

## **THE MAKING OF THE MODERN PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL**

### **Public Intellectuals Should Be Respected Because They Speak Out Against Injustice Wherever It Occurs**

In Sophocles' powerful play, *Antigone*, the daughter of Oedipus defies the edict of King Creon of Thebes that her brother's corpse should be left on the road for birds and vultures to feast on. When Creon charges her with disobedience of the law — "And thou didst indeed dare to transgress that law?" — Antigone replies: "Yes; for it was not Zeus that had published me that edict: not such are the laws set among me by the Justice who dwells with the gods below; nor deemed I that the decrees were of such force, that a mortal could override the unwritten and unfailing statutes of heaven." Antigone articulates the fundamentals of a just law. Law is not the source of its own moral authority and legitimacy.

#### **A setback to democracy**

Centuries later, M.K. Gandhi reiterated that a law is binding only if it satisfies the unwritten codes of public ethics. He spoke in the context of colonial rule. Surely democratic regimes ought to respect the right of citizens to dissent. In today's India, however, holders of state power refuse to tolerate ideas, reflection, debate, and discussion. Two years ago, the government arrested eminent members of civil society on charges that were clearly produced by conspiratorial imaginations. On April 14, two of India's well-known scholars/activists, Anand Teltumbde and Gautam Navlakha, surrendered before the National Investigation Agency. In early April, an FIR was filed by the Uttar Pradesh government against the editor of the news website, *The Wire*, Siddharth Varadarajan. The charges in these cases are flimsy. It is obvious that intellectuals are being penalised for taking on the government.

The arrests are a depressing commentary on the nature of the present government. Sophisticated societies respect intellectuals because they subject the present to historically informed investigation, interpretation, critique and prescription. This is integral to the idea of democratic politics as self-critique. Politics establishes rules that govern multiple transactions of society. It cannot be its own defendant, judge and jury. If politics is, as Aristotle put it, the master science (science for Greeks is knowledge), it has to accept reflective and critical activity. Politics is too important to be left to politicians alone.

While authoritarian societies breed court historians, mature democracies appreciate critical scholarship. But today intellectualism is dismissed contemptuously as elitist. Not only does this attitude foster a culture of mediocrity, intellectuals who hold a mirror to the state are hounded and arrested. This is a setback to democracy, because it forecloses engagement with structures of power. Without its public intellectuals, democracy slides into authoritarianism.

#### **The Dreyfus affair**

The first public intellectual was, of course, Socrates. The modern notion of the public intellectual is, however, fairly recent. It took shape in the tumultuous days of what has come to be known as the 'Dreyfus affair' in France in 1894. Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish Army officer, had allegedly handed over important government documents to the Germans. He was convicted of treason amidst a roar of revolting anti-Semitism. When Dreyfus was stripped of his medals, the crowd shouted 'Death to the Jew'. The atmosphere was charged, mob mentality ruled, and sane voices were drowned in the din. Scholars, artists, and novelists could hardly keep away. They had to summon their knowledge to reflect on citizens' rights, the irrational behaviour of crowds, the ugly slogans that stereotyped an entire community, and the unholy glee with which crowds watched the humiliation of an army officer. The incident propelled Paris-based intellectuals into the mainstream of French politics. This was the time when scholars came out from their ivory towers and took sides, despite massive crowd hysteria that broke bounds of civility.

Dreyfus was later exonerated, but the affair split the French intelligentsia wide open. Emile Zola wrote an open letter, *J'Accuse*, in support of the beleaguered army officer. Zola attacked

injustice, prejudice and intolerance. He reserved for the intellectual the function that Socrates had reserved for the philosopher: stand by the universal in the quest for truth and in the fight against injustice. Julien Benda, a noted Jewish intellectual, argued that the duty of the intellectual is to defend universal values over and above the politics of the moment.

But other scholars propagated anti-Semitism. In 1942, the philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote an account of the anti-Semitism directed at Dreyfus by right-wing intellectuals in France. Intellectuals who upheld Republicanism and basic rights were too weak to confront the power of the mob. Mobs are fickle, their rhetoric is blood-curdling, they hate debate, detest institutions, and hero-worship leaders. When intellectuals follow the mob or, worse, the leader, they pave the way for fascism, the destruction of institutions, the emergence of the hero, and pogroms of the minority. When intellectuals fail to live up to codes of public ethics, they uphold injustice. Their commitment to truth, reason and justice lapses; they become partners in injustice.

### **Moral conscience of society**

The Dreyfus affair legitimised the idea that a public intellectual has to denounce injustice despite the power of the mob. Since then it has been held that intellectuals are not defined by what they are — professors, writers, artists or journalists — but by what they do. Intellectuals have to be competent in their own field, otherwise they will not be taken seriously by anyone. But there is more to being an intellectual. Scholars have to be public intellectuals. They have to cast their scholarly gaze on issues that cause explosions, sift out the details, analyse, evaluate, and take a position. An intellectual has to be involved in public affairs.

Public intellectuals are the moral conscience of society, simply because they think. To think is to question, to call for freedom, and to invoke the right to disobey. Our intellectuals have to be reflective, philosophical beings, philosophical in the sense that they think about issues, addresses contemporary social problems and see them as the legacies of previously unresolved issues of social injustice.

It is precisely the unresolved issue of social injustice that has been taken up by Mr. Teltumbde, Mr. Navlakha and Mr. Varadarajan repeatedly and insistently. All three of them have battled the reproduction of injustice in their own ways. Mr. Teltumbde is a fine chronicler of the injustice that has been heaped on the Dalit community. Mr. Navlakha has fiercely castigated violations of civil liberties. And Mr. Varadarajan has exposed the horrific crimes committed by the merchants of hate. None of them has advocated violence, none of them has asked the Indian people to revolt against the elected regime. All they ask for is that the provisions of the Constitution be honoured by our leaders. Leaders wield the scalpel, they ought to be the healers. Their touch should nurse the wounds in the body politic. Public intellectuals are the conscience of our country. They should be respected because they speak out against injustice wherever it occurs, not be subjected to punitive action. Public intellectuals are of value because they bring the sane, cool voice of reasoned reflection to bear on contentious and stormy public issues.

### **Meanings of Difficult Words:**

1. **intellectual** (noun) – academic, scholar, learned person, pandit.
2. **speak out** (phrasal verb) – express, articulate, communicate, convey, voice (something straightforwardly & publicly).
3. **defy** (verb) – resist, take a stand against, confront.
4. **edict** (noun) – decree, order, command.
5. **corpse** (noun) – dead body.
6. **feast on** (phrasal verb) – eat up, gobble up, consume (a large amount of food with enjoyment).
7. **disobedience** (noun) – indiscipline, misconduct, non-compliance.
8. **thou** (pronoun) – archaic (old-fashioned) form of “you” (when “you” as the subject of a sentence (e.g. thou art fair!(you are beautiful!))).
9. **thee** (pronoun) – archaic (old-fashioned) form of “you” (when “you” as the object of a sentence (e.g. I love thee!)).

10. **didst** (verb) – archaic second-person singular past tense of “do”.
11. **indeed** (adverb) – in fact, actually, undeniably.
12. **transgress** (verb) – breach, violate, disobey.
13. **dwell** (verb) – reside, live, settle, stay in a particular place.
14. **deem** (verb) – regard as, consider, view as.
15. **mortal** (noun) – human being, human, person.
16. **override** (verb) – disregard, ignore, overrule/overturn, reject (a view, idea, suggestion etc).
17. **unfailing** (adjective) – immeasurable, incalculable, inestimable; constant/steadfast.
18. **statute** (noun) – act/law, regulation, rule.
19. **just** (adjective) – fair, equitable, impartial.
20. **legitimacy** (noun) – authority, lawfulness, legality; justification, validity.
21. **setback** (noun) – problem, difficulty, issue.
22. **reiterate** (verb) – repeat, say again, restate.
23. **binding** (adjective) – compulsory, imperative, mandatory, necessary.
24. **context** (noun) – circumstances, conditions, situation.
25. **regime** (noun) – system, arrangement, scheme; system of government.
26. **ought to** (modal verb) – must, should.
27. **dissent** (verb) – to express opposite/ disagreeing/conflicting opinions/ideas.
28. **tolerate** (verb) – accept, agree, allow/permit, approve (opposite/conflicting opinions/ideas).
29. **reflection** (noun) – opinion/thought, thinking, consideration.
30. **eminent** (adjective) – distinguished, renowned, esteemed, notable.
31. **conspiratorial** (adjective) – relating to a secret plan to do something bad/illegal; covert, underground, underhand.
32. **flimsy** (adjective) – weak, unconvincing, unsatisfactory, unsubstantial.
33. **take on** (phrasal verb) – oppose, challenge, confront.
34. **depressing** (adjective) – upsetting, distressing, discouraging.
35. **commentary** (noun) – explanation, interpretation, assessment.
36. **sophisticated** (adjective) – enlightened, knowledgeable; highly developed.
37. **subject (someone to)** (verb) – put through, treat with, bring under control of.
38. **interpretation** (noun) – understanding, reading, analysis/evaluation.
39. **critique** (noun) – analysis, evaluation, assessment.
40. **prescription** (noun) – (authoritative) recommendation, method/measure.
41. **defendant** (noun) – appellant, litigant, respondent.
42. **jury** (noun) – a group of people who judge something.
43. **reflective** (adjective) – thoughtful, contemplative, introspective, serious, severe.
44. **authoritarian** (adjective) – oppressive, illiberal, undemocratic, totalitarian.
45. **breed** (noun) – bring up, rear, raise, nurture.
46. **court historian** (noun) – historian in the courtroom of an authoritarian government (to work with special tribunals for matters of regime interest).
47. **intellectualism** (noun) – rationalism; intellectual pursuits.
48. **contemptuously** (adverb) – scornfully, disdainfully, disrespectfully, with full of contempt.
49. **elitist** (adjective) – associated with an elite group of people.
50. **foster** (verb) – encourage, promote, develop.
51. **mediocrity** (noun) – ordinariness, lack of inspiration, indifference; inferiority, amateurism.
52. **hold a mirror** (phrase) – metaphorically, it usually means reveal to someone what they look like to the rest of the world; (to reveal true reflection only).
53. **hound** (verb) – harass, pressurize, pursue (continuously & harshly).
54. **foreclose** (verb) – preclude, prevent, remove (a course of action).
55. **slide** (verb) – fall, drop, plunge/descend (to a lower level).
56. **authoritarianism** (noun) – autocracy, fascism, totalitarianism/draconianism.
57. **notion** (noun) – idea, belief, concept.
58. **take shape** (phrase) – become clear/definite, become tangible; develop, emerge, appear.
59. **tumultuous** (adjective) – stormy, turbulent, volatile; out of control.
60. **allegedly** (adverb) – supposedly, purportedly, reportedly.

61. **treason** (noun) – also called as high treason; betraying one’s country particularly by trying to remove the government; disloyalty, betrayal, lèse-majesté, faithlessness.
62. **amidst** (preposition) – amid, in the middle of; during.
63. **roar** (noun) – shout, clamour, din, loud noise.
64. **anti-Semitism** (noun) – hostility to, prejudice, or discrimination against Jews.
65. **strip of** (verb) – dispossess, deprive, deny/ remove, take away from (rank, power, etc.).
66. **charge** (verb) – fill, load, instil, affect.
67. **sane** (adjective) – sensible, practical, rational, responsible, realistic.
68. **drown** (verb) – make inaudible, overpower, overwhelm, bury.
69. **din** (noun) – uproar, loud noise, clamour/commotion.
70. **keep away** (phrasal verb) – make to stay away, prevent, avoid (from coming).
71. **summon** (verb) – muster, gather, collect, rally, mobilize.
72. **reflect on** (verb) – think about, consider, review.
73. **irrational** (adjective) – unreasonable, illogical, groundless.
74. **stereotype** (verb) – conventionalize, standardize, categorize.
75. **glee** (noun) – delight or pleasure.
76. **humiliation** (noun) – indignity, disgrace, dishonour.
77. **mainstream** (noun) – something (certain beliefs/ideas/activities) which are accepted or recognized by most people as a normal or typical.
78. **ivory tower** (noun) – a place where people are happily separated from the rest of the world and so they have no knowledge or experience of the practical problems of everyday life (e.g. a place of learning like college/university).
79. **hysteria** (noun) – irrationality, frenzy, wildness.
80. **bounds** (noun) – limits, confines, restrictions, limitations.
81. **civility** (noun) – politeness, good manners, mannerliness.
82. **exonerate** (verb) – free/clear from a criminal charge, acquit, declare innocent.
83. **intelligentsia** (noun) – intellectuals, intelligent people, academics/learned people.
84. **prejudice** (noun) – bigotry, intolerance, discrimination, partisanship.
85. **stand by** (phrasal verb) – support, stand up for, uphold/defend.
86. **quest** (noun) – pursuit; mission.
87. **beleaguered** (adjective) – hard-pressed, troubled, suffering.
88. **over and above** (phrase) – in addition to, as well as, besides.
89. **propagate** (verb) – spread, disseminate, communicate.
90. **account** (noun) – narrative, report, explanation, statement, interpretation.
91. **right-wing** (adjective) – conservative, rightist, alt-right.
92. **mob** (noun) – a large, disorganized, and often violent crowd of people.
93. **rhetoric** (noun) – bombast, loftiness, hyperbole/extravagant language.
94. **blood-curdling** (adjective) – terrifying, frightening, shocking, horrifying.
95. **detest** (verb) – hate, dislike, disdain.
96. **pave the way for** (phrase) – clear the way for, create a situation to do something, precede, make provision for.
97. **fascism** (noun) – absolute rule, authoritarianism, totalitarianism.
98. **pogrom** (noun) – (planned) mass slaughter, mass killing, mass murder (of a particular ethnic group).
99. **live up to** (phrasal verb) – satisfy, fulfil, achieve.
100. **lapse** (verb) – deteriorate, fail, vanish, wane, disappear.
101. **denounce** (verb) – condemn, criticize, attack, censure.
102. **cast** (verb) – discard, reject, throw away.
103. **scholarly** (adjective) – learned, well educated, knowledgeable.
104. **gaze** (noun) – observance, inspection, scrutiny.
105. **explosion** (noun) – upheaval, flare up, outburst.
106. **sift out** (phrasal verb) – separate out, filter out, sort out, isolate.
107. **call for** (phrasal verb) – require, publicly ask/necessitate, demand.
108. **invoke** (verb) – cite, refer to, adduce.
109. **address** (verb) – tackle, deal with, attend to, try to sort out.

110. **contemporary** (adjective) – modern, present-day, current, present-time.
111. **legacy** (noun) – effect/outcome (something received from a predecessor or from the past).
112. **precisely** (adverb) – exactly, absolutely, squarely.
113. **take up** (phrasal verb) – engage in, participate in, start, undertake.
114. **insistently** (adverb) – repetitively, continuously.
115. **chronicler** (noun) – historian, reporter, recorder.
116. **heap on** (verb) – give a great deal of something (praise, abuse, criticism, etc.).
117. **castigate** (verb) – criticize, reprimand, rebuke severely.
118. **merchant** (noun) – a person who involves in something unpleasant.
119. **advocate** (verb) – support, promote, champion/espouse.
120. **provision** (noun) – term, clause, requirement/ condition.
121. **wield** (verb) – use, put to use, employ, handle, control.
122. **scalpel** (noun) – a small straight knife with a very sharp blade used for surgery, dissection and craftwork.
123. **nurse** (verb) – try to cure; try to heal; try to alleviate.
124. **body politic** (noun) – all citizens of a nation collectively.
125. **be subjected to** (verb) – put through, undergo, experience (something difficult or unpleasant).
126. **punitive** (adjective) – disciplinary, corrective, retributive.
127. **of value** (phrase) – useful, important.
128. **bear on** (phrasal verb) – to have an effect on something; be concerned with, have to do with, be connected with.
129. **contentious** (adjective) – controversial, disputable, debatable.

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