

THE INDISPENSABILITY OF WOMEN SOCIAL FREEDOM FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: Sustainable development being the buzz word nowadays has found its extension in almost every field. Its increasing inevitability can be extended to something as basic as the concept of freedom. The work in this article is essentially inspired by Isaiah Berlin's 'Two Concepts of Liberty'. This paper aims at defining social freedom and presents the current status of women in the society within that framework. This paper not only dismisses the idea of Positive and Negative freedom as incompatible but establishes the necessity of both to attain the desired social freedom by women. The objective of the paper is to establish the need and importance of women social freedom for sustainable development of the society.

Keywords: Negative Liberty; Positive Liberty; Social freedom; Sustainable Development; Women.

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development being the buzz word nowadays has found its extension in almost every field. Its increasing inevitability can be extended to something as basic as the concept of freedom. The origin of the documentation of the concept of freedom can be traced back to the Vedic times in the Indian civilization during the 1500-500 BC. Vedas- the ancient Indian scriptures, believed in spiritual liberation that is freedom of the soul called 'salvation'.¹ Socrates, the famous Greek philosopher believed in the freedom of the conscience as a right of an individual and his moral duty to resist the state if it interfered with his this freedom. The concept of

freedom by Socrates^[1], Plato^[2] and Aristotle^[3] was essentially politically oriented.

The idea of social freedom can be traced back to an essay, "On Social Freedom: or the Necessary Limits of Individual Freedom Arising Out of the Conditions of Our Social Life" by John Stuart Mill^[4] regarding individual and societal freedom.² The concept of social freedom as positive and negative finds its roots in the philosophy of Kant^{[5] [6] [7]}. It was he who first gave the idea of negative freedom. This idea gave a social dimension to the philosophy of freedom. Later on, this basic idea was developed, defined, explained and discussed by Isaiah Berlin in an essay, 'Two Concepts of Liberty'^[8]. According to Berlin, positive freedom refers to the answer to the question 'What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?' whereas liberty in the negative sense involves an answer to the question: 'What is the area within which the subject — a person or group of persons — is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons'. In simpler terms, positive liberty is the possibility of acting — or the fact of acting — in such a way as to take control of one's life and realize one's fundamental purposes whereas negative liberty is the absence of obstacles, barriers or constraints. One has negative liberty to the extent that actions are available to one in this negative sense (Carter, 2012)^[9]. Basically, positive liberty is "freedom to" do something (like obtain self-mastery, self determination, choose government etc) and negative liberty is "freedom from" something (like coercion, barriers, constraints etc)^[10]. Berlin showed, negative and positive liberty, are not merely two distinct kinds of liberty; they can

¹ The Vedic Philosophy believed in the freedom of soul from sorrows and miseries. The account for the same can be found in the four Vedas, namely- Rig-Veda, Sama-Veda, Yajur-Veda and Atharveda. It is believed that after the attainment of this freedom, the soul experiences ultimate bliss and lives under the inspiration of God. Salvation is also known as Mukti or Moksha.

² This work was published in 1907, almost thirty years after his death. In this work Mill is concerned with a sociological question and uncovers the actual limits of individual freedom set by the nature of society.

be seen as rival, incompatible interpretations of actual potentialities ^[11].

DEFINING SOCIAL FREEDOM

Positive and negative liberty, undoubtedly are distinct but they are not incompatible. Positive liberty is more of a psychological view of liberty whereas negative liberty has a social base. It won't be fair to compare both. It would be like comparing height and weight. Both height and weight have different units, they are completely distinct entities and thus their comparison is vague but both of these are features of a human body. The presence of one in the absence of another would be inappropriate. Similarly, positive and negative liberties are two different sides of the same coin. It is not either this or that; it has to be the presence of both which is essential for an individual to realize his freedom fully. In fact, absence of any one will be an obstacle in the path of attaining complete freedom.

For example, an individual has a potential to excel in his field of work. He is determined and thus is said to possess positive liberty. That is, he is free to choose his path. But what if no matter how determined or focused he is, his excellence and the path he chose is not accepted by the society around and he falls victim to the societal rituals, traditions and taboos? This means he lacks negative freedom and this is restricting him to realize his positive freedom fully. Thus we can define social freedom as "*The presence of both negative and positive freedom to conduct oneself freely in the society without upsetting or by keeping and maintaining social order.*"³

SOCIAL FREEDOM AND WOMEN

Freedom for women has always been a topic of debate among the feminists and the anti-feminists. Whereas, the feminists support the idea of women freedom as important for social justice and equality ^[12], the anti-feminists refute this idea and maintain that social acceptance of women as equal to men is wrong and would lead to further suffrage of women in the hands of men and society. They claim that men and women are fundamentally different and thus are bound to perform different roles in the society ^{[13] [14] [15]}. According to the traditional patriarchal mindset, still prevailing in the larger parts of the world,

whereas the role of a male is to earn and handle economic expenses of the house, it is supposed to be a feminine duty to take care of the household. This demarcation of gender based household labour has put women in the backseat and has stereo typed them to be called a weaker sex, inferior and subservient to men. The dominance of men in the professions essentially thought to be involving more physical activity such as military forces, industries etc. and restricting women to be best suited for 'soft professions' such as teaching, interior decoration etc has further marginalized this gender based divide ^[16]. This divide has resulted in the prevailing crimes against women such as violence, dowry deaths, female foeticide, rapes and the list goes on. Although increasingly, women are proving their mettle, not only in male dominated professions but overall, it is felt that women have to work extra hard to be accepted as a person of worth as compared to men. This discrimination in the prevailing attitude in the society has forced women to protest against the treatment vetted out to them and this protest has increasingly taken the form of a revolution now.

To improve the status of women in the society, social justice and gender equality is necessary which is possible with her social freedom. Though provisions have been made by the laws in providing political and economic freedom to women but these both work only in the presence of social freedom. What if a woman has the right to vote but her exercising this right is considered against the established value of family traditions where the women aren't supposed to get involved in politics and she ends up being discarded by her own family members if she goes out and votes? Similarly, although the law has given equal opportunities to men and women to earn and make a living, hold bank accounts etc, but what if no matter how much and how many bank accounts she holds, she has to take permission of the male members to access her own belongings failing which she will be considered a threat to the family values and will be disowned by her own family? Thus, political and economic freedom are necessary but aren't enough.

When we talk of social freedom of women within the framework of the definition given above, we come across the concept of negative and positive liberty associated with it. In this context, positive liberty of a woman refers to her own self-determination and her own control on her life and decisions and negative liberty refers to the freedom from societal constraints, traditions and rituals which make her unfree. Both positive and negative freedoms are complementary. It can be said that if one has self determination or positive liberty, one can attain negative liberty by working for the removal of obstacles, which women are already doing these days. They are working hard

³ Every society has its own laws and limitations. Here we talk about freedom and social equality within those limits defined by every society for itself. Our concern is that within any particular society, women are further suppressed in the name of social traditions and rituals and the laws and norms defined for men and women should be equal. This acceptance of women by the society as equal to men is social freedom and equality.

to prove themselves so that gradually they will be able to break through the existing norms set for them, which render them inferior and finally will be able to change the discriminatory mindset of the people. On the other hand, if the societal obstacles are already absent, that is if negative liberty is present, it would be much easier to achieve positive liberty, which actually should be done to uplift women's status.

These are in a way, two paths to achieve total freedom. The former which we are following currently is difficult because it involves the movement from psychological to social, as in this we are working to remove the societal obstacles. The later path is comparatively easy, as in that the societal obstacles have already been removed and we have to just work hard to make women capable of positive liberty, which can be done by providing them proper education and making them aware of their rights. It involves the movement from social to psychological.⁴ In the former path the women alone are convincing the society and fighting to have social justice and equality, whereas in the later path it would be society helping the women to attain positive liberty. For men, it has always been the easy path as they are supported by the society to excel. On the other hand for women it has always been the difficult path that is to excel first and then seek the support of the society. This divide in the treatment of both men and women by the society is the root cause of all the problems. The day this divide is eliminated we will have a sociologically equal society.

Undoubtedly, with the spread of education, we have been able to prepare women for positive liberty, but we, as a society still lack in providing negative liberty to women owing to which no matter how positively liberated she is, she is not accepted in the society as equal to men. It is the presence of negative liberty which ensures the absence of societal constraints, taboos and rituals which do not allow women to exercise their positive liberty. Thus, negative liberty is necessary to exercise positive liberty. Presence of negative liberty prepares a path for the attainment of positive liberty and hence total freedom.

WOMEN SOCIAL FREEDOM AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable development is largely derived from the word sustainability which means the capacity to

⁴ The terms psychological to social and social to psychological are used just as representatives to explain the point that as positive liberty is more a psychologically oriented term and negative liberty is more a sociologically oriented term so it would be much easier to move from negative liberty to positive liberty than vice-versa.

endure or support. Thus sustainable development is the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland Commission, 1987).^[17] The vast area of sustainable development is divided into three major categories, that is, economic, social and environmental sustainability. Later on further divisions like political, cultural^[18], institutional^[19], governance^[20], democracy and freedom have been given.^{5 [21]}

Freedom as a part of sustainable development of human resource is vital as no development is possible unless the people involved in the process are not free. As women are an important part of human resource, their social freedom becomes indispensable for sustainable development. Increasing broad-based economic development by promoting female education, employment and economic and political empowerment is among the most promising strategies for even climate change adaptation, with women as key agents. Countries with low rates of gender inequalities in education and employment access have grown substantially faster than those in which inequality rates were high. In countries such as Bangladesh and Tunisia, growth has included women to a much greater extent than in other countries in their regions, and has benefited women as well as overall development (Klasen, 2013)^[22]. Therefore social freedom for women will lead to their social acceptance and will open new avenues for them socially, economically and politically which will in turn benefit the progress of the country and thus the world. How can we expect progress and development in the society when its most important element, women are discriminated against and fall victim to various social and domestic crimes on the pretext of stereo typical notions which render them unfree and lead to their inferior status in the society?

If we want economic and environmental sustainable development, first of all there is a need to empower the women of the world otherwise we might seem developed on the surface whereas in terms of human resource sustainability it will be hollow inside. It is the duty of the society to provide women with negative liberty and support her in developing positive liberty. Its only when they possess both

⁵ Though there is an argument on the inclusion of freedom as a separate area of sustainability, but those in favour argue that no human progress is possible without the due consideration of human rights, freedom and democracy whereas those against find no correlation between economic growth and democracy and freedom. For example, the economies of China, Taiwan, Korea etc. (Weaver, Rock, Kusterer, 2008).

negative and positive freedoms, they will be socially free and will be accepted in the society as equal to men. Once they are accepted in the society as equals, it will itself provide them with social justice and ultimately there is a hope that all the heinous crimes against women happening in the world around will end and we will achieve a socially sustainable society which will be developed in its true sense.

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