

IF LIBERTY MEANS ANYTHING AT ALL,  
IT MEANS THE RIGHT TO TELL PEOPLE  
WHAT THEY DO NOT WANT TO HEAR.

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It was a bright sunny  
day. several citizens of the Greek  
city state had gathered in townhall.  
They were about to witness a  
voice of dissent being silenced forever.

A pot of Hemlock was  
brought to the man who had  
allegedly corrupted the youth of  
Athens through his speeches - his  
dialectical method of learning  
which raised questions that the  
Athenian rulers did not want to  
hear.

This man was Socrates and  
as he drank the poison, liberty was

killed along with him.

Thus, George Orwell rightly remarked "If liberty means anything at all, it means the power to tell others what they don't want to hear".

In this essay, we shall delve into the right to free speech as the essence of liberty and why others do not want to hear this voice of liberty. We shall also discuss other aspects of liberty and its interaction with restraint.

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## RIGHT TO TELL : THE ESSENCE OF LIBERTY

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Liberty means freedom - the freedom to question, the freedom to dissent and the

Freedom to express oneself. This was the freedom the French were longing for as they stormed the Bastille. The slogan call of ensuing French Revolution was "Viva la Liberte" - long live liberty.

This call echoes in the pages of history - Galileo and Copernicus sought to tell scientific truths that the Church did not want to hear.

Similarly, Indian press through Samvad Kaumudi, Mirat-ul-Akbar, Kesari were trying to exercise their freedom to tell the British colonialists what they did not want to hear.

Liberty, thus, means the freedom of speech and expression of contrary ideas, howsoever distasteful to the audience.

One pertinent question arises here - why do people not want to hear?

### MEN FEAR TRUTH

The most dreaded right in this world today is the right to speak truth. Truth has the power to bring revolution; it can bring light where darkness prevails.

But the greatest tragedy of mankind is "men are afraid of the light". And therefore, they do not want to hear what others say.

When Narindra Dabholkar and Gauri Lankesh, two prominent rationalists, who sought to dispel superstitions, exercised their right to tell the society that their dogmas are mere rubbish, they were murdered.

Similarly, when women wrestlers like Vinesh Phogat levelled sexual harassment allegations against a powerful politician and WFI chief, it was not well received.

The fear of truth has led even democracies <sup>to</sup> use spyware (like Pegasus). Michael Foucault has expressed concern over the so-called "surveillance by libertarian states" as the biggest threat to

right to speech.

However, fear of truth is not the only reason why others do not want to hear opinions. The "so-called" need to maintain status quoism is another reason why free speech is restricted.

In this scenario, "1984" novel of George Orwell comes to mind. The authoritarian "Big Brother" had ironically installed "The Ministry of Truth" to maintain his own power over what citizens speak.

Such totalitarian regimes are guided by self-interest - and in such states, the right to tell freely is a charade. But like Amis Fotle said "one must speak

Right to power. What then are the consequences of a liberal society where right to speak is cherished?

WHERE THERE IS SAY, THERE IS A WAY

When citizens in a democracy are allowed to voice their opinions, it ensures resilience. Take the example of India — when most of India's neighbours have collapsed in the face of authoritarian regimes, India remains a stellar democracy.

When Balasore train tragedy took several passengers' lives, or when the Kolkata resident doctor's murder case came to light, it was collective freedom to speak.

that has set the government's wheels into motion.

In the economic sphere, several economists disagree with RBI's Monetary Policy and are free to pen articles on the same. Raghuram Rajan, for example, has even attacked RBI over its failure to keep inflation under check.

Similarly, social media has enabled "wisdom being radiated" from all sides. #MeToo movement and #Reclaim the Night movements are all examples of Indian women speaking truth to power.

Continuing the tradition of rightful exercise of speech, artists like M.F. Hussain depicted the perceived taboo i.e. the anatomy of female body

- in full glory, naked. The society may have shunned him for it, but liberty stood up for him.

The aforesaid illustrations reflect the power of freedom of speech. From ensuring accountability, to ventilation of grievances by vulnerable sections, freedom to tell is a precious gem. It must not be lost.

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BUT LIBERTY IS MORE THAN JUST  
FREEDOM OF SPEECH

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Freedom of speech may be an important part of liberty but is mere speech enough? The historically marginalized LGBTQ community will definitely say NO! They re-claimed their right to sexual

orientation (ie. right to express) but the Supreme Court in Supriyo Chakraborty v/s Union of India shattered their dream of a legally recognized same-sex marriage.

Clearly, liberty means a life of dignity. When Nobel laureate Kailash Satyarthi started "Narmada Bachpan Bachao Andolan", he was not aiming for freedom to tell - instead he wanted "freedom to enjoy childhood" for the child labourers.

In a similar vein, the youth of Bangladesh forced the former PM to step down - not because they were solely looking for freedom of speech but because they wanted liberty to be represented by a government which upholds probity.

Thus, liberty is a rainbow - it creates an aesthetic society and a beautiful nation.

But with great power/ rights come great responsibility. Thus liberty then must be exercised in a way that it does not harm others.

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RESTRAINED LIBERTY IS TRUE LIBERTY

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When Voltaire said "I may not agree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it", he was emphasizing how liberty of speech should be coupled with respect for others' liberty.

this is where the importance of restraint must be witnessed. The trend of cancel culture on social media which creates echo chambers

highlights misuse of liberty.

Similarly, an industrialist who claims liberty of markets often snatches liberty of own labourers to a "living wage".

These instances highlight how liberty of one may lead to chains for another. To counter this, our Constitution also provides "reasonable restrictions" on "freedom of speech" (Art 19).

Additionally, Buddha's noble way of "Right Speech, Right Belief, Right conduct" exhorts one to exercise restraint while exercising liberty. An ancient Sanskrit <sup>doha</sup> shloka

goes "Ais Vaani Bolige, mann ka Aapa Khoye ; Auro ko sheetal Kare, ap bhi sheetal hoye"

(When speaking, speak with due regard for others - so that they are calmed by your words - that is true liberty).

ONE MAY SNATCH A NAP AMIDST  
RAGING FIRE BUT CANNOT SLEEP A  
WINK IN POVERTY DIRE

In a thatched hut, Vimla  
screached in pain, she was  
quick with child but no midwife  
set alone a doctor by her side.

Her husband and father  
in law sat outside the hut,  
mulling over how will they feed  
a child, if ever it was born alive.  
Ultimately, Vimla dies in labour.

Munshi Premchand in aforesaid  
novella "Kafan" then describes how  
the two men adopt illegal means  
to buy a "Kafan" (or shroud) for  
dead woman. The two, sitting by  
her pyre, spend another sleepless  
night on hungry, growling belly.

Munshi Premchand, quite vividly presents how even a wink of sleep evades the poor.

In this essay, we shall explore the luxury of nap, and who really gets to sleep peacefully in this unequal world. Thereafter, we shall discuss how even the most affluent can lose sleep. Finally, we shall explore ways and means to correct the sleeplessness.

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### LUXURY OF A NAP AMIDST RAGING FIRE

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When there is fire all around, sleeping can prove fatal. Here, fire can broadly be understood as either a crisis, disaster or any other adversity.

However, some people are privileged enough to afford a short nap in this hour of urgency.

When Bengal saw a famine in 1872 and then again in 1943, the 'annadata' were scrambling for food, while the Governor General of Bengal slept peacefully in his luxurious fort.

Similarly, when today the fire of climate change is raging all across the world, Pacific Small Island States cannot catch a wink while Overseas Territories of French like Reunion are able to get a nap. This is despite the fact that Reunion itself faces threat of submergence.

Why do they have this luxury of nap? Because they have a fall back mechanism. Reunion residents have France to go to while the then Governor General's food was responsibility of the British crown.

Thus, while fires rage all around, the privileged and the powerful still have luxury of a nap. However, while the first world sleeps, the third world weeps.

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### SLEEPLESS NIGHTS FOR THE POOR

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"Sleeplessness" can arise from the pangs of hunger. However, on a broad view, sleeplessness is also a result of economic troubles, familial issues, the

agony of social isolation or even environmental injustice.

In recognition of the utter marginalization that an economically poor person faces, Swami Vivekananda once said "It is a sin to teach religion or talk politics to a hungry man."

As Vimala in "Kafan" saw the worst night due to lack of "institutional delivery", several women today are mired in poverty. "Time poverty" is one aspect of this which forces women to spend many a sleepless nights.

On the same lines, several denotified Tribes (who were once declared "criminal by birth")

the British) spend their lives in shadows of their past. They are condemned to "employment/occupational poverty" - taking up manual scavenging, and other menial works in distress.

Other cases of sleeplessness are even more dire - children trafficked and sexually exploited; specially abled persons seen as "object of charity"; pavement dwellers in fear of being run over.

All these cases share one commonality - dignity evades them during the day while sleep evades them at night. The sole reason for the restless nights being the monstrous poverty - of one form or the other.

Despite this strong correlation between poverty and inability to sleep, it would be wrong to conclude that it is only the poor who cannot catch a wink of sleep.

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AFFLUENCE CAN ALSO CAUSE SLEEPLESSNESS

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Samuel Coleridge in his poem "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" wittingly writes:

"Water water everywhere  
Not a single drop to drink"

Here, he has highlighted how abundance of something does not mean peaceful contentment.

Such abundance which is acquired by unethical or illegal means pricks one's conscience.

It causes a cognitive dissonance and a battle of man against himself.

In case of fugitive offenders like N. Rav Modi and Vijay Mallya, inability of catching a wink of sleep is because of "Sophocles' dagger" dangling above them (i.e. legal consequences await them).

Further, having high aspirations in life can also lead to the dreamer losing sleep. Pradeep Kumar Jena (IAS) worked tirelessly during Odisha's cyclone relief camps with his team.

The noble dedication to service caused several "COVID warrior" doctors and nurses to altruistically give up the luxury of nap that they could have enjoyed.

After all like John Stuart Mill once said "it is better to be a Socrates dissatisfied, than a fool satisfied." Thus, while catching a nap may be the best thing to do during fires all around, it is the cause of humanity that keeps several good Samaritans awake.

### A MAGNANIMOUS NAP FOR ALL

Aristotle, in all his wisdom, once said "Hope is a waking dream". If we can believe in a just world which ensures that none goes to bed hungry, then we shall be truly awaken our spirits to work towards this goal.

Before delving delving into

the means of ensuring a good night's sleep for the poor, we must understand the work that needs to be done during the day.

firstly, a social order that does not discriminate is mandatory; to eliminate poverty caused by marginalization. Smash the prejudices by unveiling John Rawls' "Veil of Ignorance" and thereby create a just society.

secondly, putting a living wage in the economically distressed people's hands should be targeted. Only then Gandhi's Talisman of "Antyodaya se Sarvodaya" can be achieved

Thirdly, to counter the "poverty of a dignified existence" like those

that vulnerable children, LGBTQs etc. are experiencing, government policies infused with care ethics and discourse ethics must be framed.

lastly, avoiding an unethical nap while the world around is in flames can go a long way in ensuring no one falls through the cracks of a good night.

To conclude, a nap though comes easily to some privileged people, it can never ensure a refreshment unless all those who are deprived of it are brought on an equal pedestal. The pangs of unavailability of food, water, housing must be eradicated. A

Sanskrit "sukti" goes thus:

"Prithiviam Trini Ratnani,

Jalam, Annam, Subhashitam

mudhe pashan khandeshu

Ratnasargya Vidhiyate"

[The earth has only three precious things - food, water and good/kind speech. Stupid are those who grant title of treasure to stones.]

Thus, our collective conscience and actions must be directed towards service of "daidra narayan" so that they can peacefully avail the essence of a nap.