom may be lost to all of us through misuse and abuse by those very persons and means that are eager to emphasize its importance

The rights and wrongs of free expression are not absolute; what may be right today, or wrong, may not be the same tomorrow. Perspectives change, social values change; free expression of ideas can change is for the better.