

The Courage of Truth; Parrheisa and its Deliberations in India Today

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On 10th January 2019, CBI Director of India, Alok Verma was sacked by a special committee that comprised of Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. And the interesting facts regarding this news are:

- Alok Verma is the only CBI chief who was appointed by CBI without any prior experience.
- Alok Verma is the first CBI Director to be removed before the completion of a fixed tenure of two years.
- Alok Verma was removed at 2 am, his room was seized and all the official documents were taken away.
- Lastly, he was removed during his undertakings in Rafale scam in which the prime suspect was PM.

The Congress party has alleged that Alok Verma was dismissed due to his keen interest in the Rafale Scam which was filed by former BJP minister Yashwant Sinha and senior journalist Arun Shourie. The Lawyer and activist Prashant Bhushan, another defendant has said that Rafale deal was the “largest defence scam the country has seen” accusing the PM in the matter. Alok Verma appears to be a representative of truth speaker in an age of un-truths and un-facts. In carrying out his duty as a true servant of government, he enacts *parrhesia* or the very ancient Greek practice of courageous truth telling. The representation of Alok Verma as a *parrhesiastes* is important because it gives those in power a model by which to speak truth in this time of untruths.

The French theorist and philosopher, Michel Foucault has interpreted the concept and practice of *parrhesia* in his final lecture series titled as *The Courage of Truth The Government of Self and Others II Lectures at Collège de France* (1983-1984). Foucault says,

“I would like to continue the study of free spokenness, of *parrhesia* as a mode of truth telling... It seemed to me equally interesting to analyze the conditions and forms of the type of act by which the subject *manifests* himself when speaking the truth, by which I mean, thinks of himself and is ... This principal (*epimele sauto*: take care of yourself) gave rise, I think, to the development of what could be called a ‘culture of the self’ in which a whole set of practices of self are formulated, developed, worked out and transmitted.”(Foucault, 1983-84, pp. 2-5)

According to Foucault, *parrhesia* is merely telling truth or a frank speech. An important thing to be noted here is that the act of telling the truth results in the production of subject whereas the individual who tells the truth acts as a frank and virtuous *parrhesiastes*. Being a Foucaultian interrogation, *parrhesiastes* too is produced by various modes of power relations such as governmental, cultural, social, historical, etc. Both Socrates and Foucault agrees that *parrhesiastes*, requires a realm of

self-knowledge and self-development which is described as “the care of the self,” that includes a world of physical and mental exercises into the ancient philosophical life. Another condition is that the self that tells the real truth they believe must truly know him or herself and therefore, a *parrhesia* comes first from the “care of the self.”

The central themes of the Foucaultian *parrhesia* are truth and courage. Foucault describes, “[p]arrhesia is the courage of truth in the person who speaks and who, regardless of everything, takes the risk of telling the whole truth” (Foucault 1983-84, p. 13). In this way, *parrhesia* can be termed as a practice or is the courage of speaking the truth to a friend, a tyrant, or the whole polity of a democratic polis, at the risk of shame, exile, imprisonment or death. This discourse or act was produced where truth and courage bonded together.

Foucault explores the moral and political institutions of *parrhesia* throughout his work, *The Courage of Truth*. Its origin was all but a democratic practice providing the structure to speak freely the truth of some importance. Foucault also discovers the dangerous relationship between *parrhesia* and the democratic city. He states: “In democracy, *parrhesia* is dangerous for the city. It is dangerous for the city because it is the freedom of everyone and anyone to give their views” (Foucault 1983-84, p. 36). *Parrhesia* is highly dangerous for lot many reasons. First of all, it results in a political and existential threat to which the city must respond when a grave truth is exposed. Second, this freedom to expression through *parrhesia* can be both a merit and a demerit as it can be polyvocal enough to be confused or misunderstood. To continue with the dangers of *parrhesia*, Foucault points out that:

“In democracy, *parrhesia* is not only dangerous for the city itself, but also for the individual who attempts to exercise it... In a precise passage in the *Apology*, Socrates refers to this danger for the individual speaking the truth in the democratic space... Consequently, a man who speaks for all these noble reasons opposes the will of al, Socrates says, risks death.” (Foucault 1983-84, pp. 36-37).

Parrhesia always requires a recipient be it a friend, a tyrant, or the whole polity of a city and there is always high risk of disagreement, enmity and death. Socrates always spoke the truth and because he spoke against the polity, they sentenced him to death. Thus, Foucault is forced to ask this question as to how can we differentiate between the various qualities and intentions of *parrhesia*? Foucault notes that “[t]he idea that *parrhesia* is always risky with the Prince, may always fail, may always encounter unfavorable circumstances, but is not always in itself impossible” (Foucault 1983-84, p. 62).

This can be seen in the case of Alexander and Diogenes. Alexander, as the King of Macedonia, was unsure why Diogenes did not flatter him and was instead antagonistic. As Classical Greek historian Dio Chrysostom describes in his *Dialogues*, the moment after Diogenes demanded to remain in the sun, “Now, Alexander was at once delighted with the man’s boldness and composure in not being awestruck in his presence. For it was somehow natural for the courageous to love the courageous” (Dio Chrysostom 1932, p. 175). Bizarrely, instead of returning insults or having Diogenes killed, Alexander gained a tremendous amount of respect for him for his frankness—Diogenes’s quality of *parrhesia*. To understand why Alexander listened to Diogenes, we must turn again to Foucault, who says, “What makes truth-telling with the Prince possible, desirable, and even necessary is that the way he governs the city depends on his *ethos*” (Foucault 1983-84, p. 63). The sovereign’s ethical and

moral attitude has to be open and generous to invite dissent. Therefore, Alexander's open ethos, coupled with the respect he gained for Diogenes through the *agonistic* struggle, allowed him to recognize and respect the urge towards *parrhesia*.

There are echoes that connect *parrhesia* to contemporary practices of courageous truth telling. In order to locate them, we must excavate the proceedings from Alok Verma's case. Mr. Verma wanted to set the record straight and carry out his duty sincerely on account of which he was fired by the PM. Ethically speaking, he needed to publicly expose the questionable behaviour, conversations and manipulations in Rafale scam. He is capable of steering towards the role of a truth teller in the Classical Greek sense. Foucault's genealogy of *parrhesia* reveals the need for real courage to openly speak ethical truths to sources of political power, at risk of shame, injury or death. Again, he lost his job in offering to do his duty and also risked being defamed by the PM of India. This can be compared to the act of a truth speaker against a tyrannical ruler who demands loyalty over honesty, and attempted to centralize power instead of allowing the judicial branch and the CBI to remain independent. Lastly, the stakes of truth telling in a democracy were as contentious in ancient Athens as they are today. What we see here are a multitude of conflicting attempts at making truths. How do we know which truths to trust and which to doubt and scrutinize and dismiss? This is always a challenge that may undermine all the effort done by honest public servants. However, lying under oath from a heroic *parrhesiastes* and longstanding CBI employee seems unlikely. At times, it is the polyvocal other non-truths that seem to me more fallible.

Furthermore, Alok Verma's *parrhesia* is also meant to inspire others to speak truthfully in the time of untruths. More and more people will likely come out who have been burned or fired for being too close to those truths he wants to hide and obstruct. The more *parrhesiastes* we have will not only build a stronger case for impeachment, but will strengthen and encourage truth seekers and truth tellers to battle the mistruths of the world. This is a crucial and critical battle that requires newfound courage and foresight to navigate our democracy ethically, justly and truthfully.

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Plato. *Gorgias*.

Plato. *Laches*.

Plato. *Republic*.