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## **Social Impact of Censorship**

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### **Abstract**

*Censorship is an issue which, by and large restricts the ingenuousness and vibrancy of any civil society, accordingly, it needs to be discussed delicately to maintain the higher standards of the inclusive and democratic values. Moreover, in this paper, I have attempted to portray, both aspect of the censorship i.e. pros and cons of the censorship, furthermore, its positive and negative consequences in a society. Subsequently, I have tried to deal with pertinent questions such as, how does censorship led to curv our right to free speech and expression (whether it is depicted in any form, it might be through, painting, music, dance and writings etc.) in the name of maintaining law, order and public decency. How have the lines been made blur between the sex and obscenity to suit the political narratives? Besides, I have mentioned some of the historical figures who have changed the map of knowledge system even though such exceptional personalities faced the negative exercise of the censorship, thus it stimulates me to reflect upon the censorship more comprehensibly to have fertile effect of it. At the last of my paper, I have robustly argued in favor of the truthful, efficient and well originated implication of article 19(2) of the Indian constitution, particularly, the word "reasonable restriction" to own a actual egalitarian society.*

**Key words:** *Censorship, Pros of censorship, Con of censorship, Freedom of 'speech and expression', Fundamentalist Elements, Misuse of Censorship and 'Sex and Obscenity'.*

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**Introduction:** Censorship is one of the significant issues of modern society, especially, at the time, when we are all living in the age of technology. This is the age in which, most of us loaded with information from internet through mobile phones, laptop, computer and television etc. Censorship of Information has both negative and positive aspects, so, on the one hand, weak and distorted information may cause hatred and violence in a civil society therefore reasonable restrictions are necessary which are already mentioned in the article 19(2) of Indian constitution, however, it should not be used for personal and political benefits. On the other hand, nourishing and true information will help people to accumulate morally efficient knowledge. As George Washington rightly said it rightly, that is, if freedom of speech is taken away, then dumb and silent we may be led, like sheep to the

slaughter.<sup>1</sup> Censorship is an act of changing a message, (whether it is in cinema, literature and art) including removal of some contents (sometimes complete elimination of the message), between the sender and the receiver. It is by and large leveled as “oppression of dissent” in any society. There are numerous definitions of censorship, however, I would like to mention Ritu Menon’s (Women’s World Organization For Rights, Literature And Development) definition;

“Censorship is when a work of art expressing an idea which does not fall under current convention is seized, cut up, withdrawn, impounded, maligned, or otherwise made inaccessible to its audience”.<sup>2</sup>

**Pros and Cons of Freedom of “Speech and Expression”:** Freedom of speech is often observed as a fundamental concept in modern liberal democracies. On the other hand, censorship represents denial of the exercise of freedom of speech, expression, and information. One of the exceptions to the fundamental right to free speech and expression guaranteed under Article 19(1) (a) of the constitution is in favour of laws, which imposes restrictions in the interest of “decency or morality”. Censorship consists of or implies both positivity as well as negativity. Thus, it seems that there are countless pros and cons of censorship and both of these aspects carry their own implications. If that is the case, then neither absolute freedom should be imparted nor is absolute censorship required in the form of draconian rule.

The pros and cons of censorship has been well pointed out by Sanaya Dadachanji:

### **Pros of censorship<sup>3</sup>**

- Censorship of pornographic material is sometimes regarded as necessary because it might negatively affect Children from early young age.
- Religious conflicts avoided by the censored material deemed insulting or offensive to a particular religious community.
- People may copy stunts which are performed on TV shows, whereas, they are usually performed by the trained people.
- It could be used to stop any agenda against the state and its inhabitants.
- It restrains vulgarity and obscenity.
- It protects the right of privacy etc.
- It would play an important role in the security of the nation, such as; keeping secret information.

### **Cons of censorship<sup>4</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> George Washington, *National Gazette*, <http://www.mountvernon.o> Feb 12, 2016.  
[rg/digital-encyclopedia/article/national-gazette/](http://www.mountvernon.o) (July 12, 2016, 09:00 pm).

<sup>2</sup> Www. Goodreads.com

<sup>3</sup> Sanaya Dadachanji, *censorship: An eyewash in India*, page 5-6.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pg. 6

- It prevents the free flow of ideas.
- Censoring of information may lead us towards having wrong perception about any individual, institution and community.
- It might be intentionally used against creativity.
- It has no coercive place in a true democratic society.
- It gives rise to and hides the human rights abuse.
- It may be misused to prevent people from agitating against those who are in power or authority; i.e. perhaps, it blocks legitimate criticism of the government.
- It will stifle the opposition and will be broadcasting fixed point of view.

**Freedom of ‘Speech and Expression’ and Fundamentalist Elements:** Freedom of speech has been provided in article 19(1) (a) of Indian constitution but at the same time it is not absolute though. Before moving on further, I would like to emphasize upon the dichotomy of religion and knowledge; they go parallel in any society, even though, religion ought to be the personal affair of peoples. It does not matter what religion they admire or look for, that should be respected with the same spirit. However, influence and domination of religion over the any kind of independent thought system, (which might not mix well with the current system of thought, but could be as significant as the other views), should be stopped immediately. Otherwise, any civilized society unknowingly would be causing great harm to itself or to thers. Even though some people still do believe that Politics and Religion can’t be separated from the lifesphere of an individual, though they have separate area of action in society. Besides, Freedom of speech and expression, projected through various mediums such as, art, literature and verbal traditions, have been affected by religious fundamentalists (society as a whole or individual or group of people) directly. For instance, Socrates (470/469-399BC) was charged with the polluting or corrupting the minds of young people of Athens. Later, Galileo (1564-1642) was also charged by almost same kind of fundamentalist elements. even now, these elements are enormously prevalent in our society. Therefore such kind of censorship stops people from creating or exploring new knowledge and wisdom. Following are some of the names who have faced almost the same kind of threat as it has been the case in the earlier course of history:

- Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906), a painter on Indian subcontinent, not only, he who had been threatened and beaten up by a group of people many times. But also, offended people claimed that he had presented Indian culture in a poor light. Furthermore, exhibition places of his paintings were vandalized.<sup>5</sup>
- Writer Salman Rushdie was banned in dozens of countries all over the world even in India for a while for his one particular book; People of one particular community felt offended and started campaigning against him.

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<sup>5</sup> Rangrasiya Movie.

- The Great painter and maestro of canvas M.F Hussain (1915-2011) left India after immense pressure and continuous threat from the fundamentalist people.

Therefore, we need to develop a dynamic approach which must have reverence for opposite views and opinion. Rigid and distorted version of truth may have negative impact over the people, so a few of those who are directed by such truth, should maintain that there is a difference between abandonment and criticism. Abandonment of anything is a form of aggressiveness that perhaps might lead towards violent acts while criticism has openness to learn or to know something new. Unfortunately, fundamentalist people are so convinced by their own preserved version of truth that they would not even allow any healthy criticism of their conceived truth. Besides, some may disagree with such kind of people, however they too deserve 'freedom of expression' as Voltaire said it correctly 'I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it'.<sup>6</sup> However, the Fundamentalists have upheld the practice of censorship throughout the history of spoken and written words. Times may change and circumstances may vary but its epitome remains the same. Admittedly, the fundamentalist ideology has not been inert . it gets defined differently in different contexts, if it is in the church in Christianity, if it is pandit in Hinduism and it is maulvi or mufti in Islamic tradition, and it is the Akal takt for Sikhs which have assumed the right to pass judgment about the written words.<sup>7</sup>

**Freedom of 'Speech and Expression' and Suppression:** Freedom of speech and expression is the mother of all liberties and freedom of the press shall be regarded as the utmost significant pillar of a democratic form of government. Richard M. Schmid has rightly said "our freedom depends in large part, on the continuance of a free press, which is the freedom of speech and expression of individual or press". But it is not unfettered. Such freedoms are subject to reasonable restrictions and one such restriction is censorship. There is exceptionally substantial distinction between censorship and restriction. Censorship is the suppression of freedom of speech within a community or of an individual. Restriction is a certain barrier created for restricting certain activities of a citizen or a community so that it does not spread to across the sections of the society. Unfortunately, Censorship has been used by our political powers to control the expressions of people, be it via art or any other medium. Control is basically, total oppression of freedom of speech and expression, any voice that does not fit into the picture of authoritative institutions, they try to suppress it. Therefore, this is basically murder of dissent among the members of civil society. People might get arrested and framed under the tough laws like sedition, and countless incidences of such kind might happen, though, threatening and psychological pressure are major to mention.

**Why absolute freedom ought not to be?**

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<sup>6</sup> Khuram.wordpress.com

<sup>7</sup> Kumar Girja, *the Book on trial, Fundamentalism and Censorship in India*, 1997, pg 6.  
Volume-III, Issue-V

In the age of technology, we have innumerable sources to get information, whether, it is a electric medium or print medium. We can get connected to each other no matter how far away we are from each other, almost, anybody can convey his/her message from any corner of the world, thanks to human evolution, that technology has reached so far, Having said that, even if technology has given us quite a few benefits and make our lives efficient, yet the rights of any individual should not be crushed. This question become important to raise, since the inception of social media, we have reached to access maximum available information, but anonymity of the individual on social media raises some notable questions, though it is appreciable that people have got the opportunity to express their views, however, most prominently authenticity of the information has become an issue to look into. To make it more clear, now, let us focus on the troubles that might occur by social media in any society. Let's assume somebody posted edited picture of highly reputed person with a rape accused criminal to defame him. Who would be responsible for defaming his image if there is absolute freedom? If that is the case then, why should restrictions not be there? Let us assume if that picture goes viral then would it be morally just to have such kind of freedom? Obviously not, thus each piece of information must be treated fairly and some legitimate provision to stop such activities must be there in any civilized society. Therefore, No freedom is absolute; it should come with several responsibilities towards each other.

I would like to elaborate on such cases of defamation or the practice of absolute freedom, there is one more case in which, a lady who was posted in Rajasthan as a magistrate resigned from her post as she got cancer, she went to take treatment of her disease, but unfortunately, some of news channels aired the footage and claimed that she had an affair with a person who made her to resign from her reputed post<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, no freedom is absolute; it must come with several responsibilities. Could you imagine how dangerous these malpractices could be? Why should owner of that particular channel not be liable for execution if he has defamed somebody in such negative spirit? Furthermore, India is a multi religious country. people have faith in very subtle to gross things (they may be ideas as well). So, things needed to be dealt carefully, even if India is moving towards modernization. Let's assume, if somebody posts a picture of an animal (which is considered to be filthy in any religion) with the holy book of any religion on social media then, certainly, this might trigger people to incite violence that perhaps led to riots in this country.

**Misuse of Censorship:** Even after having various faults in each medium, these mediums should not be shut down. Although we have censorship as a part of the propaganda of government that should not completely control the artisitic expressions. Since, censorship has been misused from the very beginning of human history. Thus, it should be in the hands of responsible and open minded people who are really concerned about the welfare of the society rather than serving the interests of some particular institution or ideology. We

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<sup>8</sup> press council of India report, 2015  
Volume-III, Issue-V

should work towards a more inclusive discourse. Arguably, in some cases, we might use restrictions (it is less harsh) in place of censorship (it is more harsh). nevertheless, censorship is a very complex entity to understand, it consists of countless facets as Benjamin Franklin eloquently said “if all printers were determined not to print anything till they were sure it would be offended to no body, there would be very little printed.”<sup>9</sup>

While in censorship, intention plays an important role. If you look at the data in recent years or the cases in recent years, most of the material that got censored is basically sexual scenes or issues in movies in the name of obscenity (which I will explain later) and indecency. It did not stopped here, recent cases of arresting (cartoonist Aseem Trivedi or arresting comedian Kiku Sharda) can not be ignored. Even dozens of films like ‘Water’, ‘Final Solution’, ‘War and Peace’ and many more ran into serious trial with the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) as they were restrained in the name of ‘public interest’. This must have been improved in course of time, though unfortunately censorship has gone to worst level by such institutions (social and political etc).

**Difference between sex and obscenity:** Films in India have been censored on the grounds of obscenity, sex and violence; but this paper does not aim to venture into those areas, rather it explores elsewhere where films have been banned or targeted in the name of maintaining public order; respecting beliefs, sentiments and traditions; or for criticizing the State on certain issues. There is an urgent need to make this distinction explicit, generally any type of sexual activity in civil society considered to be as obscene and vulgar, however it is not case, if Censorship is to be implied, it could be employed to amount of obscene and vulgar content. In other words, setting a boundary for the presentation of sexual activities and obscenity is clearly a very substantial question which needs to be addressed because there are countless misconceptions about the sex. Sex is leveled as vulgar, all the time in a country, like india, moreover, it is entirely a miscomprehension that we people are holding with us from long times back. However, the Supreme Court made it clear;

*“Sex and obscenity are not always synonymous and it is wrong to classify obscene or even indecent or immoral. It should be our concern, however, to prevent the use of sex designed to play commercial role by making its own appeal. This draws in the censor’s scissors”<sup>10</sup>*

**Conclusion:** Censorship should be used and understood with correct intention otherwise our great heritage of *Art, Culture* and *literature* would possibly collapse in the course of future. Censorship is generally used for political mileage in India so we need to define or reinterpret it again in a more inclusive and egalitarian way, if we truly hope for a better reasonable society, which shall have free flow of great art, literature and cinema. It should not come in the way of freedom of expression and speech. Now, we have discussed negative and positive implications of the censorship and its effect on the society. Therefore, it could be derived that positive effects of censorship are very less. On the other hand,

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<sup>9</sup> Www. Goodreads.com

<sup>10</sup> 2SCR446,1971.

negative impacts of censorship are much more than positive sides of it. So, to have admiration to become reasonable, responsible and a part of a civilized society we must avoid the extreme negative use of censorship. It is given that, Article 19 (2) of the constitution of India provides a basis for the imposition of restrictions in the form of censorship. Consequently, countless laws have been endorsed for censorship viz. the Press Council of India Act, 1978, the Press (Objectionable Matters) Act, 1951, the Indian Cinematographic Act, 1952 etc. These laws are of such a nature that if they will not be used with care, perhaps that might lead to the total deprivation of freedom of speech and expression. Therefore, Authoritative institutions should interfere least, not the most. Eventually, people should decide their own discourse. In any democratic country people shall be given the ultimate magnitude, therefore, their rights should not be encroached on.

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**Notes:**

1. Rangrasiya movie.
2. Market Research Report, 2012
3. Press Council of India Report, 2015.
4. 2SCR4469 (1976).
5. Wwww. Goodreads.com
6. Khuram.wordpress.com