

CULTURAL REQUISITES OF FREEDOM

M. N. Roy

It is quite natural that passionate lovers of freedom, working in an atmosphere of dehumanising poverty and grossest social and economic inequality, will be attracted by the doctrine that economic well-being is the precondition for freedom; that is not the atmosphere in which the higher human virtues can be practised. It is also true that an equitable social organisation and the provision of the most minimum conditions for a tolerable physical existence are the preconditions for any normal human development or social progress. 'But it does not necessarily follow that, whenever economic well-being is given, freedom and cultural progress are guaranteed. In other words, it is fallacious to draw a causal relation between economic well-being and freedom. The point will be made clear if we begin by defining some concepts and terms which are very freely used.

1. CONCEPT OF FREEDOM

Any dispassionate enquiry into the problem of the relation between social and economic conditions and freedom ought to start from an agreed definition of the concept of freedom. The ideal of freedom is age-old, but as far as I know, there has never been an agreed definition of freedom. Once we have an

agreed idea of what is freedom, then there can be agreement also about the means for the attainment of this end. Therefore, those who are pursuing the goal of freedom and are anxious to make a harmonious and coordinated human effort for its attainment, would do well to find an agreed definition of the concept of freedom.

Here we are immediately up against the problem: is freedom a value in itself, or only an instrumental value? Past attempts to define freedom have been baffled by the controversy about the concept itself. The difficulty disappears when freedom is conceived not as an ideal to be attained all at once, at some particular point of time, but as an experience to be made in every moment of man's life. Then it ceases to be a metaphysical concept, much less an abstract ideal which, by its very nature, recedes farther as we think we are approximating it. Only so conceived can freedom be described, as has been done traditionally, as the birthright of man or, more strictly speaking, a common human heritage.

A corollary to that clearer conception of freedom is that the ability to experience it is given in man. If it is his birthright, a common human heritage, every human being must be endowed with the faculty to experience freedom; and so conceived, freedom becomes an ideal which is accessible to human endeavour, human endeavour individually made. Since by his biological being every human individual is endowed with the faculty of experiencing freedom, to make that experience it is not necessary

for him to be associated with others; he can do so by his individual endeavour. These considerations demand a critical examination of the assertion that certain economic conditions are the prerequisite of freedom. The assertion can be examined in the light of the experience of the present as well as of the past.

2. FREEDOM & ECONOMIC WELL-BEING

It is a fact that people enjoying economic well-being are not lovers of freedom, necessarily. They do not, as a rule, appreciate the value of freedom. If they did, they would not lay themselves open to the charge of disallowing others to make the experience. Yet, the rich classes, not only of the past, but also of the present, have laid themselves open to this legitimate charge. The fact that prosperous economic conditions do not necessarily make for an appreciation of freedom warrants rejection of the dogmatic assertion that the poor and dispossessed will automatically behave like free human beings as soon as they will attain the bountiful blessing of economic well-being. But, on the other hand, it is quite evident that the circumstances under which man lives set a limit to human endeavours. Made under adverse circumstances, the best of endeavours may not be fruitful, while under more favourable conditions they may bear fruit. But not necessarily in every respect.

I shall not examine controversial facts, facts which cannot be easily verified. We do not know to what extent freedom is enjoyed by the people in the countries where a certain amount of economic

equality has been attained, and the masses are said to have been freed from economic exploitation. I should conduct the examination logically, on the theoretical level. A clear definition of freedom is the criterion of judgement. In order to raise the investigation into the problem of freedom above controversy, I should define freedom as progressive removal of impediments to normal unfoldment of potentialities inherent in man as a biological being. Freedom cannot be an experience of human life unless the ability to make the experience was inherent in man. The time-honoured saying that freedom is man's birthright suggests that, originally, in a vague way, it was believed that man was naturally capable of experiencing freedom. An agreement on that point logically leads to another agreement: that, while a tolerable physical existence, guaranteeing the provision of such primary necessities as food, clothing and shelter is necessary for a free unfoldment of human potentialities, it does not necessarily follow that all human beings living under such circumstances will be able to appreciate the value of freedom and experience it.

Adverse economic circumstances, poverty and misery and the vices they breed, undoubtedly place very great impediments in the way of a free development of human potentialities. But on the other hand, it has also to be admitted that, if the capacity to experience freedom is given in the biological being of man, the process of its evolution may not always necessarily be determined by economic conditions, whether one has a little more or less to eat. On the

contrary, the patent fact that a comfortable physical existence often discourages all creative human endeavour and blunts the moral sensibility of human beings, warrants the conclusion that, in a society which attaches greater importance to material well-being and economic prosperity, freedom may be placed at a discount. And as a matter of fact, believers in economic determinism ridicule freedom as an abstract notion.

A study of history with no preconceived idea does not bear out the contention that the basic incentive for social evolution and cultural progress is economic. It is well known that many of the greatest artists, poets and scientists throughout the world lived and worked in great poverty, under apparently insuperable handicaps and hardships. Yet they were overcome. Human creativeness defied the difficulties of social and material existence. It is true that ideal and cultural developments and socio-economic conditions mutually influence each other. But a causal connection cannot be traced between the two in any particular period of history. They are parallel processes, which can be traced to a common origin.

3. A BIOLOGICAL URGE

Mankind has pursued the ideal of freedom from time immemorial. Because the struggle for freedom, the desire to experience freedom, i.e., to experience the unfoldment of human potentialities, is a biological urge inherent in every human being. A biological urge is antecedent to social evolution; society is its creation. To subordinate a biological urge to its

creations is neither empirically warranted nor logically valid. It is to reverse the causal connection.

The fact that under certain economic conditions mankind attains a higher social and cultural level does not warrant the assertion that ideological systems and cultural institutions are superstructures raised on the foundation of production relations. A sober study should not be swayed by prejudices. Therefore I may refer to Croce, whose interpretation of history as a process of liberty realising itself is a case in point; or to Vico's discovery that history is the story of "Humanity creating itself".

Before one can fight for freedom and make supreme sacrifices for the sake of the ideal, he must feel the urge for freedom in himself; and it is on 'the attainment of a certain cultural level that one becomes conscious of the biological urge. Therefore, a small or a large group of well-meaning individuals cannot impose freedom on the masses not yet conscious of the biological urge, and who can be moved only by appeals to their emotions. The failure to realise this has led to the frustration of repeated efforts to impose social changes from above, believing that a structural social change would necessarily bring about a corresponding revolution in ideas.

A community cannot be free unless it is composed of free human beings, unless its members actually experience freedom individually, i.e., are conscious of the biological urge of endless evolution. Freedom may turn out to be a fraud, if the struggle for it is not conducted individually, but collectively,

through the instrumentality of the masses not conscious of the biological urge. The appeal to their emotions may persuade them to confound slavery with freedom regimentation with social responsibility, willing subordination with discipline.

4. STRUGGLE FOR UNFOLDMENT

It is one thing to feel the urge for freedom, as all animals do. If you chain a wild animal, it will try to run away, and as soon as it gets the opportunity, it does run away. That is not analogous to the human struggle for freedom, which takes place on the higher plane of emotion and intelligence. Indeed, in some ancient cultures, freedom was so conceived, as the instinct of wild animals. For instance, in the Chinese language, there is no word for freedom; the symbol used means running wildly hither and thither. That perhaps explains to a very large extent the peculiarities of the history of China. The ancient Chinese did not have a clear concept of freedom, and consequently no word to give expression to the concept, because the urge for freedom was not consciously experienced in ancient Chinese society. If we can be a little self-critical and look nearer home, we may find the same peculiar experience in our own history also. For instance, we talk of our cultural heritage, meaning mostly philosophical speculations. But what is the cultural heritage for the bulk of the Indian people? Political parties profess to fight for their freedom; and those of the Left may really believe that, if the peasants have land and the workers a living wage, freedom will automatically be theirs.

But what is the real cultural heritage of the masses? As far as the vast bulk of the people is concerned, it is fatalism—the doctrine of *karma*. And fatalism means lack of the faith of man in himself, the belief that man cannot make his own destiny. The law of *karma* is a negation of the fact that the urge for freedom is the biological heritage of man. The urge for freedom is nothing more mysterious than a continuation of the struggle for existence on a higher level—on the level of intelligence and emotion. Man originally started the struggle because he wanted to be free from his environments. He had to fight with wild animals; he had to gain food in order not to die. In other words, he had to struggle against his natural environments which threatened to destroy him; his struggle for freedom was the struggle for survival.

5. URGE FOR FREEDOM PRECEDES ECONOMIC URGE

The scientific hypothesis about the origin of human society is based on the fact that the urge for freedom precedes the desire for improvement of economic conditions. The hypothesis has been empirically verified by modern anthropological observations. As a matter- of fact, the urge for freedom is the incentive for social development throughout the ages. Economic determinism holds that the successive stages of social evolution were motivated by developments of the means of production; that the mentality of man was shaped by the manner in which he earned his living. There is some truth in this doctrine; but it is only half truth. It begs the crucial question: what induced man to manufacture or hit

upon the first tool? After all, the appearance of the human species is antecedent to the earliest tool. An answer to this crucial question solves the problem of the "missing link" and throws a flood of light on the subsequent process of social evolution. The mutation in the process of evolution marking the birth of the human species being beyond the reach of direct observation, the unprejudiced anthropologist must fall back on logical thinking called imagination. It can be imagined that, in course of the struggle for existence, an anthropoid ape hit upon the device of breaking a branch with which to pluck a fruit beyond the reach of his arm. That was a fact of decisive importance; it opened up a new phase of evolution; it marked a qualitative change. The biological evolution tended towards eventual social evolution. It was no longer necessary for the arms of the anthropoid apes to grow longer and longer, as they had done until then. The broken branch was the first tool, created by man. How was it made? By man's desire to be free from the physical limitations, and that incentive originated in man's brain. Economic determinism ignores that fact,— that the brain was the tool which enabled the human species to differentiate itself from its ancestor, and start off a new spurt of biological evolution which eventually became social evolution. It was the brain which created the first tool, and it is the seat of thought. So, thinking precedes social being; ideas, themselves of biological origin, have throughout the entire human history determined its course.

So long as the Indian people will remain obsessed with the fatalistic view of life which is India's peculiar cultural heritage, the idea that man is endowed with the ability to make his own destiny will never occur to them. A group of well intentioned individuals may free the Indian masses from economic exploitation. But unless they are freed from the misfortune of the cultural heritage of fatalism, no advance towards freedom will be possible; the masses will not be conscious of the urge to experience freedom. The much vaunted cultural heritage creates the predisposition to voluntary social, cultural and intellectual regimentation even in an economically free and egalitarian society, which will be only an illusion. Because, all will be supposed to be free collectively but none will individually experience freedom.

The implication of the doctrine of social liberation is that unfreedom of every individual is the condition for collective freedom. Naturally, it breeds cynicism about the very idea of freedom, that the concept of freedom is an abstraction, social existence being the empirical reality. It is true that the individual is not a social atom. None can be a Robinson Crusoe. The individuals must live in society and co-operate with each other; social co-ordination and harmony are conditions for individual development and freedom. But what is the concrete reality? Is it the individual or the collectivity? Which comes first? Social freedom is an abstract concept. In order to have a content of reality, it must be the sum

total of freedom actually experienced by individuals. Unless every individual is conscious of the urge for freedom and experiences it individually, social freedom is a myth, if not a fraud. Freedom can be experienced only by individuals, because the urge for freedom is a biological property, and biology knows no collectivity; life expresses itself through individual biological organisms, and I and the millions of us, each and everyone, is endowed with the capacity to experience freedom; but the experience can be made only individually. A group of people experiencing freedom individually together constitute a free society.

6. FOUNDATION OF FREEDOM—CULTURAL

These considerations lead to the conclusion that, while a minimum condition of physical well-being is a necessity, it alone does not guarantee the realisation of freedom. The corollary is that the foundation of freedom is cultural. Freedom is progressive removal of impediments to the unfolding of human potentialities; and that process is culture. The measure of culture is the degree of the removal of the impediments to the development of the inherent potentialities of man. It is an empirical truth that economic well-being does not necessarily make for culture. The rich are often most vulgar. The incentive for culture is of ideal-intellectual and emotional origin.

This theoretical deduction is verified by the experience of history. Take for instance the experience of the European Renaissance. It was originally

made in Italy. Later on it came to France; and on the way, to Germany. But the spirit of the Renaissance never thrived and blossomed in Germany. That fact explains why in our time, in spite of her economic development and technological advance, Germany succumbed to Fascism, while England and France resisted that danger. The original home of the Renaissance was also overrun by Fascism, because there also the revolt of man was overwhelmed by the Catholic Counter-Reformation. Freedom was appreciated more in the culturally advanced countries with tradition of regarding man as a moral entity, and therefore sovereign. Wherever the tribal tradition prevailed, collectivism of the mediaeval society resisted the march of freedom. The result was the inability to appreciate the value of freedom and the predisposition to be regimented, socially as well as spiritually, on the part of economically developed modern nations.

Learning from this experience, we must apply the lesson to our country, so that our efforts may not be misguided and frustrated. Side by side with the endeavour to improve the economic conditions of our people, the effort to lay the cultural foundation of freedom must not be neglected. To lay the foundation of freedom in our country means first of all to promote revolt against a psychological tradition, a habit of mind antagonistic to the idea of freedom. In other words, side by side with the efforts to change economic conditions, efforts should be made to create a cultural atmosphere in which the value of freedom

will be appreciated by a larger and larger number of people, an atmosphere in which it will be possible to make more and more people feel the urge for freedom: feel that they are human beings and as such capable of experiencing freedom, here and now, instead of believing that freedom is an ideal which lies beyond the problematically attainable economic equality.

7. THE MASS & INDIVIDUALS

This approach to the problem of freedom presupposes a reorientation of social philosophy,—or should I say, of the various schemes of social engineering. It presupposes a shift of emphasis from the masses of unknown and incalculable entities to concrete individuals who compose the masses. Unless a majority of its constituents feels the urge for freedom and believes that freedom is an experience worth having at all cost, a society can never be free. It may be free politically and economically, thanks to the efforts of a group of well intentioned people. But however well intentioned that group may be, freedom imposed on a community is liable to be a veiled version of a new kind of slavery—to the “liberators”. This is a matter of experience of the modern world.

A certain degree of economic welfare is a precondition for cultural, ideal, intellectual, and emotional development. But it is also true that economic prosperity of a society composed of human beings who do not feel individually the urge for freedom may be analogous to the comforts of electrified and

streamlined stables for race horses. Guided slavery is not freedom; and economic prosperity may be pampered servitude. Unless a cultural content is put in the concept of freedom and freedom is regarded as a matter of individual experience, the much desired economic liberation of the masses will not protect the modern world from the danger of accepting guided slavery for freedom. Freedom being a matter of individual experience, the condition for any community to enjoy it is the growth of the number of its members who will feel more and more keenly the urge for freedom. Guided by the consideration that they will have the greatest opportunity to develop their potentialities in a society composed of people equally jealous about their own freedom, their individualism will promote the cause of the freedom - of all.

It goes without saying that this mentality cannot thrive except in an atmosphere in which freedom of thought and judgment, the spirit of enquiry and the ability to distinguish between right and wrong prevail, or are at least highly valued, where a growing number of individuals cultivate these virtues, which can be experienced and practised not only by individuals but by all -individuals. Such an atmosphere is the only solid, abiding foundation of freedom. In our country, we have only just started the work of building the edifice of freedom. We shall be well advised to subject our preconceived notions and pet ideas to some critical examination and try to give due consideration to the realities of our country and

to our history. We should give up the illusion that human freedom will automatically follow from a certain pattern of socio-economic reconstruction. After all, society is a creation of man, and therefore a free society can be created only by free man, by man appreciating and endeavouring for freedom. If we undertake the task of creating a free society with men who by and large do not consciously feel the urge for freedom, are not culturally preposed to appreciate the value of freedom, all our efforts and our best intentions will be frustrated. That has been the experience of many countries, and we had better learn from their experience.

8. FREEDOM, A VALUE IN ITSELF

We should be guided by the empirical truth that the desire for economic betterment is not or at least not the primary incentive for all human and social developments; the biological urge for freedom is the basic incentive. Freedom is not an instrumental value. It is not a means to something; it is an end in itself. It is not an ideal to be attained in some distant time, but something to be experienced every day of our life. And those who experience freedom can alone be real defenders of freedom.

Having been associated with all kinds of political and social doctrines and theories, the ideal of freedom has been dragged down to the plane of political controversy. A dispassionate examination of the problem of freedom will have to be made on the higher plane of scientific knowledge. The discovery

that search for freedom is a biological urge opens up an entirely different outlook. It reveals the cultural foundation of freedom. The love of freedom results rather from the cultural development of man and a community than from any arbitrary socio-economic reconstruction.

Economic well-being and political freedom are also ingredients of the total human culture. Therefore, the cultural prerequisites of freedom include economic betterment and political institutions which give man the scope for an all-round development. But in the last analysis, greater emphasis should be laid on the deeper layers of human nature. Freedom does not concern merely the relations between man and man. In the first place, it must be experienced individually. Keenly conscious of the urge for freedom, and capable of experiencing it, individuals will build a really free society. Culture, therefore, is the foundation of freedom, which can be reinforced by the satisfaction of all other human requirements.