

Freedom of speech

Sociology, Human Rights



Freedom of Speech Freedom of speech is arguably the most precious gift of democracy. Democracy nurtures freedom of speech of its citizens. Citizens, in turn, safeguard democracy by voicing their protest against each and every violation of democratic rights of people. Evolution of democracy is nothing but a history of the extension of the right of freedom of speech from the limited group of privileged citizens to the universal right of every citizen granted by democratic regimes of the world.

It should not be forgotten that the slaves had no franchise and freedom of speech till the 19th century and women got franchise and democratic rights only in the twentieth century in many democratic countries including Great Britain. Extent of freedom of speech can very well be considered the index of true spirit of democracy in a country. One wonders as to what would have been the course of history of many countries in the world, had freedom of speech been completely denied to their inhabitants. One celebrated instance of freedom of speech and its historical outcome is forcefully described by Shakespeare in his drama "Julius Caesar".

After the murder of Julius Caesar, some leading lights of Rome assembled at a place to offer justification for assassination of Caesar. Caesar, according to them, had become a threat to the freedom of Romans. Antony, a friend of Caesar begs for one opportunity to go to the stage and pay his tribute to the dead Caesar. Once he gets the permission to speak, he makes the fullest use of his freedom of speech and explains to the audience how Caesar had undergone hardships to serve the people. Bit by bit, he builds up a highly sympathetic opinion among the crowd of listeners and they are converted from being haters of Caesar to lovers of Caesar.

Not only that, most of the Romans thereafter started hating Brutus for his dastardly act of killing Caesar. Antony, through the clever exercise of his freedom of speech is able to turn the table on the conspirators and mobilise pro- Caesar forces to defeat Brutus and his co-conspirators. History of civilisation is the history of conscientious objectors. Martin Luther, through his inflammatory speeches challenged the authority of Pope and ushered in Reformation in Christianity at the end of middle Ages.

Protestantism gained growing number of adherents on accounts of its enlightened and liberal principles which ruled out the necessity of mediators between man and God. Not only the more progressive countries of Europe adopted Protestantism, the new world of North American States was dominated by the free spirits who lauded free enquiry and speech and went on to establish a democracy where rights of man were given constitutional protection. A fair and just social system is unimaginable without the guarantee of freedom of speech to all members of the society.

Interests of citizens are bound to clash sometime or the other. Unless the aggrieved has freedom to express his grievance and complain to the law enforcing agencies, he cannot protect his rights and safeguard his interests. Freedom of speech is therefore enshrined in the constitutions of all civilized and democratic nations of the world. Towards the first half of the twentieth century most colonised countries of the world were swept by freedom movements aimed at restoring freedom of speech and other basic freedoms which only self governing nations can ensure.

India, too witnessed growing agitation of freedom fighters against the British Regime. While leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar

Vallabh Bai Patel traversed the length and the breadth of the country criticising the despotism and repression of the British Rulers, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose organised Indians, mostly prisoners of war, outside India into Azad Hind Fauj (Indian National Army) to fight the British and free our country from the foreign yoke. He thundered, " Offer me your blood and I will ensure the freedom of India".

His fiery speeches inspired thousands of men and women who fought valiantly and even freed some parts of India from the British Rulers before they were overwhelmed by the superior might of the British. After the conclusion of 2nd World War, most of the colonial powers felt that they could no longer deny half the population of the world democratic freedom, and they granted freedom to many Asian and African countries. Freedom of speech has become a powerful instrument of reform and grievance redressal in most parts of the world.

Satellite television has provided worldwide access to the suppressed and repressed people of the world to voice their sufferings and grievance on various forums like Amnesty International and United Nations Commission on Human Rights. These institutions effectively intervene wherever they find that the human rights - freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of equality before law - are violated by different organisations or even the state governments.

By continuous criticism of the governments engaged in suppressing minorities or sections of people, these non- governmental organisations are building strong international public opinion against the repressive regimes and are forcing them to grant civil liberties to their citizens. Organisations for

protection of Human Rights have been set up in many countries of the world. In India, too such organisations have come up at the central government level as well as at the level of many states.

Many non-governmental organisations are engaged in spreading awareness of civil liberties and empowerment of women and other weaker sections of the society. In collaboration with national and international organisations monitoring the status of Human Rights, these NGO's have made a dent into the backward and sleepy Indian Society. Their selfless service and activities have ensured relief and justice too many vulnerable citizens. Union Government and State Governments are involving the NGOs increasingly in literacy and awareness building programmes.

In India, people are becoming increasingly aware of their democratic rights. They participate in self-governance at the level of Panchayats and Municipalities. These local bodies have been given constitutional status by 73rd and 74th amendment to India's Constitution. Reservation of seats for women in the local bodies has brought about a change in the functioning of these grass root democratic institutions. Women give free voice to their opinions and problems and mobilise community and approach legal and executive agencies to sort out the thorny issues which have eluded solution so far.

Many women are now leading the Panchayat bodies and Municipalities. A social ferment is sweeping the country. Freedom of speech is increasingly used to obtain and ensure basic human rights like right to elementary education. Only a vigilant citizenry can protect civil rights. The spirit of the age at the turn of the twentieth century is characterised by free

enquiry and freedom of expression. The last two decades have witnessed the collapse of totalitarian regimes in the communist countries of Eastern Europe and progressive democratisation in China.

Gorbachev brought in "Perestroika" (restructuring) and Glasnost (openness) and Russia bade good bye to seven decades of regimentation and iron-curtains. Thorough-going reforms were introduced to usher in a multi-party democracy, freedom of speech and transparency in the functioning of the government. Gorbachev's initiative was hailed by Chinese students too who gathered in large numbers at Beijing's Tianenmen Square in April-May 1989 to protest against the corrupt one party rule and to demand democratic rights.

On 4th June, 1989, the Chinese government used army with tanks and guns and killed students in hundreds and curbed the uprising. After this protest, however, state control over business, industrial and educational sphere was loosened and greater freedom of expression was allowed in China. A new kind of free market economy has been introduced in China promoting prosperity and civil liberties in the country.

With the crumbling of the last major bastion of totalitarianism in Russia and China, most of the world has accepted liberal democratic system. Experience of civil liberties has whetted the appetite for greater freedom and transparency. Wherever people are taking initiative to liberate themselves from repressive political order, they are getting moral support of the people of free countries. It is hoped that proliferation of human rights and freedom of speech will reinforce the liberty of man throughout the world.