

Freedom and 'Restraint'

Recently, when a young actor-cum-mimicry man performed amidst waves of laughter, it was like a memento for the beauty of free speech. He enthralled his audience imitating one political leader after another and one cinema hero after another. Soon, however, I was feeling uneasy, when he began to mimic an interaction between three physically challenged persons: one without normal sight, the second devoid of normal hearing and the third not able to speak even a word. I left the auditorium with the least disruption and almost unnoticed.

The mimicry man should not have used the challenged persons as his subjects, despite his achievement of imparting joy to the audience. This is a situation where self-restraint would have been of great benefit to civility in the broadest sense. In the absence of the much desired self-restraint, should some authority impose that "restraint"? The answer seems to be an emphatic "no". If we go by the recent events pertaining to the screening of *The Da Vinci Code*, we have a different story to tell in regard to preserving individual freedom.

One must applaud both the intellectual honesty of the critics of the novel (on which the film is based) and the intellectual curiosity of the millions who have purchased and read it. Several of them being Christians is testimony to their extraordinary tolerance borne out of mature judgment and compassionate concern for an author's freedom. The highest court of the land dismissed a petition requesting a ban on screening *The Da Vinci Code*. The court pointed out that it was to be regarded as no more than a work of fiction.

Freedom has been at the very core of human evolution, which has never been smooth and predictably clear-cut. It has always been a churning process. Effective governance through efficient regulatory mechanisms and speedy and inexpensive justice through the appropriate legal framework and

institutions are the instrumentalities to ensure that the churning is as smooth as possible and as free as possible from destructive violence inflicted on the peaceful majority by a violent minority. India is particularly lacking in both governance and the provision of speedy and inexpensive justice. The recently put out Eleventh Plan Approach Paper says: "Corruption is now seen to be endemic in all spheres and this problem needs to be addressed urgently... Quick and inexpensive dispensation of justice is an aspect of good governance which is of fundamental importance in a successful civil society..." Regarding the problem of speedy (though not quite inexpensive) justice, India has 11 judges per million population as against 51 in Britain and 107 in the US.

As for free expression's interference with one's faith, it is often the weakness of the faithful that craves for one restraint or the other on such expressions, at times even going to the extreme of violently getting rid of them. My faith in god is here to stay and is non-negotiable and indestructible simply because that faith has been derived from decades of personal experience and not fiction or film.

Freedom is both the process and the end result. As a process it allows one to seek for truth in the realms of here and hereafter. As the end result, it leads one to the ending of all seeking and searching. Individual freedom is the core of existence and evolution. However, the individual exercising her freedom is obliged to ensure little or no infliction of violence, both physical and verbal, on others, who are also exercising freedom in a way similar to but not identical to her.

What happens when freedom is constantly entangled with violence? It presents the best opportunity for a dictator to emerge and curtail freedom.

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Universities and Higher Education

Amrík Singh's analysis of the role of universities in promoting higher education and in regulating the affiliated colleges leaves much to be desired (June 17, 2006). He has not touched on how the traditional universities of the early days, like the Bombay, Madras and Calcutta universities, compare in excellence with the present-day technology universities, law schools and medical universities created by the government with all the fanfare and state funding.

Karnataka has many specialised universities, like the Sanjay Gandhi Institute of Health Sciences in Bangalore and the Vishweshwaraya Technology University (VTU) in Belgaum. Both these universities are regulating the technical/medical colleges in the state. The VTU has a sprawling campus and boasts of hi-tech distance education. But the VTU has no agenda for guiding research, consultancy and helping the faculty of the affiliated colleges. One of the worst features of VTU is its rules for recognising the faculty of the affiliated colleges/institutes for guiding PhD students. If the faculty is above 60 they cannot guide PhD students! Many emeritus professors have

rich experience in guiding PhD students and the VTU should constitute an expert group to identify capable faculty who can be enlisted to guide and promote academic research in the constituent colleges. The VTU should go beyond "policing activities" like setting admission procedures, firing college principals for violating examination rules, withholding accreditation to colleges, etc. The vice chancellors of these universities spend more time in the corridors of Vidhan Soudha in Bangalore than in promoting excellence in teaching and research.

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