

Concept of Freedom: Theoretical Conception

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Freedom is one of the most cherished values of man of all ages. Generally, freedom is having the ability to act or change without constraint. Freedom also meant to be free to oneself and not just only the condition of being free from restraints. Men have been struggling to gain freedom from the political, economic, social and spiritual constraints that have bound them. Though men in all ages have valued freedom highly, yet they differ on their perceptions and views about freedom. Different thinkers enunciated their ideas on freedom in their own ways and suggested their own methods for its realisation. Thus differences amongst the thinkers created difficulties in the comprehension of the concept of freedom leading to numerous problems in the realization of freedom in different walks of human life.

Throughout the history, the desire to be free inspired countless marginalized groups to challenge the rule of political and economic elites. For example, liberty was the watchword of the Atlantic revolutionaries who, at the end of the 18th century, topples autocratic kings, arrogant elites and shareholders, thus putting an end to the old regime. Similarly, in the 19th and 20th centuries, Black civil rights activists and feminists fought for the expansion of democracy in the name of freedom, while populists and progressives struggled to put an end to the economic domination of workers.¹ In the view of conservatives, true freedom is not about collective control over government, it consists in the private enjoyment of one's life and goods. From 1770 onwards, as revolutionaries rebelled in the name of liberty on both sides of the Atlantic, a flood of pamphlets, treatises and newspaper articles appeared with titles such as some observations on liberty, civil liberty asserted or on the liberty of the citizen. In the course of the 19th century this view became widespread among European elites, who continued to vehemently oppose the advent of democracy. Benjamin constant, one of Europe's most celebrated political thinkers, rejected the example of the French revolutionaries arguing that they had confused liberty with participation in collective powers. Instead, freedom-lovers should look to the British Constitution, where hierarchies were firmly entrenched.²

Thinkers from the East and the West have been expounding their ideas on freedom. Though the concept has received due attention from Western thinkers, while among Eastern thinkers Sri Aurobindo has developed the concept of freedom in detail. However, freedom has been a running theme in the history of western political thought. The exponents of negative freedom conceive freedom as 'absence of restraints'. In this sense, Hobbes argues that a free man is that who is not hindered to do what he wants to do. He regards every law as an anti-thesis of freedom. Similar views were expressed by

Bentham. Similarly, J.S. Mill also argued and termed it in negative terms. He argued, "The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it."³ He asserted that interference with someone else's freedom is not justified. Thus he says, "His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or for bear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinions of others, to do so would be wise, or even right."⁴ J.S. Mill makes a distinction between 'self-regarding' and 'other regarding' actions and argued that the interference with others liberty is not justified. He says, "The role end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others."⁵ While other negative liberal thinkers maintained that role of the state should be minimum and assigned limited role to the state to maintain peace and order in the society.

However, according to the positive conception of the freedom, it is termed as self-perfection, self-realisation, rational self-determination and similar expressions.⁶ Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Green and Bosanquethas also developed the concept of freedom.

Rousseau argued that freedom lies in obeying the general will. He argued that freedom does not mean the absence of constraint, but doing what one ought to do. Kant put forward the notion of freedom as the realization of moral personality by bringing one's feelings and inclinations under the rule of reason.⁷ Similarly, Green and Bosanquet have been regarded as the chief protagonists of the positive conception of freedom. As Green stated, "freedom means quite different things – according to the nature of the object which the man makes his own, or with which he identifies himself."⁸

Similarly, Bernard Bosanquet defined the positive conception of freedom by saying that "is the being outsiders, and the fullest condition of liberty is that in which we are

³ J.S. Mill, *On Liberty, Representation Government: The Subjection of Women* (London: Oxford University Press, 1912), p. 18.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Larry M. Preston, "Freedom and Authority: Beyond the Precepts of Liberation", *The American Political Science Review*, 77, No. 3, (September 1983), pp. 666-673.

⁷ Immanuel Kant, "Freedom through the Moral Law", in *Freedom: Its History, Nature and Varieties*, eds. Robert E. Dewey and James A. Gould (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1970), p. 190.

⁸ J.H. Green, *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1941), p. 2.

¹ " 'Freedom' means something different to Liberals and Conservatives. Here's how the definition split – and why that still matters" time.com Accessed on 28th February, 2021.

² *Ibid.*

ourselves most completely.”⁹ He further stated, “Liberty, as the condition of our being ourselves, cannot simply be something which we have, still less something which we have always had – a status quo to be maintained. It must be a condition relevant to our continued struggle to assert the control of something in us, which we recognize as imperative upon us or as our real self, but which we only obey in a very imperfect degree.”¹⁰ Isaiah Berlin also stated about the positive conception of the freedom. He stated that, “I wish, above all, to be conscious of myself as a thinking willing, active being, bearing responsibility for my choices and able to explain them by references to my own ideas and purposes. I feel free to the degree that I believe this to be true, and enslaved to the degree that I am made to realize that it is not.”¹¹ Berlin exposes the weakness and dangers involved in the positive notion of freedom and argue that the negative view of freedom is “truer and more humane ideal.”¹²

Thus freedom is a multi-dimensional concept. It has political, economic and social and spiritual aspects. While the meaning of political freedom is that the power of the government to rule and legislate should be limited. Besides this it also implied that the citizens or associations should be free to participate actively in politics. Similarly economic freedom implied the freedom of the individual from economic hardships. An individual should be free from starvation and unemployment. Similarly, social freedom is related with the impact of culture, tradition and the general organization of society upon freedom of the man. It means, “freedom from orthodoxy or narrow walls of fanaticism or any social impulsion to make people conformists.”¹³

However, the ancient Indian philosophers pay great attention to the spiritual freedom. They regard spiritual freedom as the ultimate goal to be achieved by man. It can be argued that the world means to them a prison and they regard it essential to obtain salvation from its clutches and fetters.¹⁴ Like Vivekananda talks of the necessity of external freedom and regards spiritual freedom as the highest goal of man. He says, “one may gain political and social independence, but if one is a slave to his passions and desires, one cannot feel the pure joy of real freedom.”¹⁵

Thus it can be concluded that the ideas of freedom of modern Indian thinkers are based on a fusion of the Western and the Indian notions of freedom.

⁹ Bernard Bosanquet, *The Philosophical Theory of the State*, 4th ed. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1923), p. 136

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

¹¹ Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 131.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 171.

¹³ Vrajendra Raj Mehta, *A Theory of Politics* (Delhi: Sultan Chand & Sons, 1968), p. 46.

¹⁴ V.P. Verma, *Studies in Hindu Political Thought and Its Metaphysical Foundations* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsi Das, 1974), p. 60.

¹⁵ *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1959), p. 216.