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زبان های اروپایی

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## Question of the limits of ‘Freedom of Expression’

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International Human Rights organisations are the biggest advocates of the Freedom of Speech and Expression. Everyone should have the right to freely put forward his/her views and opinions. But every other day, the reports suggest that in one country or the other, an attempt is being made to suppress the Freedom of Expression. It was in the practice of the same ‘Freedom of Expression’ when a Danish newspaper Jylland Posten published a controversial cartoon of the Prophet Mohammad. It met with violent reactions in many Muslim countries. If the publication of that cartoon was an example of the so called Freedom of Expression of the cartoonist, what would we call the violence that ensued?

Similarly, hue & cry created over Salman Rushdie’s novel ‘The Satanic Verses’ is refuses to end. Salman Rushdie must have followed the same so called Freedom of Expression while writing about the Islam and Holy Quran in his book. So, what is the logic behind the fatwa (decree) of death issued in Iran against him? Why his arrival to India was opposed tooth and nail? Even his video conference was cancelled under pressure of some fundamentalist fringe groups. Why this assault on Freedom of Expression? Why anyone should have problem with Taslima Nasreen’s personal opinion? It is Taslima’s freedom to express herself in her own book. She also faced the wrath of bigots. Recently, the inauguration of the seventh edition of her autobiography ‘Nirbasan’ was shelved during the 36th Kolkata International Book Fair on objection by a local Muslim Organisation Mili Ittehad. Has Taslima Nasreen no right to put her life’s experiences in her words?

Many other examples of suppression of so called Freedom of Expression can be found in India. For instance, by celebrated painter Maqbool Fida Hussein depicting the Hindu goddess Saraswati was called ‘insulting’ by a group of religious fanatics. As a result, Hussein’s art gallery was vandalized and he was threatened for life. Ultimately, he had to leave the country. Owing to the threat to his life, Hussein preferred to stay back in London and died there on 30th

June 2011. Early last year, he also acquired the citizenship of Qatar. In another instance, the film Parzania made on Gujarat riots was banned by Gujarat government due to the opposition its screening faced from zealots. They didn't want the truth of the riots to come out in the public. Similarly, many such incidents have taken place whereby the offices of TV channels, newspapers and editors' houses have been targeted just because the content of those media houses didn't go down well with some prejudiced right wingers.

A few months ago, Janata Party President Subramanian Swamy, making use of his so called right to freedom of speech, wrote an article in a newspaper in which he suggested depriving the non-Hindus from voting if they do not "proudly acknowledge that their ancestors are Hindus." Finding Swamy's views incompatible with its secular principles, Harvard University severed its ties with him. Student organisations of Harvard also called Swamy's article 'objectionable' and 'condemnable.' But why? Just like any other person, Swamy also enjoys the right to freedom of speech?

Latest case of assault on free speech came to light when a Kashmiri filmmaker Sanjay Kak was about to screen his documentary 'Jashn-e-Azadi' at a three-day seminar on Jammu and Kashmir in Symbiosis University, Pune. Due to the objections raised by the right wing Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the screening of the film had to be cancelled and the seminar was postponed. According to Sanjay Kak, he tried to portray the ground reality of Kashmir through his film. But the 'cultural nationalists' sitting in Pune accused Kak of promoting separatism through his film. Not only this, they even suggested that had the film been on the contribution of the armed forces in the state of Kashmir, they would have allowed its screening. Hence, now the film producers and directors should make films on the advice of these self-appointed guardians of society? The youth of similar mindset had beaten up eminent lawyer Prashant Bhushan just because they didn't agree with his views over Kashmir.

All the above examples make us think what exactly the Freedom of Expression stands for? What are its limits and if any thought, opinion or article is an object of Freedom of expression for some, why it is objectionable to others- people, organization or community? The fact is that the human sensitivities are as important as the freedom of expression. Common people often owe allegiance to their religion, caste, region, country, traditions, history, rituals etc. Almost everyone is serious and sensitive towards these legacies. Notwithstanding that such people are often seen as narrow-minded, intolerant or bigots, but in their own opinion their worldview is the best and most appropriate. They don't think there is any scope for any debate or discussion over their established faith.

It is true that the concept of freedom of expression is so abstract that its usage not only hurt people's sentiments; at the same time, this tool of freedom is used to suppress others' freedom of speech. In this long and protracted struggle between the freedom of expression and its suppression, it has not been decided yet as to what should be the limits of freedom of expression and who should decide such limits which are acceptable to the people of every country, religion and society. Setting the limits of this freedom can avoid confrontation. But it's not going to be easy.