



When free speech is truly free

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Its true power is its capacity to make those in power accountable to those who don't have power

- Freedom is a theme which is going to come up again and again through this election.
- It is a term, like truth, that has globally become extremely important today.
- But it is not an easy concept to understand, especially in a public political discourse.
- First of all, there are many kinds of freedom: freedom to speak, to write, to think, to imagine, to live our lives, to eat what we want, and so on.

Freedom to hold forth?

- We often tend to think that among the main elements of democracy are the holding of elections and a free media.
- Both elections and free media are important because they stand, among other things, for the notions of free speech and free expression.
- Casting a vote anonymously, of one's own free will, is an example of free expression and is broader than just 'free speech'.
- Similarly, when the media has the freedom to air all kinds of views, it is seen to be an example of free speech.
- Paradoxically, there is an inherent tension between free speech and democracy.
- If free speech is understood merely as the freedom to say what one wants, then that is obviously not conducive to meaningful social behaviour.
- The answer to the problem of defining what really constitutes free speech lies in understanding the meaning of 'free' in free speech.
- We can't really say what we want all the time since all speech is

constrained.

- We are constrained by language, words, concepts and grammar, and even by the physical contours of our mouth.
- We are constrained by the biological and cognitive structures related to thought and its expression through language.
- Socially, we are not fully free to say what we want.
- We cannot make certain utterances in certain places.
- In addition to constraints, all speech also has a cost.
- Thus, the essence of free speech is not really about the freedom to say what we want.
- It is more about speech which is free, which comes with no cost.
- Free speech is nothing but the conditions under which the hearer is not allowed to take offence and intimidate the speaker.
- The real freedom in 'free speech' lies not in the freedom of the speaker to say what she wants but in the constraint on hearers to allow the speaker to say what she wants.
- Thus, when we demand the right to free speech, we are essentially demanding the right to stop others from not letting us speak.
- The most important consequence of the idea of free speech is that it shifts the responsibility of free speech from the speaker to the hearer.

Criticism as a duty

- It is not free speech to purposefully slander a person.
- But criticising the government or nation is not the same as slandering an individual.
- Such criticism is not just a right, it is more a duty of democratic societies. In a true democracy, there is nothing that can be considered as slandering the government, even if a criticism may be wrong and unjustified.
- That is because free speech is a tool to make democracy workable and it is not really about the individual freedom to say what one wants.
- Free speech is the mechanism to make sure that they govern correctly and on our behalf.
- It is only free speech, defined in this manner, that makes democracy workable.
- The true power of free speech lies in its capacity to make those in power accountable to those who do not have power.

The power equation

- Thus, true free speech covers only those acts of speech which speak against power, and keep those in power accountable.
- It thus safeguards the most cherished democratic principle.
- Free speech by itself is not the essence of democracy but is the means by which any democracy can be sustained.
- Speech, in the task of keeping check on power, has to be subsidised and made free by those in power.

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