

V

LIBERTY AND EQUALITY

When we consider the relation between liberty and equality, it must be realized that different interpretations of these principles lead to different conclusions in

this regard. In other words, these principles may be found mutually complementary or contradictory in different contexts.

Liberty and Equality as Complementary Principles

The principle of liberty stipulates 'equal' liberty or freedom for everyone. If freedom of one becomes unfreedom of another, it would be against the spirit of freedom itself. If freedom of the strong destroys freedom of the weak, if freedom of the clever undermines freedom of the simple, and if freedom of the rich turns out to be a constraint on the poor, it would amount to negation of freedom as a universal principle. In this sense, liberty and equality are complementary principles. This view concedes the imposition of reasonable restraints on freedom so that freedom of one does not stand in the way of similar and equal freedom of another.

In a primitive society, nobody is allowed to use his physical or manipulative power to harm any other member of the community. With the development of civilization, many new and subtle means of exploitation are evolved. Property is one of such means. While the few cannot enslave society by pooling their physical and mental powers, they can do so by accumulating unlimited property. The property can also be used to hire best talents and labour power. Thus property is the most potent instrument of depriving others of their freedom. In other words, vast socio-economic inequalities in society are not compatible with the principle of freedom.

So the demand for substantive freedom stipulates the provision of substantive equality. This in turn calls for the reduction of vast socio-economic disparities. Those who wish to maintain these disparities—on the ground that the rich have accumulated their riches by 'just' means—try to hide the true relation between liberty, equality and justice. The principle of equality demands a radical change in those social arrangements which enable one section of society to gain undue control over the life of others.

R.H. Tawney (1880–1962), Harold J. Laski (1893–1950) and C.B. Macpherson (1911–87) regard liberty and equality as complementary principles.

Idea of Equality as Impediment to Liberty

Some thinkers have envisaged certain situations where the provision of equality obstructs the enjoyment of liberty. French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–59) in his celebrated work *Democracy in America* (1835–40) observed that the 'principle of equality', whereby all distinctions of social status are gradually eroded, was the ruling principle of modern history. The principle of equality in this sense encouraged the individual's subservience to public opinion and the extension and centralization of state power. With the extension of democracy in the social sphere, the source of intellectual authority was found in public opinion and this led to the 'tyranny of majority'. Supremacy of public opinion demanded conformity to generally held attitudes and standards; it led to believe that a dissenting position must be a wrong one. The net result was the curtailment of individual autonomy and the loss of liberty. In other words, whereas the principle of liberty demands the encouragement of a variety of interests and opinions, the

principle of equality tends to promote conformity of opinions and attitudes: hence the antithesis between liberty and equality.

Lord Acton (1834–1902), a British historian, who was deeply influenced by Tocqueville, similarly argued during the nineteenth century that in the modern times, liberty was endangered by the rival doctrine of equality with its tendency to erode independent centres of power and to promote the authority of the state. Thus Tocqueville and Acton were chiefly concerned with the conflict between liberty and equality in the political sphere, that is, in the sphere of use of authority and they sought to resolve this dilemma through decentralization of power, particularly by vesting adequate power in the intermediate voluntary associations. Tocqueville saw free political parties and free press as suitable instruments for safeguarding individual liberty.

In fact Tocqueville was not against equality as such. He only warned that the demand for equality in the sphere of freedom of opinion should not be pressed to such an extent that it results in the suppression of freedom. John Stuart Mill (1806–73), a British philosopher, was so impressed by this argument that he held that if the opinion of a single individual was different from the rest of society, that society had no right to silence him.

Some writers tend to oppose equality in the economic sphere in the name of safeguarding individual's liberty. Thus Isaiah Berlin (1909–97), British thinker, in his famous essay 'Two Concepts of Liberty' (1958) argued that the state could only protect negative liberty of individual which consists in not being prevented by other individuals from attaining his goal. On the other hand, positive liberty treats individual his own master? It belongs to his own will and capacity which is beyond the scope of the state. If one cannot fly like an eagle or swim like a whale, one is by no means deprived of political liberty on this count. Similarly, if a man is too poor to afford something on which there is no legal ban—a loaf of bread, a journey round the world, recourse to law-courts—he cannot complain that he has been deprived of political liberty.

Thus Berlin, sought to equate socio-economic inequalities with natural and moral inequalities, and thereby projected a distorted view of equality. He ignored the fact that natural inequalities are unalterable while socio-economic inequalities are the product of social conditions which can be altered to meet the demands of justice. By divorcing liberty from equality, Berlin has done a great damage to liberty itself.

Then F.A. Hayek (1899–1992), an Austrian thinker, in his *Constitution of Liberty* (1960) argued that individual differences in skills and abilities under the conditions of equality before the law result in inequalities of income and wealth. If we try to remove these inequalities by forcing an authoritarian rule, it is bound to destroy individual's freedom, Hayek values freedom as an instrument of social progress. He argues that while extending the scope of freedom, we should not ask how many persons will be benefited by it, but how much progress will be made possible. We should not divide the 'cake of freedom' to ensure 'equal shares for all', but according to each individual's potential to secure social progress. In his view, it is better that some should be free than none, and that many should have

full freedom than all should have limited freedom. In other words, let late-running trains get late further if other trains could be run on time.

Hayek's message is clear: Let us strive for achieving high levels of excellence in the chosen few rather than marginal improvement in the majority of mediocres. In his view, the question of social justice should not come in the way of individual prosperity. In his later work *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, Vol. 2 (1976) Hayek declared social justice to be a 'mirage', hence an unrealizable principle. Liberty alone is the principle worth pursuing. Hayek wants to solve the problem of individual liberty within the market system, although he conceded that the state should provide for some public services outside the market system. But he has not made it clear as to wherefrom these services will be provided without diverting some resources from the market system. By divorcing liberty from social justice, Hayek has undermined the foundations of liberty itself.

Conclusion

Liberty and equality comprise the foundations of a just social order. Conflict between the two arises only from their biased interpretations. In economic sphere, if equality is interpreted as 'identity of treatment', or equal shares for all disregarding merit and need, it not only destroys liberty but makes a mockery of equality itself. As H.J. Laski (*A Grammar of Politics*; 1938) has observed:

Equality does not mean identity of treatment. There can be no ultimate identity of treatment so long as men are different in want and capacity and need. The purpose of society would be frustrated at the outset if the nature of a mathematician met an identical response with that to the nature of a bricklayer.

It is significant that in the legal-political sphere, a reconciliation of the principles of liberty and equality is not at all difficult. But their relation in the socio-economic sphere is certainly more complicated and capable of conflicting interpretations. Even legal and political equality may be rendered ineffective due to socio-economic inequality. Thus, so long as we do not step into the thorny field of socio-economic life, liberty and equality go together very well. In the historical perspective, the cry for liberty was greatly supported by the idea of equality. As Laski has brilliantly expressed:

The power, in fact, of the ideal of equality lies in the historical evidence that so far in the record of the State the wills of men have been unequally answered. Their freedom, where it has been gained, has accordingly been built upon the unfreedom of others. Inequality, in a word, means the rule of limited numbers because it secures freedom only to those whose will is secure of respect. They will dominate the State and use its power for their own purposes. They will make the fulfilment of their private desires the criterion of public good. (*ibid.*)

In other words, the demand for liberty implied the abolition of special privileges of certain groups, hence equality of all citizens, in the legal as well as the political sphere.

But coming to the socio-economic sphere, some champions of liberty would contest the idea of equality. They argue that liberty enables man to acquire unlimited wealth, prestige and power, while equality seeks to limit such opportunity. It discourages initiative and enterprise, stunts potentialities of men and robs society of its valuable assets. Such thinkers deprecate equality as the antithesis of liberty and the road-block to social progress. Still others argue that equality in the economic sphere should be restricted to the provision of a minimum subsistence level for each individual so that the more enterprising, talented and energetic are not deprived of their liberty to prove their excellence and get suitable reward and encouragement. Now, this stand is not very strongly contested by the champions of equality who concede that equality postulates equality of opportunity, not identical treatment; fair shares, not equal shares.

Differential treatment and differential rewards to different persons according to the value of the service rendered by them to society, therefore, do not contravene the principle of equality, nor of liberty. But if this argument is stretched too far, it would become untenable. Those who argue that the state has nothing to do with the existing socio-economic inequalities or that the demand for equality should not be allowed to stand in the way of a purely competitive system, are stretching the principle of liberty too far. They lead to drastic and disastrous conclusions for humanity.