

The Myriads of Liberties

Jyotsna Srivastava

Guest Lecturer, Abhyudaya, Government of Uttar Pradesh

Abstract

The experiment of Athens taught that in democracy, The rule of most numerous and most powerful class was as evil as monarchical absolutism. Liberty as a concept was yet to assume definite form and meanings in this age. In medieval societies, war was considered important for fulfilling the needs of people. Freedom was collectively sought in medieval ages. In Colonial empires, liberty was spirit that united native subjects against an oppressive state. And in modern societies, Liberty is an individual affair. Historically perceived liberty evolves to serve the needs of generations across ages as per the needs of society and structures.

Keywords: Freedom, Societies, Absolutism, Evolution, Collective.

The relevance of the term ‘liberty’ in the constitution of social, political and economic institutions is inevitable. In the contemporary world the demand for liberty is generally looked up as the basic/core value of human existence and dignity. Global institutions specifically monitor states across all the parameters, ensuring basic rights to the people. Freedom of expression and choice is often the topic of debate at national and international politics. It is in this sense that one can realize the need of finding an answer to the question- what is Liberty? Coming up with a final definition of liberty, summing up all the possible aspects associated with it has, since, long been a challenge. Highly subjective nature of the term makes its understanding complex. Liberty can simply be defined as the state of being free. If we were to ask people what freedom is to them, the chances of getting exactly same answer is negligible. A huge range of socio-political narratives, woven around, needs to be shed in an attempt to unravel the term ‘liberty’. Limited scope of the present paper, however, leaves us with two questions that seem too important to be left unanswered. Firstly, is it possible for us to have a single, universally applicable definition of liberty? And secondly, is the existence of a state, providing with absolute individual liberty, possible?

Subjectivity associated with ‘liberty’ is such that one can imagine a basket (labeled ‘liberty’) which everyone of us urges to possess but the content or items that are to be kept in this basket depends on the personal wish of the person carrying it. Basically the basket, here, is the reflection of what is important for a person. Thus, under the label of liberty, it is clear that each one of us is demanding something different. It is in this context that we can understand the problem that scholars face while turning up with a single, universally applicable definition of liberty.

The use of the term ‘liberty’ is definitely not new. It has been in existence since ancient of societies. Here, it becomes undeniably essential to trace the history of the term ‘liberty’ as it can provide us with an insight of changing perception of liberty over the time Lord John Dalberg-Acton in his book ‘ The History of Freedom in Antiquity’ opines, “ The ancients understood the regulation of power better than the regulation of liberty.” The degree of the freedom that was enjoyed was very low in the ancient societies and that too

was limited to the elite section of the society. There was oppression and exploitation by the state. (Dalberg-Acton 1985, 15-18)

In the history of antiquity, Acton found confirmation of the fact that liberty is ancient and despotism modern. According to him, the first of the many disasters to befall liberty occurred when Babylonia conquered Judah and freedom under divine authority made way for absolutism under human authorities. From the degradation of tyranny, inequality and oppression, the world was rescued by the most gifted of ancient cities, Athens. Solon brought revolution in philosophy and politics when he introduced the idea of popular election. The process of democratization was hastened by Pericles. But very soon it was evident that the people, now sovereign, felt themselves bound by no rules of right or wrong, no criteria except expediency, and no force outside of themselves. The experiment of Athens taught that democracy, the rule of the most numerous and most powerful class, was an evil of the same nature as monarchical absolutism and required restraints to same sort: institution to protect it against itself and a permanent source of law to prevent arbitrary revolution of opinions. (Dalberg-Acton 1985, 8-18)

The Roman republic experienced the same problems as Greece. It is in this context that Acton goes on opining that in terms of institutions and legislations, Greece and Rome had an imperfect conception of freedom. They know how to manipulate power, but not how to achieve liberty. Acton wrote, “The vice of the classic state was that it was both church and state in one. Morality was undistinguished from religion and politics from morals; and in religion, morality, and politics there was only one legislator and authority.” (Dalberg-Acton 1985, 17)

In an attempt to compare the liberty of the ancients with that of moderns, Benjamin Constant also provides us with valuable insights on the perception that ancients had of liberty. He contends that all ancient republics were restricted to a narrow territory. These people attacked their neighbors or were attacked by them. Thus, driven by necessity against one another, they fought or threatened each other constantly. Those who had no ambition to be conquerors could still not lay down their weapons, lest they should themselves be conquered. All had to buy their security, their independence their whole existence at the price of war. (Constant 2007, 4-5) From this, one can understand how war was considered important for fulfilling the needs of the people in ancient societies. Thus, the freedom that was sought and urged for, by ancient people was way different from that of moderns, which was the ultimate consequence of the existing social and political order. They enjoyed freedom in collectivity, whereas for moderns individual liberty holds much importance.

By now, it is quite clear to us that the term ‘liberty’ is not new nor is the urge for liberty new. Since the time of ancient societies we can see the importance of liberty, however, changes over the time, for which changes in the ideologies/social values and political structures can be accounted for, as Benjamin Constant does. According to him, with the emergence of layer territories the potential of commerce was realized over the constant warfare. This, to some extent, gave people space to indulge in their private life and a need of individual liberty is realized. Keeping this in mind, one can adhere to the fact that, demands that are put forward under the label of liberty changes over the time with a change in ideology and in social and political orders.

Moving ahead, we need to turn back to the question to there being any possibility of having a single, universally acceptable definition of liberty. The term is generally described as the condition of men in which coercion of some by others is reduced as much as is possible in society. According to F.A. Hayek, however, the term liberty has acquired a number of different meanings over the time, which, to some

extent confuses the use of generally accepted definition of liberty. (Hayek 2012, 13) For instances, “political freedom” ensures the participation of men in the choice of their government, in the process of legislation, and in the control of administration. The meaning that this particular term has acquired and degree of freedom it offers actually confuses the use of generally accepted definition of liberty in a sense that it would be absurd to consider a person free just because he has given his consent to the social order into which he was born; a social order to which they probably know no alternative and which even a whole generation who thought differently from their parents could alter only after they had reached a certain age. But this does not mean that the person is not free either.

Likewise, “inner” or “metaphysical” freedom acquires different meaning which again challenges the generally accepted meaning of liberty. (Hayek 2012, 14) There are times, when a person’s action does not go parallel with his will but, this is certainly not because he is unfree, rather it can be a result of lack of strength, influence of temporary emotion and intellectual weakness. There exists a third use of the term liberty which is again confusing. This kind of freedom appears in the dreams of many people in the form of the illusion that they can fly, that they are released from gravity and can move “free like a bird”. This freedom that means omnipotence is also confused with the individual freedom. (Hayek 2012, 15)

In this way, one can understand the complexities that arise because of the myriad of ways in which liberty is perceived and demanded in the contemporary world. Here, one cannot overlook what Hayek has to say about the origin of modern liberal ideologies. In his work, ‘The Constitution of Liberty’, Hayek traces the origins of modern liberal ideologies to two roots: the empirical albeit unsystematic tradition of the British; which flows from an understanding of liberty grounded on the emphasis of upholding tradition and custom and thus grounds itself in the institutions of power, and the rationalistic utopian tradition of the French which emphasizes the power of human reason and focuses on human action. Hayek also notes the growing dominance of the French tradition over the British. Here it also becomes evident that a coherent set of ideas, which can be employed in while understanding is again challenged because of the ideological differences that exist between different nations. Thus, to come up with a single, coherent, universally applicable definition of liberty is not possible. For this, the difference in cultural values and socio-political backgrounds between different nations of the world can also be accounted for. Thus, at a particular point of time there can be possibility of two different nations offering different degree freedom to its members because of its socio-political norms.

C.A. Bayly’s work, ‘Giants with Feet of Clay: Asian Critics and Victorian Sages to 1914’ provide us with the insightful understanding of how problematic it can finally turn up when a nation’s (a nation with different socio-political background) perception of liberty is employed in by the other nation irrespective of it being a nation with a different social, political and economic institutions and the latter is coerced to offer same degree of freedom its member in the process of the constitution of social, political and economic institution. As was the case with India, where the British influence led to the constant attempt of making India participate in free-trade, which is one among the most important aspects of liberalism. It is not that the idea of personal autonomy or liberty was not a core value in ancient Asian values. But the degree of freedom that was to be offered and restraints that are to be put depend on the prevailing social, political and economic conditions of India. Back then, India was to start its journey of development and it was not possible or favorable to offer the same degree of freedom as it was provided by developed nation-states. As far as the question of there being any possibility of a state to exist, which can provide absolute individual liberty without any social restraints, is concerned, we need to first understand what individual

liberty offers. Individual liberty gives people right to follow their will and act accordingly, irrespective of the society or community they live in. according to F. A. Hayek, “The application of the concept of freedom to a collective rather than to individuals is clear when we speak of a people’s desire to be free from a foreign yoke and to determine its own fate..... But though the concept of national freedom is analogous to that of individual freedom, it is not the same; and the striving for the first has not always enhanced the second.” (Hayek 2012, 14) Benjamin Constant also talks, more or less, on the same line when he asserts, “Social power injured individual independence in every possible war.” The two scholars try to highlight the fact that for ensuring individual liberty the importance of collectivity or community must be undermined.

One cannot here, deny from the chaos that can be reached with the absolute individual liberty. Since this world offers us common and fixed natural resources to live by there comes into existence social norms which makes us realize the importance of both competition and co-operation. The right of doing whatever one feels like can interfere with others’ right to do the same. And it is in this sense that we can understand the problem that a nation state can face in providing with absolute individual liberty. Moreover, not every time liberty is good and desirable. As accorded by F.A. Hayek, “Liberty does not mean all good things or the absence of all evils. It is true that to be free may mean freedom to starve, to make costly mistakes, or to run moral risks.” Thus, there are times when people themselves don’t prefer to be free. (Hayek 2012, 17)

It is in this context that need of a state is realized which can put restraints or control the degree of freedom being offered to the members. Here, Edmund Burke’s contribution cannot be overlooked; according to whom liberty derives from Natural Laws; it is our birthright, forfeited only through irrationality or violence. But liberty is not license to act from sheer self-will. Rather, it is “social freedom”, it is that state of things in which liberty is secured by the equality of restraint, with no individual or group able to violate the liberty of any other.

To conclude, it can be said that though a word of common usage in this age, ruling the political philosophy across the world, ‘Liberty’ is rather complex. The paradoxes it throws at someone who attempts to draw a clearer picture are disturbing. The closer you get to decipher the connotations associated with this basic right, the blur is the picture you see. The most simplified opinion can be that there is a myriad of ways in which liberty can be perceived. This is the ultimate result of each individual being different from the other on the basis of his thought process and ideologies. Moreover, different parts of the world have been witness to different socio-political past which has led them to have a certain core values, aspirations and socio-cultural norms. This makes it problematic to come up with single definition of liberty, specifying the degree of freedom that has to be offered. As far as the absolute individual liberty is concerned, it won’t be wrong to go with what Burke has to say- “... It is the greatest of all possible evils; for it is folly, vice and madness, without tuition or restraints.” Interestingly, the State is the one which can ensure the collective and individual freedom both and it is the same institution that checks on the utility of individual freedom. Paradox, it is. But the paradox is as real as the human urge to be liberated. Absolute liberty to one has all the potential to compromise with the absolute liberty to another. A perfect balance is what different kind of States, through all the ages, is striving for.

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