**Question: Discuss the conception of Freedom of Expression.**

**Answer:** Freedom of expression is the principle that supports the [freedom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom) of an individual or a community to articulate their opinions and ideas without fear of retaliation, [censorship](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Censorship), or legal sanction. It includes any act of seeking, receiving, and imparting information or ideas, regardless of the medium used.

Freedom of expression is recognized as a human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Article 19 of the UDHR states that "everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference" and "everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice". In the Indian Constitution too, Article 19 guarantees six freedoms in the nature of civil rights, which are available only to citizens of India. Freedom of speech and expression is included in them, and is a fundamental right of every Indian citizen.

The right to free speech is thus an extension of the right to individual freedom. But the question arises whether free speech has any limits. In other words, do we have an absolute right to free speech?

In his book *On Liberty,* John Stuart Mill argues that silencing any opinion is wrong, even if the opinion is false, because knowledge arises only from the “collision [of truth] with error.” According to Mill, individuals are bad at discovering the truth: most of us hold strong opinions without the evidence or expertise to back them up. Authority figures are no better than the rest of us, as they are prone to censor views that they find inconvenient or unflattering. This is why free speech is imperative: in a society with strong norms of free speech, we will encounter dissenting points of view that motivate us to rethink our opinions. Therefore, we must allow all speech, even defence of false claims and conspiracy theories, even if some of these are offensive to us.

We should draw a distinction, however, between harming others and offending people. For example, some books may be genuinely offensive, but that’s not an adequate reason to ban them; the offense they cause is not the same as harm. On the contrary, some speakers use their platform to directly threaten the rights of others and to preach hate. Their right to free speech may be restricted as individual freedom does not include the freedom to harm others.

This is why the Article 19 of UDHR has been amended to state that the exercise of the right of freedom of expression carries "special duties and responsibilities" and may "therefore be subject to certain restrictions" when necessary for "…respect of the rights or reputation of others" or for "…the protection of national security or of public order, or of public health or morals". Similar restrictions are there with respect to the freedom of speech and expression given under the Indian Constitution as well.

To conclude, being free does not mean to do or say whatever we want. We cannot go into an office and use insulting, offensive words towards someone and expect to get away with it because of freedom of speech. Schools, universities, organisations, companies and even websites have rules and codes of conduct which should be respected by all citizens. Bullying and harassing people with words are not allowed, even if it is on the phone or online. We need to set limits to the freedom of speech so as to protect people from harm.