

## **The Aesthetics of Living: The Deepening Crises**

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“The freedom culture is in danger of being destroyed by capitalism”

(Bauman 2002: XXIII).

**Abstract:** *A combination of neo-liberalism and right-wing nationalism is out to vitiate democratic orders and citizenship in some parts of the globe. This new order threatens the livelihood of a large majority of the population in one way or the other, destabilizes their livelihood rights, disenfranchises them, constricts their freedom and imprisons their creative faculty in its efforts to enforce a homogenous culture. The prime challenge before the citizens in these countries, therefore, is to defend the individual freedom and agency and right to collective resistance making use of their critical faculty. An ideal benevolent social democratic order, which respects freedom of the subjects and of the communities, upholds the egalitarian and humane ideals and negates any form of coercion or oppression, is everybody's dream. Such a dream is actualized in some social-democratic countries in the Scandinavian. However, the countries that combine neo-liberal greed with authoritarianism and a monolithic culture betray the livelihood expectations and sabotage the proliferation of an aesthetic life. The task before the enlightened citizens, therefore, is to prepare to be able to decrypt the systemic technology of subversion of human freedom, rights and agency and look for ways and means to preserve the subjective freedom and be a part of the collective moves to create an ideal material and aesthetic order.*

**Keywords:** Freedom, authoritarianism, livelihood, aesthetics, neo-liberal order, risk society, reflexive modernity, technology of self.

### ***Introduction***

There are two primary and universal objectives that guide human life: one, to work to meet the material needs that are indispensable for the survival

of the humankind and a decent life, and two, to take initiatives to meet the non-material needs in order to make life beautiful in line with the aesthetic practices (search for knowledge, truth and higher philosophy of life, leisure, cultivation of humane ideals, journey into the world of art, literature, sports, decoration, gardening, beautification, activities in self and community care, and so on) of the individuals or the communities in a given time and space. In other words, materiality and spirituality combine to make life beautiful and complete. Both of these, equal in importance, constitute the essence of human life. Life is a journey of struggle and fulfillment to meet these needs following the conventional technology and culture and about surging ahead discovering new ways of doing things while unfurling new and unknown terrains of human life applying the individual and collective creative imaginations. Neither the ontological needs nor the aesthetic demands are fixed; they vary over time and space and across classes, communities and individuals. Even one individual or one family can innovate in meeting ontological and aesthetic demands with improved material conditions and access to right kind of information (or knowledge). The quality of living and that of the socio-political-economic and cultural order depends much on whether the individual members, who constitute the “collective order”, have easy access to the basic material needs and a free ambience and space to chase their aesthetic imaginations. Material freedom, freedom to think, innovate and practice (or cultural freedom) and freedom of expression are the keys to good life and the essence of a prosperous socio-cultural order.

The philosophers of ancient Greece – Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, Xenophon - to name only a few, the philosophers of the Hellenic period, and the philosophers of modern time – Rousseau, Nietzsche, Marx, Foucault – to name a few, have searched for the best ways and means to meet the two essences of human life outlined above. Putting it in a grand generalized way, one could perhaps say that all human sciences and actions are directed, at least apparently, to these two fundamental ends, from the ancient to modern times, and the conflicts between the individuals, groups and the social order of the time center around an inevitable mismatch between the expectations of the individuals and groups and what is offered by the order.

An ideal, munificent, social democratic order, which respects freedom of the subjects and the communities and upholds the egalitarian and humane ideals and negates any form of coercion or oppression, is everybody’s dream. Such a dream is actualized in some Scandinavian social-democratic countries, where there is an overwhelming intolerance for inequality and oppression and citizens’ happiness index is on top in the global scale.

However, the countries that combine neo-liberal greed with authoritarianism end up vitiating the livelihood expectations and the conditions for an aesthetic life. The prime task before the enlightened citizens, therefore, is to be able to decrypt the systemic technology of subversion of human freedom and agency and look for ways and means to preserve subjective freedom, and to be a part of the collective efforts to create an ideal material and aesthetic order.

The *first part* of this paper deals with Michel Foucault's perception of subjectivity and individual autonomy, the *second section* delineates Ulrich Beck's (and Bauman's) perception of how the second-order modernity promotes "individualization" and subverts the possibility of a collective resistance, and the *third section* examines how Foucault's and Beck's perceptions would be useful in disentangling the on-going dialects between the "governmentality" and individual subjectivity (or autonomy) and its impact on the livelihood and the aesthetic life of the people in India. The paper ends with some concluding observations.

### ***The loss and recovery of the subjectivity***

Writing about the ancient Greek philosophical tradition in *The History of Sexuality Vol. 2 (1990)*, Michel Foucault observes that (1) there was no disciplinary boundary at that time and the philosophers looked at life holistically, (2) the individuals enjoyed the highest degree of freedom as free dialogue (among the citizens) was the means to production of knowledge (a fact acknowledged in Satyajit Ray's *Agantuk* (1991) and Amartya Sen's *Argumentative Indian (2005)*, and which was also there in the Lokayat school of Indian philosophy), (3) all knowledge forms or philosophies were directed to the collective perception of aesthetic life (to make human life and society beautiful and philosophically rich), even the discourses and practices of sexuality were conceived to be a part of aesthetics of life and "self-care", (4) cultivation of knowledge was an indispensable part of human life, for both the ordinary citizens and the rulers ("the ruler must learn to rule himself to be able to rule others" was the famous Greek dictum), although the slaves were non-citizens and completely disenfranchised, (5) freedom for all to care for themselves and to elevate themselves morally, spiritually and philosophically was the essence of aesthetics of living in both ancient Greece (Foucault 1990) and Hellenic Greece (Foucault 1986).

Foucault (in Vol. 4 of *History of Sexuality*) has shown how human freedom (sexuality is only a field), which was the hallmark of the ancient societies,

has been constricted as we moved into the mediaeval Christian Age, where the centralized power of the Church and the State (or the Pastoral Power) objectified human beings in order to transform them into the subjects (without agency) of the order. The dialogical mode of knowledge production was replaced by a teacher-pupil like arrangement; the teacher – the Pastor or the King – became the source and symbol of knowledge and truth and the ordinary people were to follow their edicts, their discourses. In Foucault's estimate, the subjective freedom, has been further constricted through all-encroaching and sophisticated bio-power of modern era, through surveillance and systemic discourses on every single ontological issue, and by putting in place an elaborate arrangement of disciplining and punishing the subjects.

Despite structural technology of control of individual subjectivity in modern time Foucault argues that the individuals should make efforts to find liberty, or a free space, to mould themselves, exploring the mechanisms of self-care, creativity, criticality and search for an aesthetic life. The individuals should always search for techniques to preserve freedom, which allows them to work on themselves, while cultivating knowledge, truth and aesthetics. Such alternative technologies, Foucault cautions, could also bind us to the categories, constructed by the given order. As such, we have to take into account the points where the technologies of domination of individuals have recourse to processes by which the individual acts upon himself. And conversely, we have to take into account the points where the techniques of the self are integrated into structures of coercion or domination. In "Truth and Power", Foucault tells us:

... what makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no; it also traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network that runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repressive (Foucault 2001a: 119).

In Foucault's analysis, the power arrangement (or "governmentality") of a time involves two complementary parts: (1) how the individuals direct their own actions as well as those of others, and (2) how the institutions and states direct the actions of groups of individuals. The disciplinary techniques of the structure in different historical epochs has been elaborated in his books *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and *History of Sexuality, Volume I* (1979). The former is central to the critical project in Foucault's late works,

which consider not merely how government imposes laws on individuals but also how individuals mold themselves into subjects, generating consensus for the order. Foucault's project was to rediscover the subjectivity (the individual with identity and autonomy) which the structure intends to deny.

Foucault searched for ways and means to retain individual autonomy while analyzing the structure-agency dialectics in modern governmentality. In his 1980 Dartmouth lectures, Foucault observed that the challenge before us in modern times is to find "positive foundations for technologies of the self," foundations in scientific knowledge grounding practices which allow individuals to become autonomous subjects (Foucault 1997a: 203). The individual, in so doing, must know how the disciplinary power "categorizes the individual . . . imposes a truth on him" (Foucault 2001b: 331). Foucault argues that the problem of self today is not to seek "either a positive self or the positive foundation of the self"; rather, the problem we face today is "a politics of ourselves" (Foucault 1997b: 222) in which new forms of subjectivity are to be promoted (Foucault 2001b: 336). The task is to develop those relations to ourselves whereby the individual actively constitutes herself as an ethical agent (Foucault 1997c: 291) empowered to neutralize the systemic regime of ethics.

What is required to offset such disciplinary effects of the individuals is to develop the competencies necessary to practice their freedom. For Foucault, what is of interest in ancient ethics is that a strong structure to one's life is provided by developing a relation with herself, without submitting to normalizing and disciplinary structures that tell us how to act (Foucault 1997d: 260, 263). The structure to their lives thus reflects a link between the person's volition and action, enabling the person to govern herself (Foucault 1997a: 209-10). Such a relation to oneself—what Foucault calls "ethics" (which, in essence, is "the relation with yourself when you act", and is different from that of "a code that would tell us how to act") (Foucault 1997e: 131)—is not prescribed by a moral code but rather is a matter of individual choice to pursue by undertaking "self-forming activities" (Foucault 1997d 270-71). Establishing a relation to the self is thus central to Foucault's project of developing new subjectivities.

In contemporary society, individuals are made "subjects," categorized and given identities (Foucault, 2001b: 331). In contrast, a "self" is a set of core beliefs and principles that constitute the person's understanding of who she is. The "self" is neither a sovereign universal subject nor some sort of pre-social human nature which individuals strive to realize or to return to. However, for Foucault, nothing is in a power-free realm. He tells us that

“power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus, not a ‘supplementary’ structure over and above ‘society’ whose radical effacement one could perhaps dream of ...a society without power relations can only be an abstraction” (Foucault 2003). However, the individual should reserve the right to critique under all circumstances. “[Critique] is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and questions power on its discourses of truth . . . [Critique] will be the act of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected intractability. Critique would essentially ensure the desubjugation of the subject in what we would call . . . the politics of truth” (Foucault 2003: 267). The central argument here is that the individuals should connect to their “selves” so that they could understand their own lives better.

By inserting such a “self” into the process of subject formation (or “subjectivation”, to use Foucault’s terminology) new forms of subjectivities may emerge, since there is a critical engagement between the way the person understands herself and the forces that try to imprison her. Foucault’s work on ethics is thus inherently political because it is about forming new subjectivities and resisting the imposition of identities that discipline individuals. The Foucaultian ethics, according to his adversaries, would lead to extreme form of individualism, which would lead to politicization and segmentation of the individuals. James Wong (2013), however, rejects such an interpretation of Foucault and his writings.

The common cord in most other Foucaultian writings as well is the dialectics between the technology of control and self-production by the social order and the struggle of the individual subjects for preservation of subjectivity and freedom in defense of the aesthetics of life. The leviathan social order of a given time fine-tunes the technology of control by controlling human body, existential (ontological) issues, human psyche, discourses and thought process and even the aesthetics of life by monopolizing production and dissemination of knowledge, by mastering the art of surveillance, discipline and punish. While unraveling the structures of systemic control and the history of un-freedom Foucault searched for freedom of the self to decide her/his course of life, for which she/he would need alternative knowledge and truth about human life (not the ones that are constructed by the power of the day), which would be dynamically searched through a dialogical method involving free and critical thinking individuals. The existing structures would change through human beings’ search for alternative truth, aesthetics and morality. The “care of the self” comes in here as the individuals are

called upon to elevate their discursive understanding and create free space for themselves by nurturing and sharpening critical consciousness.

The dialectical relationship between the larger social order and the individual has been captured by Foucault in the following discourse:

As a context, we must understand that there are four major types of these “technologies,” each a matrix of practical reason: (1) technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things; (2) technologies of sign systems, which permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols, or signification; (3) technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject; (4) technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and semis, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (Foucault 1988: 19).

Foucault argues that “what makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no; it also traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network that runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repressive” (Foucault 2001: 119).

Self-construction, for Foucault, is both systemic and the result of self-care for autonomy or freedom. It is essentially a power-knowledge dialectics. The systemic definition of self is therefore open to contestation and even rejection. In his effort to work out an alternative to the hegemonic power Foucault takes a post-structuralist position to argue that the hegemonic consensus of the given power-structure cannot be replaced with an alternative consensus since that might also prove to be hegemonic in due course. He is, therefore, arguing in favour of a perpetual or an open-end dialectics or contestation in defense of subjective freedom under all circumstances. The self-care, in this sense, aims not to be trapped in any hegemonic discourse, rather, it looks for alternative discourses and techniques for preserving subjective freedom.

Foucault’s argument is that the aim of seeking consensus (at any collective level) is itself played within a system of power relations, and is not without its own exclusionary effects; rather, one should work against the exclusion

of other perspectives. He adds that we need to ask "... what proportion of nonconsensuality is implied in such a power relationship, and whether the degree of nonconsensuality is necessary or not, and then one may question every power relation to that extent" (Foucault 1984: 379). Working with different, perhaps even oppositional, points of view foregrounds the present constellation of values and traditions framing our relations to one another and to ourselves and allows us to challenge them by viewing the values and traditions differently. This is why Foucault does not privilege the idea of a community, a "we," in his discussions on politics. He tells us "the 'we' must not be previous to the question; it can only be the result—and the necessarily temporary result—of the question as it is posed in the new terms in which one formulates it" (Foucault 1984: 385.) In conjunction with the practice of *parrhesia*, the joint examination of values and norms in place at present may give rise to other voices, other possibilities (Wong 2013: 11).

Foucault's prognosis of systemic control of the subjects (the loss of subjectivity) and recommendations for the recovery of the subjectivity appear much in line with the discourses of the German critical school and the post-Marxist scholars. However revolutionary Foucault might sound in his discourses, he essentially takes a post-structuralist and post-modernist position which negates, or at least substantially weakens, the possibility of organized counter-hegemonic struggles or that of a total systemic transformation as was dreamt of by Marx and the Marxists. His idea of ethical freedom might help retain subjective autonomy but that would not be good enough to overpower the hegemonic stranglehold of the system. A revolutionary discourse and a collective movement by the oppressed may, in the long run, fail to bring liberation for the masses (as has happened in East Europe in the last century) and may turn out to be hegemonic (as in China or North Korea), but the humankind cannot but search for alternative discourses of collective transformative movements.

### ***Reinvention of Politics in Reflexive Modernity***

We can perhaps bring in the ideas of Ulrich Beck as outlined in his *Risk Society* (1992), *The Reinvention of Politics* (1997), 'The Theory of Reflexive Modernization' (2003), and many other latter writings to construct another discourse (different from that of Foucault) that talks about a different kind of existential and aesthetic crises in modern time. While for Foucault the loss of subjective freedom is the root of the crisis in modern life for

Beck “individualization” or the rise of a withdrawn calculative, defensive individuals, who are busy working out survival strategies to smother insurmountable risks unfurled by the modern industrial or post-industrial societies, is the crisis. The fragmentation of the people into atomic individual units because of the growing risks of modern life kills the possibility of collective resistance. While Foucault’s primary concern is the preservation of subjective autonomy Beck’s concern is to restore some form of collective self and collective mobilization for social transformation, which is otherwise lost in post-modern societies.

Beck argues that the progressive “individualization of social inequality” - an inevitable outcome of the modern capitalist societies, manifest in, unemployment, a shift to contractual, part-time employment, and the erosion of lifetime job security in both blue-collar and white-collar occupations – impacts the long-term economic and political development of these societies. The modern society, programmed for speedy economic growth, unleash different kinds of risks – environmental, economic, social-cultural and political, which operate in interconnections, putting human life and the dream of a good life at risk. With gradual weakening of the state in the neo-liberal global order the individuals are left to fend for themselves and are estranged in the jungle of crises. The individuals, in turn, reflect on the ground realities and decide about their livelihood and living strategies and this leads to an extreme form of individualization or atomization (Beck 1992).

Beck argues that the industrial society marks a transition, a watershed in human history, in fact, from a human condition where naturally occurring hazards (disease, flood, famine, and the like) - along with socially determined hazards such as invasion and conquest, regressive forms of thought and culture, and rigid class structures – molded the fate of individuals and groups, to one where increasingly our fate is bound up with risks that are deliberately undertaken – for the sake of benefits conceived in advance, by means of our technological mastery over nature. Too much dependence on technological solution kills the creative aesthetic faculty of the individuals (Beck 1992). A recently published report on global warming cautions how the uncontrolled greed for material comfort and profit of the modern capitalist regimes is leading to global warming at a fast rate, which, if goes unaddressed, would result into a total disaster for the human kind. This precisely corroborates Beck’s worries (UN Report on Climate Change and Global Warming 2021, Source: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/08/1097362>).

According to Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994) globalization since the last decades of the last century has brought about a second-order modernity - "reflexive modernity" - which leads to an extreme form of individualism called "reflexive individualism", where, in coping with the risks, the individual works out her or his own strategy. In the first wave of modernism the individuals had a defined path towards rationality, positivism and freedom; there was an expected uniformity in this journey. In the second-order modernity, associated with globalization induced neo-liberalism, there has been a "denormalization of roles". The individual has become, in Beck's word, "nomadic", without a fixed or defined role or direction. There has been a move toward complexity, indeed towards "chaos". Whereas the "roles" of the first modernity depended very much on what Kant called determinate judgement; on prescription, on determinate rules, in the second-order modernity the individual must be much more the rule finder himself. Determinate judgement is replaced by "reflective judgement". Commenting on Beck, Lash has argued that "reflective judgement" is not reflection because there is now no universal to subsume the particular. In reflective judgement the individual must find the rule. "Reflective judgement is always a question of uncertainty, of risk, but it also leaves the door open much more to innovation." (Lash 2002: xi).

The reflexive individualism and reflexive judgement, according to Beck, lead to a post-modern chaos, where the individuals, lost in the chaos of crises, reflect in diverse ways, depending on their socio-economic-political-cultural condition and work out ways and means to have a cozy place for themselves while compromising with power and the dominant ideologies, the ideology of consumerism, in particular, which turns out to be most lethal integrative force in the neo-liberal-global order.

Despite an apparent (and claimed) "openness" of the post-modern order, which vouch for "freedom", there has been the rise of a sophisticated regulative system in the guise of the modern market-oriented State. The system tries to regulate the individual life through Constitutive and regulative rules or, the Constitutional and extra-Constitutional rules. Exploitation takes place through regulative rules while exclusion take place through constitutive rules. This threatens both livelihood and the aesthetic life of the citizens since it tends to vitiate universal human and democratic rights of the people, who aspire for a decent life in a fearless ambience.

The apparent individualization in the post-modern era, according to Bauman, does not subvert the integration mission of the economic-political order. He writes:

... that individualization (a) is a structural characteristic of highly differentiated societies and (b) does not endanger their integration but actually makes it possible. The individual creativity which it releases is seen as creating space for the renewal of society under conditions of radical change. In developed modernity – to be quite blunt about it – human mutuality and community rest no longer on solidly established traditions, but, rather, on a paradoxical collectivity of reciprocal individualization (Bauman 2002: xxi).

Another important manifestation of individualization, according to Beck, is the corrosion and slow disintegration of citizenship' (Bauman 2002: xiii) 'individualization spells trouble for citizenship and citizenship-based politics' (p. xiii); public issues are many but collective resistance is fading.

The gravest of all risks unleashed by the neo-liberal order are: (1) naturalization and universalization of post-knowledge and post-truth as knowledge and truth; although we boast of progress of science never before in human history, the individuals are the victims of false consciousness when they face the risk of being taken over by the mammoth information technology, controlled by the national and global capitalist orders, (2) erosion of the culture of dialogue and negotiation, or "gymnasia", to use Foucaultian terminology; knowledge and information flow only from the power (3) the loss of subjectivity, agency and citizenship; the apparent freedom and citizenship rights have been turned into illusions and "the public sphere" stands colonized by power (4) a new socio-political order that is out to create a genre of ideology-free, unethical self-seeking "rational" human beings bereft of long-standing human values. In this new world, we all are reduced to disenfranchised "labourers" of different forms and the voiceless subjects, who have been structurally forced to give up the vision and the struggle for an alternative humane social order. As a part of their survival strategy, individuals now embrace an irrational "zero-risk" mentality, a mentality of compromise.

In *The Reinvention of Politics* (1997), Ulrich Beck suggests that nothing less than "another reformation" is needed and that this calls for the "radicalization of modernity". He proposes that "this assumes social inventions and collective courage in political experiments" – only to add at once that these "inclinations and qualities... are not exactly frequently encountered, and are perhaps no longer even capable of garnering a majority". Yet here we are: we have no other conditions in which to act. And in these conditions, like it or not, act we will, bearing the consequences of our actions or our failure to act. In a latter book *Individualization*

(2002) Beck and Beck have taken a similar position as is evident in the following paragraph:

Neoliberal economics rests upon an image of the autarkic human self. It assumes that individuals alone can master the whole of their lives, that they derive and renew their capacity for action from within themselves. Talk of the ‘self-entrepreneur’ makes this clear. Yet this ideology blatantly conflicts with everyday experience in (and sociological studies of) the worlds of work, family and local community, which show that the individual is not a monad but is self-insufficient and increasingly tied to others, including at the level of worldwide networks and institutions. The ideological notion of the self-sufficient individual ultimately implies the disappearance of any sense of mutual obligation – which is why neoliberalism inevitably threatens the welfare state. A sociological understanding of Individualisierung is thus intimately bound up with the question of how individuals can demystify this false image of autarky. It is not freedom of choice, but insight into the fundamental incompleteness of the self, which is at the core of individual and political freedom in the second modernity (Beck and Beck 2002: xxi).

The central idea, therefore, is to keep striving for new ways and means to reverse the process of individualization and to work for restoring the individual into the collective self, craving for a better social order. Beck, Bauman or Giddens are out to rediscover this collective self out of reflective individuals, which would voice against the forces that threaten the peoples’ right to a decent life and right to aesthetic life. While Foucault tells us to be self-reflexive and take all care in preserving subjective freedom Beck cautions about the rise of excessive individualism in modern “risk societies”, which vitiates the possibility of collective progressive movements. When we talk about the present situations in India both these theoreticians appear relevant.

### ***The Indian Case***

The champions of neo-liberal order had put all their eggs in one basket, namely, the market, the modern panacea of all ills and in the process; the “social” and the “collective” thus stand broken and the individuals are asked to fend for themselves. They thought, the state is too much interfering and a stumbling block in the path of economic growth and prosperity of the

nation, and the public sector units and the state support for the working class, the agricultural labourers, small and medium farmers, the 95 per cent of the workers who find their sustenance selling labour in the informal sector units, and the owners of the small and medium-scale enterprises, is unsustainable and unnecessary. Systematic sell-out of the Public Sector Units to the private capital has led to massive job loss and pushed the new generation job-seekers to take up insecure low pay jobs in the private sector. The only mantra in the neo-liberal order is aggressive economic reforms; the underlying expectation is that the gargantuan market will sustain the middle and the poorer classes by creating enough income/job opportunities. The role of the state, in this discourse, is restricted to create more space for the private national and global capital by opening all the state owned resources for sale and by giving all kinds of support to the corporate capital to grow. In extending its pious support to the private capital, the present Indian government has waived nearly 8 lakh crores of rupees of bank loan for the corporates since 2014-15 financial year and even after this there is an unpaid loan of 12 lakh crores of rupees, which puts the public sector banks and the ordinary depositors in serious crisis (*Ganasakti*, Siliguri, 22 July 2021: 6). For the victims of the neo-liberal order there is a “safety net”, and some financial support under various government schemes in the name of welfare measures, which help the ruling elite to garner public support in periodic elections.

The inevitable upshot of the neo-liberal capitalism is a risk society. The fluctuating economic growth that puts the market in periodic jeopardy, fails to accommodate the ever growing unemployed population (currently the unemployment rate in India hovers around an unsustainable level of 18 per cent) and puts those who manage to retain their livelihood at risk (pay cut, more work, retrenchment at will, abolition of retirement benefits, and so on). The “market in crisis” (for example, the current slump) is a big threat to those 95 per cent of the workers who are dependent on the informal sector of economy. The economic crisis also impacts around 67 per cent of our population who directly or indirectly depend on the agricultural sector for a living. The on-going COVID19 pandemic induced negative economic growth has forced millions of the workforce out of job. Based on updated data Patel (2021) reports that under BJP reign there has been a progressive job loss, starting from 2014. The total number of Indians with work shrunk from 44 crores (440 million) in 2013 to 41 crores (410 million) in 2016 to 40 crore (400 million) in 2017 then to 38 crores (380 million) in 2021, though the workforce grew from 79 crores (790 million) to 106 crores (1.06 billion). Another report reveals that compared to the pre-Covid March 2020

quarter, India today faces a loss of a massive 19.6 million jobs. Although the women account for only about 10 per cent of the jobs, they count for 23 per cent of the loss of jobs a year after India was struck by Covid (Vyas 2021). This is primarily because an overwhelming majority of the women workers are employed in low-pay informal sector and it is the informal sector that has been affected the most by Covid.

Unable to sustain themselves, the jobless workers are committing suicide along with their family members (Pathare et. al. 2020), many are withdrawing their children from schools and colleges, while many others are living the life of destitutes and many are resorting to crime for a living. The condition of the youth with technical education who had been employed in the private sector/corporate sector/ IT sector is no good; many are the victims of retrenchment, many more are fearing the sack and those who have retained their jobs agree to take a pay cut and work for longer hours.

The neo-liberal order governs by systematically disenfranchising the working class. The size of the workers and employees in the public sector has shrunk and those who continue in the PSUs run the risk of losing jobs; their rights have been taken away by amending labour laws and the voice of the trade unions has been muted; the trade unions affiliated to political parties adhering to neo-liberalism now sing the tune of the market. The 95 per cent of the total workforce who depend on the informal sector have no trade union right; albeit highly exploited, their survival depends on the mercy of their employers. The corporate sector has been granted the right to “hire and fire” at will and the workers have been denied the voice of protest. In order to facilitate extraction of more surplus value the employers now decide about the wage structure and the working hours. Even in public sector, in some of the States, the working hour has been extended from 8 hours to 12 hours a day. When the threat of losing job looms large the workers are forced to bury their “will to protest” and willfully “surrender” their subjectivity and freedom while agreeing to accept whatever job-conditions they are offered. When the livelihood is at the risk, the working class, the “vanguard of social revolution” (in Marxist parlance), not only lose their voice of protest but they turn out to be the defenders of the bourgeois order. The loss of subjectivity or individual agency and thus becomes unavoidable; they are forced to live in a perpetual state of unfreedom.

The on-going travails of more than 5 lakh tea-garden workers (mostly of Adivashi origin) and their 25 lakh dependents in the Terrai and Dooars regions of North Bengal is a case in point. The gardens are abandoned or

closed down by the owners at will and some of them reopen after a gap with ownership change. The new owners go for casualization of workforce to cut down the wage-cost, evade the payment of outstanding dues (the provident fund, pension, gratuity and so on) and deny the workers their rights, which are laid down in the Plantation Labour Act, 1951. The trade unions in the gardens of this region, which had a glorious tradition of movements, stand as helpless onlookers since they cannot provide any protection or relief to the workers whose survival is seriously threatened by the actions of the owner-government nexus. Finding the class movement ineffective the workers surrender to identity politics (or ethnic politics) and fall into the trap of the ruling class-corporate nexus. The ethnic leaders, mostly the self-seekers, who enjoyed power and privilege while being with the earlier ruling parties, now join the present ruling parties at the Centre or the State to hold on to their privileges. They work as the agents of the owners and sabotage any effort to put up a united working class movement. When livelihood is seriously threatened the jobless Adivasi workers migrate to the urban centers to work as construction labour and the women and children become easy quarry of the human trafficking nexus. When livelihood is threatened and the community life stands fragmented, the cultural activities and the aesthetic creativities appear luxury as the Adivasis put all their energy in earning a living. The education and normal upbringing of the children also suffer, while a section of the adults are forced to make ethical compromises.

Not only the livelihood risks or disenfranchisement that spoils the aesthetics of life, often, the minds of the workers are filled with ideological poison of communalism, casteism and linguistic identity. A look at the history of working class movement would help comprehending how these ideological elements of “false consciousness” (to use Marxist phraseology) have weakened the working class unity and trade union movement in India, right from the colonial period. Historian Chitra Joshi (2003), for example, has shown that the working class unity in the industrial city of Kanpur fell apart with the communalization of freedom movement in the 1920s and 1930s. The workers who had put a united fight against their exploiters for so long took part in communal riots, killing fellow workers of other religious communities. Even after Independence, Kanpur has witnessed several rounds of communal conflicts. The Shiv Sena movement in Maharashtra, in Mumbai in particular, has left a similar effect on the working class unity in the post-Independence period (Gupta 1982). The current ruling elite are playing the same thing with greater potency in different parts of the country to destroy working class unity. Like the life of total subjugation, ideological divide and the

resulting false consciousness spoil the beauty of living in harmony, fraternity, criticality and the struggle for a better life.

Besides, the working class, a large majority of the *dalits*, who survive as labour in different sectors, the agriculture and the informal sector, in particular, live in indignity and in every day humiliation. The large-scale practice of untouchability, even after so many decades of Constitutional democracy in place, denies the *dalits* a life of dignity. The practice has a large-scale support of the customs, traditions and the regulative rules. Ambedkar has phrased it as denial of “social equality”; he predicted back in 1949, that mere political equality (meaning universal adult franchise) will fail to bring social equality with caste system in place (Ambedkar 2013). Besides, the *dalit* girls and women are often the victims of the raw lust of the upper caste men; reports of rape and murder of the *dalit* girls appear too often in the media.

Thus, the workers in India along with the *dalits* live in poverty, insecurity, unfreedom and indignity. With their minds filled with “ideologies of unconsciousness and divide” they are made to support the hegemonic power decade after decade. The livelihood risks force them to compromise with power, both politically and ethically. This explains why the progressive social democratic movements are weak in India. A large majority of the *dalit* women and less educated “non-worker” home-makers also fall in this category of “voiceless” (non)citizens.

The bourgeois, a small minority of the population, controls the neo-liberal order and all the material resources in connivance with the political elite. The ruling elite receive lavish financial support (in the name of electoral bonds) from the business elite while the former extend state support in the form of pro-market policies, infrastructure support, land and soft loans, tax benefit, labour reforms, and administrative protection. The neo-liberal order with the support of the State has created a highly iniquitous economic order where corporate profitability has increased leaps and bounds; according to a report, 20 Indian companies now account for over 90 per cent of profits (up from 30 per cent a decade ago). Most of these 20 companies are growing their free cash flows (*FCF*) at over 25 per cent per annum, despite the challenging economic circumstances in the past five years. While one can see the consolidation of the world’s fifth-largest economy in the hands of 15-20 corporate giants, a large section of the workers, those in primary sector, the women, the lower middle-class, the unemployed and the semi-employed (in the informalsector) languish in poverty (Wadhwa 2021).

The Corporate giants return the favour by donating generously to the electoral fund of the ruling parties. Much of the money that is generated (by the ruling parties) through “secret” electoral bonds, is spent on winning elections, buying legislatures (to garner majority or to topple an elected government) and for bribing the impoverished electorate, which lead to subversion of the democratic institutions and ethical order. The control of the mass media by the corporate houses serve twin purposes: (1) to do business by aggressively commodifying the non-commodities (like folk songs, folk art forms, even news items and so on) and (2) to garner ideological consensus in support of the ruling elite. The media are put to effective use to popularize ruling class ideology and generate consensus in support of the actions of the ruling party and its leaders, even when such actions subvert the democratic institutions and values. The “culture industry” (to use Adorno’s phraseology) is thus interested only in profit and power and, in effect, sabotage the aesthetic demands of the society. The corporate-controlled media promote cheap entertainment or “tittytainment”, which devalues aesthetics in culture and brings estrangement of the people.

There are divergent and even conflicting categories in the burgeoning middleclass in the neo-liberal order. (1) A section of the middleclass (for example, 90 percent of the ministers in the Central Government who are millionaires), who constitute the political elite, work hand-in-gloves with the corporate elite. They are the guardians of the system. For them, power is a means to further the corporate interest while keeping “a share of the cake” for themselves, by both the Constitutional and extra-Constitutional means. One can refer here to the fact that about 42 per cent of the ministers in the present (after reshuffle of ministry 7<sup>th</sup> July 2021) Central Government have criminal records (*The Indian Express*, New Delhi, 11 July 2021). It is a matter of big regret that “lumpenization of politics” is being normalized in Indian democratic practices. (2) The second category of the educated middleclass constitutes those who do not control the market but are the direct beneficiaries of the market economy. They are the white-collar, technically skilled high paid technocrats and the managers, who opt for “slavery” of the corporate masters. In terms of interest and ideology they are securely integrated into the order; they are the “ideological” flag-bearers of the neo-liberal order. They are completely bereft of critical or reflexive consciousness and serve the system as its “active citizens” (to use Habermas’ idiom). (3) The third category is that of the struggling ones, constituted mostly of the lower-rank skilled workers in the corporate world; they find their livelihood in the corporate sector yet not fully integrated. They bear the brunt of the volatile market economy; they are retrenched at

will whenever market is on a slump. Economic insecurity and instability or the risks of market society make them voiceless; they are willing to serve the system for a living yet remain on the margin. (4) The “petty-bourgeois” small-scale entrepreneurs are closely tied up with the market economy and many of them work as the subsidiary units of the manufacturing industries; hence, their wellbeing depends on the rise and fall of the market. Ideologically they side with the ruling class and neo-liberalism; they are also the flag-bearers of the conservative ideals and reactionary politics. (5) The millions of “the industrial reserve army” consisting primarily of the educated and technically skilled youth, waiting to enter the job market, are the prime victims of the neo-liberal arrangement. They live with an uncertain future when the public sector jobs shrink considerably and the job opportunity in the private sector also dwindles when the economy is in crisis (as it is now). For the market, the graduates and post-graduates in the Arts and Social Science streams are “unemployable” and those with technical education are taken in insecure contractual jobs. Driven by the risk of unemployment the youth shun their radical-critical consciousness and depend much on social and political capital (to use the phraseology of Pierre Bourdieu) in order to find some foothold. This is one of the reasons why in recent decades, since structural reforms introduced in the late 1980s, the students by and large support the political parties which are out to promote the neo-liberal ideology. A section of the unemployed youth is effectively put to use in lumpenization of politics. (6) The artists of different kinds, who take up sculpture, painting, music – vocal or instrumental, acting in TV serials, stage and cinema, could be divided into sub-categories depending on the level of their career success or failure. The successful few find a secure place in the “culture industry” by playing in the hands of the corporate houses while a large majority of the artists live in economic insecurity; many live in perpetual poverty. Ideologically and politically a section of the impoverished artists takes the side of the ruling class and another section plays safe by pretending to be “non-political” (mostly as a strategy to survive in an ambience of highly politicized “culture industry”). A third section of the artists take a critical stance; they constitute the progressive section often adhering to a left-leaning ideology and openly support left-democratic forces. This section of the artists expresses their critical voice while putting their career and income at risk.

The most notable of all categories are the Left-leaning and free-thinking freedom-loving writers, social workers, lawyers, film makers, who are subjected the surveillance, censorship, control, disciplining and punishment by the “oppressive state apparatuses” (to use Althusser’s phraseology) by

using repressive laws like Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) and are often detained in jail without trial for years; the judiciary remains a passive bystander. The death of 84-year-old Father Stan Swamy, a tribal rights activist, who had COVID and was suffering from Parkinson's disease in a Mumbai hospital on 5<sup>th</sup> July 2021, and the arrest of 16 noted academicians, writers, lawyers and rights activists in Bhima Koregaon case of 1<sup>st</sup> January 2018 (only 8 of them have been charge sheeted so far) is a case in point. The ruling powers, besides using legal means also use the unlawful means to silence the critical voices. They would label them Urban Naxal, shame them in public using social media, subject them to media trial, vandalize their properties, and paintings (as happened with the painter Maqbul Fida Hussain some years back), would censor or ban a cinema, label them as traitors (famous actor Dilip Kumar, who passed away on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2021 is an example) and the killing of the free-thinking writers/activists like Narendra Dhabolkar, Gobind Pansare, M. M. Kalburgi, and Gauri Lankesh, and so on, allegedly by the Right-wing fanatics, are a few burning examples.

The repression of the critical voices applying legal and unlawful means by the power elite, by subjecting them under surveillance and punishment (extreme form is elimination) is a deliberate ploy to create an ambience of fear and un-freedom. Not only the direct victims are taken to be silenced; there are millions of potential creative-critical minds who prefer to remain silent as a strategy to avoid oppression and purging. Two recent incidents, cited below, are perfect illustrations of how the oppressive State is out to silence the oppositional voices by means of surveillance and penal actions.

1. On 20 July 2021 the Pegasus spying scam was brought to light by research wing of the Amnesty International. It has been reported that over 300 verified mobile phone numbers, including that of two ministers, over 40 journalists, three opposition leaders and one sitting judge, besides scores of businesspersons and activists in India, could have been targeted for hacking through the spyware of Israeli origin. The opposition parties and the informed journalists apprehended government hand in the scam since the Pegasus spyware could not have been procured or put to use without the knowledge of the Home Department of Government of India. NSO, the Israeli Government Agency, the maker of Pegasus, in a statement claimed that they sell the software to government agencies only and not to any private operator. Although the Indian government agencies have denied their hands and claimed the

expose to be an international conspiracy the Amnesty International has stood firm on its research findings. The Government investigating agency in France has also confirmed the use of Pegasus for spying in India, France and many other countries. On 29 July 2021 more than 500 prominent intellectuals, writers, artists, and journalists have written to the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of India with a plea to institute a thorough judicial probe into the scam (*Ganasakti*, Kolkata, 30 July 2021: 6). Several top journalists and politicians, who were put under surveillance, have also filed separate petitions in the Supreme Court demanding a probe, under the scrutiny of the apex court, and protection of their constitutional rights.

2. On 22 July 2021, the Income Tax Department conducted raids at the offices of the *Dainik Bhaskar* (corporate media and investment group, which claims to be independent) across the country on alleged tax evasion. The searches were conducted at the residential and office premises of the promoters of the group across 32 locations in Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Delhi, Rajasthan and Gujarat. In a message posted on its website, *Dainik Bhaskar* claimed that the government raids have come against it as it put out the “true picture of the government’s inefficiency before the country during the second wave of Covid-19” (*The Indian Express*, New Delhi, 23 July 2021). While no one can question the authority of the Income Tax Department of the government to bring the income tax evaders to book it is shocking that the Department never finds fault with the media houses that toe the line of the ruling party.

### ***Conclusion***

The will to live, will to knowledge, will to freedom and aesthetic life are universal in human life. To meet this universal human craving we need a just social order, an economic, social, cultural and political arrangement that ensures (1) economic freedom or adequate material support for all, (2) freedom to explore peoples’ creative aesthetic imaginations, and (3) political freedom or the citizenship, which gives people the right to criticism and organization, an ambience that promotes free play of critical and plural thoughts and help people construing alternative discourses and praxis. A combination of a neo-liberal order and a false nationalism based on primordial

sentiments denies people a decent material life, puts all kinds of restrictions on their aesthetic freedom, and denies them the right to frame an alternative ethical order. The dream of an ambience “where mind is without fear and the head is held high” (in line with Tagore’s dream), which is not too impractical, fades in such an economic-social-political arrangement. The structural forces coerce the people, through close surveillance, control and disciplining (penalizing), and compel them to spurn their critical creative voice, tame their creative faculty, and coerce them to surrender to the systemic demands.

No one can define “aesthetics” for everybody; as people inherit and nurse an aesthetic culture in every single social locale. Even an extremely totalitarian regime cannot wipe out all the cultural traditions as peoples’ ability to think and imagine (romantically) is fundamental. Hence even a beggar or a destitute folk singer, or an oppressed housewife, would sing, a starkly impoverished tribal woman would dance or paint her wall with indigenous colours and all of them would make efforts to narrate the struggles of their life aesthetically. However, there should not be any denying that when the wretched and the marginalized are down sorting out their livelihood issues their aesthetic life will suffer. The people of middle and upper classes live with material security, yet, their aesthetic and ethical life suffer under an authoritarian regime. I have discussed, in this paper, how the inbuilt forces in the neo-liberal, totalitarian order can threaten the life, livelihood and freedom, which are the fundamental rights of the people who constitute the citizens of the nation. If a large body of the people are made to live under systemic surveillance, and under the threat of being disciplined and punished they would resort to self-control by restraining and disciplining their imaginative-creative faculty in order to avoid the systemic purge or at least as a survival strategy. If the people, irrespective of their economic, social and cultural locale are forcefully fed with the elements of a particular way of life or ideology and are scared to express themselves in aesthetic creations the aesthetic reserve of the nation will fall empty in the long run.

Foucault, as discussed in this paper, has deciphered, in his numerous writings, the systemic mechanisms that have denied the individuals their subjective freedom or autonomy in different historical epochs. He is particularly critical about the rise of pastoral power and bio-power in mediaeval and modern times, respectively, which mastered the art of surveillance, control and disciplining. The central problem, for Foucault, therefore is to find out technics of “self-care”, which includes a jaded defense of individual freedom and alternative ethics against all adversaries. Foucaultian politics is critical about

any ideology-based party-led all out transformative movement; he apprehends that such movements, if successful, would, put in place a different kind of hegemonic and anti-freedom regime. Foucault, therefore, is not too enthusiastic (unlike Marx) about any alternative route to mass liberation; for him, rather, defense of individual freedom under any kind of regime is fundamental.

Ulrich Beck, Giddens or Bauman, on the other hand, disentangles how the neo-liberal orders of modern time take the shape of a risk society that denies individuals both material and aesthetic freedom and leads to mass-scale individualization or atomization, which in turn, scuttles the possibility of organized anti-hegemonic collective movements. They, unlike Foucault, stood in defense of both individual freedom and collective movements more in the form of “new social movements” like green movement, feminist movement, cultural movements, consumers’ movement, and so on, which, according to them, would lead to the creation of a kind of anti-capitalist social-democratic order.

Human history tells us that people never stop reflecting and they never surrender their creative-romantic-critical faculty; they will find their ways to express themselves in their acts of creations and criticism, which will flow in multiple directions (and never in a linear path decided by money and power combine). In India, in recent times, the critical minds have come forward to condemn the “murder” of Father Stan Swamy. Amartya Sen, Jean Dreze, Ramchandra Guha, Romila Thappar and many other celebrated intellectuals have condemned it and the fellow detainees in the Bhima Koregaon case (of 2018), who are languishing in jail have also protested the inhuman treatment of Stan Swamy. The leaders of well-meaning political parties have also expressed their anguish at the denial of justice to the tribal rights worker.

At a time when the authoritarian rule indiscriminately applies sedition law of the colonial era (which the British had applied to suppress the freedom movement) and the anti-terrorist act of UAPA, there are still voices who oppose the existence and application of these rules. We now live in a free country where the citizens are guaranteed the right to freedom of speech, criticism and organization by the Constitution. The oppressed citizens have not surrendered their right to protest; they continue expressing their voices following the democratic means. The apex court of the country is taking note of the misuse of these laws and asking questions about their essence in a democratic country.

Despite being subjected to systemic oppression for his practice of emancipatory pedagogy in Brazil Paulo Freire critiqued the “neo-liberal fatalism” and observed, in his path-breaking *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000) that no force can determine the course of history since human history is all about possibilities, and “we can demystify the evil in this perverse fatalism that characterizes the neoliberal discourse in the end of this century”. It is very unlikely that communism, at least the way it was practised in the erstwhile Soviet Union and the Eastern Block, or the way it is practised in China or North Korea now, is the way to freedom of the oppressed primarily because of their hegemonic nature and denial of citizenship. These socio-political orders might be able to provide some kind of material comfort to their populations but they essentially deny individual freedom and imprison peoples’ creative critical faculties. Peoples’ craving for an aesthetic life, which is as fundamental as ontological needs, cannot be met in any authoritarian, disciplining socio-political order. Alternatively, a social-democratic model, which has been successfully put in practice in the Scandinavian countries for decades, and which look more humane, could be the goal to achieve.

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