

## **The Paradox of Tolerance: Lessons for Free Speech**

The Right to Free Speech and Expression is one of the fundamental rights of the Indian constitution and is a prominent feature of many democracies around the world. It's quite foundational in that respect, and it is free speech that helps us fulfil our democracy to its fullest extent. However, in today's political climate, it seems that "Free Speech" has been reduced to an ominous, get out of jail free card, where people brandish it in conversations in an attempt to, ironically, shield themselves from criticism and censorship.

This becomes especially prominent and doubly troubling when it comes to matters like hate speech and bigotry. There exists a vocal opposition to the censorship measures taken to protect marginalised groups against such verbal abuse. The best encapsulation of this seems to be the criticism of Germany's anti-hate speech laws, which extend to laws against holocaust denial. Holocaust denial is a harmful, toxic, and reactionary take on a historical tragedy. It serves no end but to invalidate and demonize the identity of the Jewish people by suggesting they "made up the Holocaust". And yet, here we have people saying that it's wrong to ban such hateful implications because of "Freedom of Speech".

By now, it should be an obvious fact that not all speech is equal. When we speak of hate speech like Holocaust denial, we are speaking of a rhetoric that actively serves to invalidate people and their ways of life. It is easy to see how the platforming and promotion of such derogatory and harmful ideas isn't really "going against political correctness to preserve free speech". In fact, what such speech achieves is the opposite. It silences people of marginalised groups as their very identity is slandered. It promotes and reiterates harmful ideals and rob us of healthy, nuanced discourse. It can even go as far as to push marginalised people away from such discussions, and force them to debate personal attacks on their very existence and being, in the name of "rational discourse".

So, we reach this mind-boggling conclusion – that for full realisation of free speech and expression, we need censorship. It seems almost sinful to suggest the mixing of these polar opposites – but this realisation isn't exactly new. Today's debates about free speech and platforming have a lot to do with something called "The Paradox of Tolerance". "The Paradox of Tolerance" was first coined by philosopher Karl Popper in 1945. In his own words, "Unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them". Popper's words have been since a prominent feature of many debates on the nature of free speech.

What Hopper advocates for is not the complete suppression of intolerant beliefs, however. Instead, he advocates for their counter by rational arguments, checks and balances. Hopper's rejection of intolerance really comes in full force when there is no scope for rational argument, and instead the topic at hand, the intolerance, is wielded for, in his words, "deception". It is easy to see that this is exactly what is happening with Holocaust denial. By promoting it in the name of "Protection of Free Speech", what one inadvertently does is fall for the Neo-Nazi's deception – his packaging of ideas in a palatable manner. Even if you yourself are not Anti-Semitic, by buying into the tangent presented in the form of "Free Speech", you, ironically, do exactly what they want you to.

This art of redirecting focus is not unplanned. By shifting the discussion to censorship, the actual harm and factual inconsistencies of Holocaust denial in itself are side-tracked. The agenda is reset. I don't know about you – but for me, this very well falls in the category of deception that Hopper mentioned earlier. I use Holocaust denial as a placeholder here, but truth be told, this "Preserving

Free Speech” argument seems to take the same role in various issues, and is extremely effective and directing focus away from a central issue.

This is not to say that Censorship is inherently good. Once again, not all speech is equal, meaning not all censorship is equal either. What we need in metaphysical discussions like this is Context. Context of what is happening, who is involved etc. Today, nuance and ambivalence have been destroyed in favour of instant, gratuitous attacks, especially online. The problem today is recognising that a complex issue like Free Speech is not black and white, and as crazy as it sounds, sometimes for a truly tolerant society, there are certain things we simply must reject.