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EDITORIAL NOTE

Is the Freedom of Speech and Expression under peril in India?

The recent cartoon controversies that have rocked the nation coupled with the internet obscenity debate a few months back reflect the dismal state of irrationalism that persists in our country. Intolerance has reached such epidemic proportions that the political class invariably keeps falling back on antiquated arguments in the matter of individual freedoms. Constant attempts are being made to gag ideas and expressions which don't fit in with time-tested views and notions of certain individuals or a class of people. In the process, the art of reasoning has taken a backseat.

Recently, a storm brewed over the inclusion of an allegedly offensive cartoon in a political science textbook. As opportunistic politicians tripped over themselves to defend Ambedkar (shown riding a snail labelled "Constitution" and spurred on by a whip-wielding Nehru), not one paused to consider the idea that the whip might be a metaphor for the slow pace of the drafting process of the constitution and that no slight had been made against Ambedkar or Dalits. The textbook was prescribed for students of the 11th standard, an age when students are taught to not only absorb facts but to critically analyse them too. To deny them a point of view differing from what is convenient for a political group, is to do them and our education system an injustice.

However, our purpose is not to find out the true meaning or other comforting alternate meanings which can pacify warring groups. A true democracy should learn to appreciate all meanings – be it extremely discomfoting to some group or completely appeasing to

one group. There can always be multiple ways of understanding a particular form of expression. Some views can support such expression while others may be critical of it. Keeping the tradition of debate and argument alive, we should be open to all possible meanings.

Unfortunately, what we see nowadays is that there is no scope for another viewpoint to exist. Independence of thought is being completely curtailed. Moreover, not only have common people been victims of such hypocritical and whimsical decisions, but in the past we have seen that well known public figures were also been made to face the brunt. In 2009, Jaswant Singh's book *Jinnah: India-Partition-Independence* was banned because it stated that Sardar Patel had "conceded" Pakistan. Similarly, he was also criticised for praising Jinnah and was made to resign from his party. Such close-minded approach to historical analysis is damaging to individuals' freedom of speech as well as academic rigour and freedom. Rigid views and ideas of politically powerful people forces extra-constitutional limitations on people with respect to the exercise of their freedom of speech and expression.

Restrictions are not limited to political speech – this culture of intolerance permeates all forms of expression. That an artist as renowned as M.F. Husain was hounded out of the country by Hindu thugs who found his tastefully nude depictions of Hindu goddesses perverse, is an indictment of the very core principles of democracy and freedom upon which our nation is built. In a genuine democracy, it is a perversion to demand that one viewpoint be accepted at the exclusion of all others. A balanced outlook to the exercise of this right is missing; one finds that people use their freedom to suppress other's freedoms. Even the so-called elite and the administrators and politicians of our country support extremist and violent expression of opinions that suit their needs while informed discussions and criticisms are shunned.

One of the reasons for this could be that people are identifying themselves more with icons and not their ideologies and any diversion from what these icons seem to believe creates some type of a backlash.

As is being beginning to be argued, this is only to be expected in an age of “twitterisation”, where thought has been condensed into half slogans and shallow quips. Intellectuals have abandoned intellectual rigour for 60 second sound bites on shouting matches masquerading as television debates. Equally to blame is the political class, which has not only undervalued inconvenient truth, but has been openly hostile to it, and encourages ignorant criticisms fuelled not by considered thought but by irrational outrage and petty political calculations.

Tolerance for intolerance represents a failing in our democracy. Without tolerance for new and opposing ideas and an inculcation of constitutional values, our society would be so much the poorer for political, academic and artistic thoughts. We are hence forced to ask some uncomfortable questions – Is the growing intolerance a collective failure on our part to keep the spirit of democracy alive? Is it that for momentary gains we are willing to see that others’ rights are violated only to later find that we have conceded enough to the state to trample upon our own rights?

The Editorial Board