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15 AUGUST 2018 Last Updated at 12:00 PM | NATIONAL | OPINION

Freedom Requires Limits, So That Others May Enjoy Their Freedom Too

Some people naively equate freedom with an absence of social restraints. But should I be free to do whatever I want? Should I be free to pollute the river, not pay any taxes, or torture the cat?

NAMIT ARORA



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Freedom is the ability to pursue the life one values. This view of freedom is inclusive, open-ended, and flexible. It embraces our plural, evolving, and diverse conceptions of the good life. It also admits other long-standing ideas of freedom, such as not being held in servitude, possessing political self-rule, or enjoying the right to act, speak, and think as one desires.

Some people naively equate freedom with an absence of social restraints. But should I be free to do whatever I want? Should I be free to pollute the river, not pay any taxes, or torture the cat? To play loud music on the metro, not rent my apartment to Dalits, or incite hate or violence against other groups? I hope not. My freedom requires limits, so that others may enjoy their freedom. Edmund Burke held that freedom must be limited in order to be possessed. A freer society is not necessarily one with fewer social restraints, but one with a wisely chosen set of restraints and provisions, such as public education, healthcare, and ample safety nets for all.

But inevitably, in pursuing the life we value, we'll sometimes run into strong disagreements over our values and the restraints and provisions we see as conducive to freedom. These disagreements might spring from our religious vs. secular values, modern vs. traditional values, egalitarian vs. libertarian values, authoritarian vs. democratic values, and various other axes of identity, culture, and belief. The perennial

task for members of a free society is to find ways to manage and contain such disagreements, while maximizing freedom for both self and others. 'For to be free,' wrote Nelson Mandela, 'is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.' However, especially with deeply polarized moral or sacred values, at times with no middle ground, tragic conflict may be unavoidable, as with blasphemy or abortion laws.

Deliberation and informed debate, then, lie at the heart of a free society. Our social vision is bound up with that of others, so it behooves us to negotiate, persuade, and compromise. As free people, we must choose the right trade-offs between certain freedoms and other social goods that we also value, such as equality and justice—understanding that they can't all be fully realized at once. 'The price of a free society,' wrote Isaiah Berlin, 'is that sometimes, perhaps often, we make bad choices.' For instance, we may underestimate the importance of reducing economic inequality or correcting historical injustices for greater peace and freedom for others.



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There is no perfect recipe for freedom, then. Yet, perhaps the least imperfect vehicle for freedom that modern, plural societies have yet found is representative rule, with checks and balances to help make a fair, transparent, and accountable regime of laws, justice, and equal opportunity, i.e., a constitutional democracy. The more robust its functioning, the greater its odds of securing freedom for all. But ordinary people, and hence their democracies, remain famously corruptible. Sectarian passions, blood and soil nationalisms, religious and ideological fervors, and exclusive affinities of race, caste, or tribe are the perennial sports of the people, rooted deep in our human material. They may lurk in the shadows until they're put into play by social turmoil, demagogues, or fanatics of various stripes. Freedom, then, is not a fundamental property of any political system. A democracy, too, rises and falls with the caliber of men and women who comprise the demos.

Freedom has never been free or easy. 'The price of freedom is eternal vigilance,' wrote Desmond Tutu. At the end of the day, the greatest enablers of freedom are a sober decency in public life, a sense of common humanity, social trust, thoughtful exercises of our rights and duties, and a broad respect for facts, evidence, and critical thinking. Durable freedom requires an ethos of care, compassion, and justice for our fellow humans. It also requires a vigorous culture of dissent, interrogating power, and combating bigotry, fearmongering, and propaganda. 'The greatest threat to freedom,' wrote Wole Soyinka, 'is the absence of criticism.'

Without such foundational qualities in our public and private lives, no social, political, economic, or technological system can secure our freedom. These qualities don't just fall out of the sky; they need steady cultivation in both kids and adults—a much needed task in India today. 'Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom,' wrote Thomas Paine, 'must undergo the fatigue of supporting it.'

(Namit Arora is a writer, humanist, travel photographer and former internet technologist. He is the author of The Lottery of Birth: On Inherited Social Inequalities (2017). His home on the web is shunya.net.)

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