Be prepared to pay the price of freedom
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We must always speak up and stand up for what we believe in whenever irrational voices try to drown the voice of reason and sanity. Freedom must be protected for its own sake and not just only on issues that affect us directly.

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Artiste as activist: Meryl Streep
RECENT days have witnessed a distinct clash of views. The Jaipur Literature Festival ended with protests and disagreements. Film director Sanjay Leela Bhansali was attacked in Jaipur, for allegedly portraying a Rajput queen in his forthcoming film Padmavati. Donald Trump's infamously termed "Muslim ban" has been met with protests throughout the world. Jallikattu protestors occupied the beach and much of news headlines. What emerges from these instances is the diverse opinions and points of view. Taking matters, closest to home first. Disagreement is the hallmark of a healthy democracy. Not only is it unavoidable, but it is also to a great extent desirable. It is dissent, disagreement and debate that ensure discussion, development, transparency and accountability. This, in turn, ensures that democracy is grounded in the will of the people—not just in the majority view but in a collective, balanced and well-represented view.

However, to ensure a balanced, free debate, it is essential that we do not lose sight and importance of freedom. The film fraternity, in unison, condemned the attack against Bhansali. Messages of support were numerous. Meryl Streep perhaps vehemently led the charge against Donald Trump in Hollywood. What was most interesting was, however, the timing. It was certainly heartening to see the film fraternity stand for a cause—but it was also unfortunate that things had to come to this for so many to voice their opinion against rising intolerance. Many people who spoke up now—against an attack on a film-maker (one of "them")—had maintained an unnerving silence previously on issues which perhaps affected a lot more people.

Dante once said, “The darkest places in hell are reserved for those who maintain their neutrality in times of moral crisis.” Media personalities enjoy unrivalled power and influence. As Meryl Streep rightly said, it was a responsibility to speak up against injustices of the world. It is certainly a shared responsibility to voice our opinions, condemn the condemnable and applaud the plausible. Our forefathers have fought very hard for freedom. Indeed many laid their lives. Today, numerous soldiers are doing the same—safeguarding our freedom. Freedom, like most precious things in life is not only attained it also has to be maintained. It lies on us to ensure the freedom that we have inherited, and so fondly cherish, is
passed onto the future generations. It does not take a long time for freedom to be curtailed, cabined and cribbed. A case in point is Afghanistan. It was not long ago when the streets of Kabul were a diverse mix of vibrancy, liberal intellectual sessions and intrepid debates. Things are inching towards an equal, inclusive society again. Yet it is still a far cry from the "hippy trail paradise" that it once was.

Perhaps most famously, Martin Niemöller, warned against rise of tyranny in the following words:

“First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out- Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out- Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out- Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me-and there was no one left to speak for me.”

While we have it, the onus is on us to ensure that we keep our freedoms intact. Grand gestures are not what we necessarily need. Instead, what we do need is a continuous effort to strive towards ensuring the voice of reason is not drowned by unreasonable, non-progressive voices. We need to keep a continuous watch and not just on matters that affect us directly. The need of the hour now, as it has always been, is to speak up and ensure we maintain what we have inherited.

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