

# Pegasus, a blemish on democracy

The hour has come to oppose excessive oppression through serious political action



SHELLEY WALIA

Pegasus, the mythical winged horse from Greek mythology, is known to have allowed Bellerophon, the Corinthian hero, to ride him in order to defeat the monstrous Chimera before flying off to the heavens where he was turned by Zeus into an eponymous constellation. He has now returned to earth in the guise of a malware designed to fight terrorism, criminality and national insecurity. Though interpreted as an allegory of soul's immortality in modern times, Pegasus becomes a symbol of poetic inspiration, only to be turned into a reprehensible cyber weapon in the hands of dictators and bigots with the purpose of putting down dissent and killing critical thought. The constellation still glows in the heavens, but no longer evokes the age-old mythical sensations for humanity.

## Where science has brought us

How science has aided in the inadvertent political game of demolishing basic human rights has finally fructified in the production of a technology that infiltrates human privacy right up to the bedrooms of its targets. When C.P. Snow walked into the Senate House at Cambridge in 1959 to deliver his Rede lecture, 'The Two Cultures', he sparked a global debate that would put a nail in the coffin of humanities, giving a boost to the study of science for the advancement of humanity. The two distinct cultures that emerged led to the confrontation between the technocrats and 'literary intellectuals'. While the former stood in favour of social reform and progress through technology and industry, the latter, who Snow disparagingly called "natural Ludites", had insignificant consideration for progress through industrialisation. We now know where science has finally brought us. **The shadowing of our every move in a cyber-savvy world has resulted in escalating military and police repression. Mounting security concerns have been met with mounting technological responses. It is a world ridden with tensions between security and**



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## freedom, secrecy and transparency.

Democratic structures along with fundamental liberties stand eroded in the face of unrestrained free market economics that exists only to direct every facet of life. This is a system of the Panopticon, an architectural edifice where the warden in a central tower can monitor the prisoners in their cells without the prisoners seeing the warden.

The use of Pegasus, therefore, poses a stark danger to democracy and freedom, particularly in 10 governments believed to be the customers of NSO Group: Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Morocco, Rwanda, Hungary, India and the UAE, all believed to have a dismal record in the protection of human rights. The obsession with power through surveillance has brought in its wake not just the blitzkrieg of information, but also given rise to political systems that aim at behaviour control, destroying the sanctity of the individual's privacy and thereby threatening democracies with serious consequences. We are caught in a world where the harsh reality of power and its exercise takes predominance over the constitutionally guaranteed right of self-determination and freedom of expression. The central motive, however, remains political domination through the control of any dissent or ideological variance with the state.

The security agencies of democracies and dictatorships are engaged in gathering the phone 'data' of citizens who show any signs of opposition, heaping it all away for any contingency that might arise in the future. Working against all norms of jurisprudence, the national security state remains 'legitimately' above board, blatantly pursuing acts of social con-

trol through surveillance on the basis of national security. The new metamorphosed role of Pegasus has finally become the terror of a devastating hacking scandal, a means of punishing people and threatening to drown the world of freedom.

This is at the heart of the contemporary debate on the use of Pegasus, a battle between the totalitarian state and dissidence. In such circumstances, living in confrontation with the state apparatus is tantamount to being labelled as "anti-national". There are many incarcerated without a trial for years. True to the concept of fascism, the interrogation of state policy becomes a betrayal in the Orwellian sense, where free thought and debate are an anathema.

The utopia promised by the government of Oceania in George Orwell's 1984 is an illustration of the logic of totalitarianism. Such an over-organised system represents the purging of history and free human thought for the smooth and peaceful running of the state apparatus. Criticism is not permitted by a management that has at its disposal highly developed surveillance technology, the 'thought police' that incarcerates or eliminates any 'thought criminal'.

As Hannah Arendt argues, the state ensures not just the transformation of the outside world but also the very dysfunctionality of the unpredictable nature of human creativity and its spontaneity. In Orwell's novel, O'Brien, an agent of the thought police, owing complete allegiance to the Party, explains to Winston, the central character, the unending process of persecution that can appease the ruling class so as to give it an assurance of its immortality. The state manipulates the rebirth of Winston, turning his rebellious old self into a

faceless believer. Similarly, in his classic, *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley envisages material progress all right, but with enormous dangers to human creativity. In such a world, no prodigies or rebels can be born. It is a world of the "hatchery" in which "hobbits" are "manufactured" at various stages of arrested physical and mental development whose strength lies only in falling into line.

The Pegasus upheaval finds a parallel in Orwell's 'Big Brother' symbolising the modern state and its authoritarian apparatus. **Governments have lied about intelligence operations, illegally spied on millions of innocent people, and collected data from every conceivable electronic source to be potentially used to censor dissent, blackmail people or just intimidate those who struggle to make corporate and state power accountable. The post-Snowden years have seen new technologies like Pegasus enhancing surveillance to the point of exposing us to the danger of losing our very grip over our day-to-day private affairs.**

## Expansive interrogation

The ills of the modern state emerging from the culture of secrecy is therefore apparent. There would probably be a world of feasible peace and openness if there were no classified documents. One thing has become clear after the revelation of many governments illegitimately engaging in spying on their citizens: the hour has come to oppose all such excessive oppression through serious political action. Like Edward Snowden, we all live online and indeed, there really is no place to hide. However, the future is not foreclosed, and as long as there is critical inquiry, there is hope. As Howard Zinn, the historian, once said: "We are supposed to be thinking people. We are supposed to be able to question everything."

A more expansive interrogation of the treachery inherent in the return of the Pegasus affair and its fallout for rights activists, investigative journalists and writers calls for a serious probe. Or else, the gradual diminishing of our individual right to free speech and the dismantling of democratic institutions would culminate in the return of Orwell's Oceania.

Shelley Wallia is Professor Emeritus at Panjab University, Chandigarh