

Commentary

To Kill a Mocking Bird

–Nirupam Hazra¹

ABSTRACT

Eminent social psychologist Ashish Nandy is charged under SC/ST act. His crime was that he depicted a reality which was unpleasantly real and argued in favour of those whom he had reportedly sinned against. This incident could be termed as another example of growing intolerance for freedom of expression, another attack on the constitutionally guaranteed right to free speech, which has, by now, become more of a norm than an aberration. But a nuanced examination of the whole controversy reveals something more about our society. The controversy surrounding Ashish Nandy's remark at Jaipur Literary Festival, tells many a things what Nandy himself did not think of pointing out, but thanks to the twists and turns of the events, he ended up doing so.

We are living in a society where celebration of intolerance and irrationality has become a national culture and hounding and harassment of freethinkers a national pastime. Every time a thinker speaks of something insightful, every time an artist creates something original or a writer depicts a reality which fails to achieve the norm of collective conformity, some group or other volunteer their 'sentiments' to get hurt. The recent controversy surrounding eminent sociologist Ashish Nandy's remark adds another feather to the crown of intolerance.

VIOLETION OF FREEDOM OF SPEECH

“I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it”

This quotation of Beatrice Hall, the biographer of Voltaire, is the best testimony of the idea of free speech and tolerance in its absolute sense. But it sounds utterly hollow and utopic in contemporary democratic India, where the right to freedom of expression, though constitutionally guaranteed, is routinely violated. Now it has become part of our democracy, thanks to

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our heightened sense of sentimentality and sensitivity. Constitutionally sanctioned right to free speech is under perennial threat and it is best illustrated when an innocuous comment or a humorous cartoon on social networking site put someone behind bars.

Such acts of intolerance are actually manifestation of a malaise that has spread deep into our society and plagued the democracy. Anything that is critical is criminal; anything that is opposing is offending. The increasing tendency of demonizing dissent and criminalizing criticism is the greatest danger that our democracy faces today. Dissent, dialogue, discussion and debate are essential characteristics of any vibrant democracy. They save a democracy from degenerating into authoritarianism. But in India, the practice of critical thinking and public debate always run the risk of being hijacked by rhetoric, rancour and rabble-rousing. The recent controversy is one such example. It is an example of rapidly shrinking space for freedom of expression and democratic debate. What is more frightening is that these attacks on freedom of speech are being carried out with a semblance of legitimacy, with implicit support from various institutions like judiciary and media.

IMMATURITY OF MEDIA

There is a symbiotic relationship between media and democracy. A free and mature media ensures a more vibrant democracy. Media plays the crucial role of giving shape to public opinion and diagnoses the pathologies of the society. But it is also exposed to the diseases that plague the society. Therefore the health of a democratic society depends on the health of the fourth estate.

But this incident exposed the immaturity and imprudence of Indian media, especially of electronic media. The whole controversy could be attributed to the collusive role played by media in stirring up a manufactured outrage. No amount of defence can absolve the media from its complicity and culpability. They quoted selective portion of the statement made by Mr. Nandy and presented it in such a way that it sounds casteist in nature. The English news channels deliberately edited the first and the last part of Nandy's speech, which contained all cautionary explanation to avert any misunderstanding; others blatantly ignored Nandy's arguments as something insignificant.

So, the entire episode can be interpreted only in two possible ways which can also be read as a commentary on health of Indian media. Either

the media is intellectually impotent to understand what Mr. Nandy really meant to say or they deliberately chose to stir up a controversy as it was impossible for them to resist the temptation of sensationalism. So, either it was difficult for the media to comprehend Nandy's insightful statement or it was easier and more convenient for them to draw an inference of their own which will serve the purpose of sensationalism and match the definition of 'breaking news'.

This manufactured outrage will be enough fodder for the electronic media to have a fierce debate in the confinement of TV studios, but it costs us a bigger and wider debate. First of all we lost a chance to understand corruption in its wider sense. According to Nandy, democratization of corruption and the increased participation of people from the lower-class in corruption are good for Indian Republic because, corruption plays, though unintended, a role of social equalizer. We could have had a heated and healthy discussion on the merit of this statement. People might have disagreed or even opposed to what Nandy had said. But, unfortunately there was no space for that. Our intellectual imprudence did not find it worthy of debate. Rather it focused on something which was grossly misinterpreted and misread. The nature of debate or controversy that we have, defines our collective intelligence as a society and sadly, this incident shows that we still celebrate symbolism over substance, ignorance over insight.

Another pernicious and enduring impact of this incident is that it will further encroach the already depleted space for free speech because now the media, an institution whose survival and function are entirely based on the idea of freedom of speech, has ended up becoming an instrument of violating the right to free speech. It will eventually give the already powerful state more power to curb the freedom of speech on flimsy reasons or no reason at all. Media, willingly or unwillingly, also sacrificed their own rights. Their immaturity and imprudence will be reasons for censorship of media and Indian democracy will be deprived of the essential critical assessment of the reality beyond the complacency of status quo.

Opportunism of Political Class:

The greatest loser will be the people Prof. Nandy spoke for. They will be made to dwell in the delusion of reality seen through only lenses of their political masters. It is high time for the opportunist political class to consolidate their vote-bank by exploiting the distance between the

gullible common man and the thinkers and intellectuals. Politicians know it very well that if common people start to see the reality through the prism of rationality, sooner or later; they will be able to make difference between a friend and a foe, between foul and the fair. So, by demonizing the thinkers and intellectuals and widening the disjunction between them, the politicians want to create a smokescreen which blurs the reality.

In this incident the most vociferous opposition and criticism of Nandy's remark came from the leaders who claim to represent the SC, ST and the OBC. Though Nandy was talking about corruption in its wider sense--corruption as an equalizing force; leaders like Lalu Prasad, Mulayam Singh and Mayawati had every reason to feel uncomfortable with his statement. So, the best way to decry the reality that Nandy points out is by linking it with the entire population they represent, by taking individual corruption to a level of caste identity.

Collective Arrogance and Folly

The truth which Prof Nandy intended to depict was the critical analysis of corruption. According to Nandy the elite and upper-class people continue to take part in corruption, but there corruption is less tangible, less visible because they do it with such sophistication that it does not appear to be corruption, while the corruption of the people from the lower class appears more brazen and in-your-face because they lack the subtleties and sophistication. Prof. Nandy, with his characteristic enigmatic way also claims that corruption is a class equalizer, like the upper class people, persons from lower-class has also started to take advantage of the system through clever manipulation and crafty manoeuvring. He believes that it is good for Indian republic.

It may not be an ultimate reality; it is a dangerous reality which everyone will love to discard irrespective caste and class. For the corrupt upper-class it is a scathing criticism of their malpractice, for the gullible middle-class whose sporadic outburst of frustration against corruption often takes the form of social movement, Nandy's statement is outrageously profane and pro-corruption. To the simpleton lower class people it is an insult to them and their very identity. So let's kill the mocking bird and celebrate.

Thus, Prof. Nandy, who dared to tell the truth in a very 'undignified' and 'vulgar' way without any sugar-coating, becomes the victim of our collective intolerance, immaturity and ignorance.