

In Defense of Freedom of Expression and the Right to Dissent

Vijay K. Soni

Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.

John Milton, *Areopagitica*

Freedom is a rare commodity and the rarest of all the freedoms is that of free speech and expression. It encompasses within its ambit all other types of freedoms - be it political, social, economic or psychological. The freedom to practice a religion, follow a profession or the freedom of physical mobility become meaningless and restricted once this cardinal gift is denied. It is not surprising to realize that what began as a political concept has now embraced all aspects of human life and liberty. For democracy, it's the very foundation on which the edifice of governance and institutions stand and draw their sustenance.

Incidentally, for the past one decade we have been witnessing the freedom of expression thwarted by inimical and antagonistic factors like religious extremism and intolerances that have percolated deep down in global geo-polity for one reason or the other.

These are not new phenomenon as it has always been there in some form or the other. What is worrying is the frequency and the degree of their prevalence and their notorious ability to draw global attention by virtue of violence and loss of human lives. The violence at *Charlie Hebdo*, a French satirical magazine, which killed 12 staffers, is only the tip of the iceberg of simmering discontent, mistrust and intolerance that has plagued the global socio-political fabric.

Recently in Bangladesh, within a span of few months, three liberal, secular bloggers were put to death for voicing what they believed to be their vocations in life. They were the bloggers who didn't offend a religion or religious beliefs but wanted people to do away with superstition and follow a rational path of tolerance and universal peace. Avijit Roy, a Bangladeshi-American and founder of the blog Mukto-Mona ('free mind') was killed in broad daylight in the streets of Dhaka in full public view. Washiqur Rahman, another blogger, was killed in a similar manner. Ananta Bijoy Das was another freethinker who was hacked to death in Sylhet, a city in Bangladesh for being anti-Islamic.

Quantitatively speaking, these are only few instances of religious intolerance. But there are numerous others, which either go unreported or are given ethnic hue for perpetuating such intolerances and violence. There are critics who have cited the 'Clash of Civilization' or Islamic extremism as the reasons for such violent reactionary outbursts. We often forget that these are human reactions to

repressive and curtailed freedom of expression of the people who are committing these crimes and it has to be seen in the light of human behavior. The perpetrators of such crimes are themselves victims who have been denied freedom of expression. The violence are reactionary outbursts by people, a group or community who has not been brought up in democratic societies. Democratic societies do not mean adult franchise alone, but a cultural, social ethos of free and rational thinking.

Come to think of a situation where these people have a platform to voice their opinion, the right to disagree, dissent and raise their identity concern peacefully and democratically. Would they continue with the perils of extremism? When we seek freedom of expression for ourselves, we have also to ensure that others are not denied of these inalienable rights, which brings perspective and balance to the way we see the world around us. And the way others see us. The disparity in religious belief, underdevelopment, and the divide between the East and the West are mere by-products and outward manifestation of malaise, which is fast making inroads in the global social fabric.

The biggest casualty of the existing order of violence has been its impact on artistic expression. While the one part of the world, which is more liberal and progressive, can see the changing order in perspective, the other remains deeply ingrained in conservatism and traditional thought-process. The conflict revolves around the two perspectives of world-views. Those who are involved in the conflicts of world-views, more often than not, bring religion as a prop to play the tricks to control and mesmerize the masses.

The sources of violent reactions have largely been by people inhabiting the developing countries or under-developed countries, if we use the term loosely. A large number of these countries are politically democratic but feudal and medieval in their social structures. They have still not been able to evolve from democratic nations to democratic societies. While the West was able to make this transition with bittersweet experiences, the Orientals were caught unaware and sandwiched between the traditional thought process and politically democratic and liberal ideologies. A society, which is not emancipated from religious orthodoxy, is bound to react negatively and violently to the liberal and progressive world-view. This has been proven time and again.

After globalization, the violent reactions have reached all shores - to Paris, to London, to New York, to Boston and other global cities. The world-views of these people also travel with them to whatever place they go. When migration takes place, whether of labour or skilled manpower, there is no visa restriction to deny entry to the world-view of the person emigrating. You simply can't control or curb it. What one can do however, is help in changing the world-view of the people who have never been exposed to the freedom of expression. One can help them reason out the existing rituals, practices and orthodoxy of which he or she is a victim. However tedious it may sound, there is no escaping from the vigor that is required in making course-correction in this journey. A large section of globe is still engulfed in the ignorance of what constitutes free speech and is not able to exercise this invaluable gift.

The problem largely is not with the freedom of expression but with the denial of the same rights to people who are aggrieved and find themselves to be circumstantial victims. They are far removed from expressing themselves and have been denied the necessary education to reason out and question the prevailing social and religious orthodoxy. There is no easy way to this perennial problem - no linear solution will work as it is an arena where both the violator and the victims are on the same footing, with little difference of perspective of whose rights are being violated and who is the violator.

Democratic social institutions are the only ray of hope for reformation and restoring the balance - of equal rights of free expression to one and all irrespective of caste, creed, color, religion and economic or educational status. To achieve this, democratic institutions will have to veer from majoritism to egalitarianism. It should not be the number or quantity that should qualify in heralding these reforms, but a true sense of purpose for ensuring that no ones rights are violated. It will have to be curative and creative at the same time. The goals of such reforms will have to be - to disagree, dissent and not being disrespectful at the same time.

As Mahatma Gandhi, the great Indian leader and advocate of non-violence theory, said - "Hate the sin and not the sinner." Unfortunately, what is happening is we are busy bashing the sinner and not eradicating the very roots of such sins. We have killed dictators, banished the blasphemers and outcaste the anti-social and criminals but have not been able to do away with the sin, which keeps making resurgence with vengeance, one after the other. The liberals' maxim of the 'rights to offend' should not be treated on equal footing to the 'rights to insult'. One has the rights to voice the differences but not the rights of differential treatment on the basis ethnicity, religiosity or racism because it's against the very concept of democratic rights.

Modern human history is replete with violation of rights of expression and it has been increasing with greater intensity. It was not too long back when Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* was criticized and banned in some countries on blasphemy charges and Islamic extremist groups issued a *fatwa* on his name. There was widespread condemnation of the incident and the world justifiably felt that a writer has the rights to exercise his or her imagination to elicit a point and in the process purge the society of orthodoxy and malpractices. But the line of differentiation of 'what's right' and 'what's wrong' is very thin and needs to be practiced with utmost caution. It brings us to yet another tricky issue of deciding who could be an arbitrator in the disputes of creative freedom. More often than not, it has to be the creative artist himself or herself who is expected to exercise this freedom with equanimity and responsibility. The government's role in such issues have met with disastrous consequence in the past as it is they who are perceived to be a threat to creative freedom by virtue of being state power. Governments have often stepped in when the consequence of such actions assume a public disorder.

In India, the government recently played such a role in mediating a truce between a section of people and Tamil writer and Professor, Perumal Murugan. His book "*One Part Woman*" (translation from Tamil titled *Madhorubhagan*) created uproar and there were widespread demonstration. The novel narrated a story in a temple town about an infertile couple having extramarital relationship to have a child. As the name of the town was real, the inhabitants felt offended and took it upon themselves as an insult to their society and religion. It turned out to be an unfortunate incident and for no reason the author had to apologize profusely to get away from being embroiled in the violence. He vowed to stop writing and posted a message on Facebook, '*Perumal Murugan, the writer is dead. As he is no God, he is not going to resurrect himself. He also has no faith in rebirth. An ordinary teacher, he will live as P. Murugan. Leave him alone.*'

In yet another incident in Kerala, a Professor of Malayalam T.J. Joseph had to face the wrath of Islamic fundamentalists. He had unwittingly put a fictitious story in a grammar test in which a lunatic was named 'Mohammad'. As a consequence, extremists chopped off his right hand. He was leveled blasphemer and was sacked from his job. Unable to bear the sufferings, his wife ended her life. It was the beginning of an unending trauma of humiliation, pain and suffering for the professor. The incident goes to prove not only the hostilities between communities, societies and religious groups but also the intolerance to an innocuous incident. One can never be sure as to which incident may flare up into violent demonstration given the volatile composition of social structure in India and around the globe.

History bears testimony to the fact that no nation or society can progress, innovate or be intellectually prosperous, if freedom of expression is curbed or when censorship starts ruling the imagination of people. It is as true in artistic expression as in academic, trade and commerce and in scientific endeavor. The ability to innovate comes from necessity, and free flow of ideas and exchange of dissent. As new forces shape the global geo-polity, these irritants will not only slow the progress of mankind but will also create new challenges which could be detrimental to our very creative freedom. Enough lives have been lost to intolerance and it's high time we learn a lesson to create a global order which is open, transparent, egalitarian and caring to the needs and wants of people living on the fringes of so-called democratic nations.

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