

Concept of Liberty

THE CONCEPT OF 'liberty' or 'freedom' denotes a very important principle of

political philosophy. Liberty is sometimes regarded as the distinctive principle of liberalism, but freedom is acclaimed as a universal principle.

Freedom is eulogized by liberal, idealist as well as Marxist theory. Nobody quarrels

with freedom as an end, but different schools of thought differ on the means and

mode of realizing freedom. Even the champions of absolutism, authoritarianism

and slavery pay lip service to freedom, claiming that for ordinary men, submission

to authority—regarded as the symbol of some sort of excellence—is the best

way to realize freedom.

T

The champions of liberty have, however, always challenged the claims of the

privileged classes to such excellence. The ideal of liberty has inspired many

revolutionary struggles against despotism and foreign regimes. It is significant

that the struggle for liberty is always informed by a philosophy of equality.

That

is, when some oppressed sections rise against their oppressors—as in peasant

revolts or national struggles of independence—they challenge the alleged superiority of their oppressors, demanding equality and justice on the universal

principle of human equality.

NATURE OF LIBERTY

Liberty is the quality of man. It is man, as distinguished from other living beings,

who demands freedom and evolves institutions to secure it. Animals, birds and insects are governed by the rule of the 'struggle for existence' and 'survival of the fittest'—the fittest is the one physically strongest and cleverest. They have no 'aim of life' beyond mere existence. Man as homo sapiens has distinguished himself from other living beings as he claims to have an aim in his life. He has created the whole complex of institutions—civilization and culture—in pursuance of this aim. Animals are mere slaves of nature; man has largely learnt to tame, control and harness nature to serve his purpose of life. Freedom is the distinctive quality of man.

However, despite the long history of man's civilization, he has not yet risen fully above the rule of the animal kingdom. So long as the elders, the more experienced, more learned, more competent, more prudent and more energetic men in society manage common affairs in the common interest, men do not lose their freedom in obeying their commands. But in actual practice, it is mostly the selfish, strong and clever men who have managed to assume dominant positions and acquire special privileges in society. As a result, society was divided into privileged and underprivileged sections—the oppressor and oppressed, the exploiter and exploited, the dominant and dependent groups—because one set of men assumed power over the lives of others. The privileged classes have developed a

vested interest in the existing order. They have sought to justify that order by

stressing its virtues in order to establish the legitimacy of their dominant position.

A typical example of this tendency may be found in Aristotle's defence of slavery.

Aristotle argued that men differ from one another in their moral excellence; that

the slaves were not full human beings, capable of virtue—they were merely 'living tools'. He suggested that slaves receive the benefit of virtue solely by serving their masters. He also argued that the system of slavery provided 'leisure'

for the freemen which was essential for the exercise of virtue.

Thus, the privileged classes have always stood in defence of the status quo—

no change in the previous position. It is only when the subject classes rise in

revolt against injustice and oppression that they challenge the special privileges of

the dominant classes and raise the slogan of liberty to press their claim of equality.

Liberty is, therefore, a force behind social change—it is the voice of the oppressed;

it is the voice against injustice; it is the voice to reestablish human values as

against the rules of the animal kingdom.