

Redefining freedom

*"Posterity will remember
And will burn with shame
Remembering the strange days
When common honesty was
called courage!"*

THUS spake poet Yevtushenko, noted in the early 60's as the herald of free voice in what was then the U.S.S.R., reflecting several strains of the time that was – or perhaps of the time that still is.

The brutal tyranny humanity experienced under different forms of totalitarianism and ideological tribalism in the 20th century obliged the thinking man to ask, what is the meaning of life without freedom? Must man struggle and suffer to achieve what should normally be regarded as his fundamental right as a conscious creature?

This anguish perhaps found its most blunt expression in Sartre's observation, "Man is condemned to be free". Condemned "because he is not his own creator and yet he is free". He is dumped on this earth without his own consent, yet he is responsible for everything he does. Sartre of course did not believe in any innate consciousness in man in the process of evolving or unfolding itself and did not subscribe to the faith that an omnipotence in its free-will had become man and everything else and man could realise that free-will when he identified himself with his source, call it God or Providence. But the Indian consciousness, since time immemorial, has believed in the existence of a deeper essence in existence – quite different from the Sartrean concept of essence – by knowing which man can know all and everything. In fact, one of the two great streams of human endeavour from the very dawn of his consciousness flows in the direction of discovering this knowledge.

I am referring to man's inner voyage recorded in his long spiritual history, including the experiences gained by him through yoga, meditation and various spiritual practices. The second stream of man's endeavour, his exploration of the physical world, his organising the collective living, his pragmatic achievements, too have been greatly influenced by the first stream, consciously or unconsciously.

In India, by and large, the freedom to follow the currents of the inner stream was rarely questioned. That is why we find countless philosophies and doctrines concerning the meaning and the goal of life, some of them completely contradictory to one another, thriving simultaneously. Even when a powerful monarch was enamoured of a certain faith and wanted his subjects to follow it, he took

recourse to the slow path of persuasion and not coercion.

That is how Emperor Ashoka spread Buddhism while another contemporary emperor, Tsi Huang-ti of China, builder of the Great Wall, made a bonfire of all the books that his soldiers could lay their hands on, because he did not think it necessary for the common man to indulge in as useless a process as thinking or philosophising when he and his wise ministers were there to do it for everybody.

Indeed, India even nurtured the world's first atheists with distinct philosophies – the Charvakas, the Javalas and the Ajivikas – and viewed the founders of these schools as savants. Adventures in consciousness and their expression, for the most part, went together in literature, the freedom spanning remote points from the lofty to the bizarre, from the grand epics to the witty Udvatas, satires and the absurd. In art and sculpture the scope of freedom embraced a breath-taking range.

Were our ancestors enlightened enough to realise that true growth could be possible only through freedom despite its misuse, that it is only through nursing and protecting a thousand eccentrics that you could let a true genius bloom? Be that as it may, it cannot be denied that it is only a free adventure in consciousness, supported by a conscious commitment to discipline, that could have cultivated the colossal literary heritage of India, the many-streamed splendour and strains of her culture, despite the curses of a gradually degraded caste system and whimsicalities of occasional potentates. What Einstein said in our time, "Everything that is really great and inspiring is created by the individual who can labour in freedom," ("Out of my Later Years," 1950) seems to have been a truism with the consciousness that was India.

Was this mighty tradition of freedom imperilled later? There were periods of oppression and censorship during the British rule and even in free India, as during the spell of Emergency in the 70's. But they have been temporary. If we are thinking in terms of redefining freedom, something else, something more than the elements of mere external freedom is perhaps tapping our conscience, even though external freedom is a must.

Perhaps it is time to remember that the social, political and legal freedoms are only conditions for a far more meaningful freedom – a freedom to grow into myself, against all the forces which conspire to detain me in the chaos made up of universal impulses and petty exercises of my superficial self, my ego. I may call my resigning to a rule of these trivialities my freedom, but that does not mean much, for

to emerge from a prison but to remain a slave of vanities and prejudices which can throttle the freedom of the next man at the earliest opportunity, is hardly a glorious condition.

Masquerading as exercises in freedom, today a great menace threatens the very soul of freedom. The power and popularity of concepts like democracy socialism and equality have informed us that I cannot be an autocrat or a tiny tyrant anymore. Hence I change my strategy, unconsciously for the most part. I align myself with a colossal tyrant – a collective ego – formed of common economic or political interest or impulse of a host of others and slay the freedom of someone else with a surprising holy face. I forget that if to be a tyrant individually for achieving my desire is bad, it cannot become good simply because a hundred other individuals join me.

Perhaps the old lesson from John Stuart Mill is yet to educate us: "If all mankind, minus one, were of one opinion and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind." ("On Liberty")

Several factors, in different regions of our vast sub-continent, threaten the creative writer's freedom today. Terrorism, for example. But there seems to be a sinister, if subtle, fraternity between terrorism and the general apathy and inertia, the collective violence and corruption we nurture – all conveniently fitted into some interpretation of freedom and democracy.

Alas, it is difficult to judge who merits a greater claim to devilry – the branded terrorist or the little mob-leader who, during a *Rasta Roko*, punctured the tyres of a rickshaw carrying a slum-dwelling woman in the throes of labour, the terrorist or the doctors walking out of the operation theatres at the call of their federation, leaving the patients' hearts and stomachs open, the terrorist and the officials of a mental asylum suddenly deciding to desert their posts, allowing the insane inmates to roam the roads and get crushed by traffic, the terrorist and the mob invading a snake-park and lynching most of its denizens.

An Indian writer today should also reflect on another danger. Every stride civilisation takes brings its own challenges. Today we are exposed to the literatures of several other countries, in particular to those of the West. This is great, but not unconditionally so. We have the freedom to leap off our native genius, but is that really a freedom? No danger to freedom is more dangerous than the lure of the false freedom. Let us remember one of our own great poets:

*"Emancipation from the bondage of the soil,
Is no freedom for the tree."*

—Tagore ("Fireflies") ■

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