

Liberty and Equality

Freedom is the Supreme Value

By SAUVIK CHAKRAVERTI

IN one of our Student Outreach Programmes, a young lad came up to me and said that, when he spoke of liberalism and the free market, many people opposed him on the grounds that this would result in the promotion of inequalities in society. How can India's liberals defend themselves from this charge?

Unlike the socialists, liberals do not value equality. They value freedom. They see the market economy as a natural eco-system in which human beings survive by finding specialised niches from which to work, by virtue of a natural gift given to them by God: the ability to trade. Liberals believe that human beings should be left free in this natural market economy, this natural eco-system.

As with nature, where we see tall trees and short grasses, there will be inequality. But at least there will be freedom. In freedom, we will surely survive better than if we do what the socialists did: ignore nature, ignore the natural eco-system of the market economy, and sacrifice all our freedoms at the altar of equality. The socialistic pattern of society Nehru envisaged was not one of tall trees and short grasses: it was one of uniformly trimmed hedges. And this vision was never realised. Indeed, it may be said that the socialists were never sincere about realising this vision. In their society, even in their political parties, there is strict hierarchy. Theirs is a VIP culture. Indeed, it is because of them that there is a highly successful brand in India called VIP. Liberals believe that the socialists took away our freedoms by offering us this false vision. It is time we took our freedoms back, and abandoned the quest for a society of uniformly trimmed hedges. It may be useful to briefly inquire as to how income inequalities work in the market economy. It is not that capitalists alone gain.

Sports superstars, movie stars, rock musicians, television anchors and various other performers who do not really own any capital and merely sell their services earn incomes that would put many a capitalist to shame. The trick, to put it simply, lies in the ability to get as many customers as possible from the market. All these performers rely on the size of their fan clubs and their ratings. It is akin to businessmen pursuing market share. Thus, in the market economy, gains

go to those who satisfy the most customers; those who sell. They do not go to those whose output is shoddy. This promotes a work ethic.

Under socialism, rewards go to those who wield state power, and to their cronies. Instead of a work ethic, what is promoted is a culture of influence-seeking, influence-peddling, bribery and corruption. Businessmen, who should be spending all their time pursuing profits, find that they have to devote considerable attention to politics. This politicisation of economic life destroys all public morality, among both politicians as well as

IN BRIEF

- Liberals value freedom, not equality
- Socialists ignored the natural eco-system of the market economy
- Politicisation of economic life destroys all public morality
- If every person could find a specialised niche, there would be a creative flowering of the human race
- Liberty is the supreme political value
- Our strong socialist state is a complete antithesis to the notion of constitutional freedom

businessmen. Freedom promotes morality and the work ethic.

The idea of freedom promotes equality in a different sense: it does away with those who wield power over the market process. In Nehru's vision of uniformly trimmed hedges, there has to be a gardener. In the socialist scheme, this gardener is assumed to be omniscient and benevolent. This assumption can no longer be accepted as valid today. After 50 years of socialist gardening, it seems fairly obvious today that the gardener has interests of his own; that he is actually destroying the garden in pursuit of his own selfish motives.

If this predatory gardener were to be evicted from the garden, which is what liberals hope to achieve, our society would flourish like never before. It would grow free and wild, with no one with the power to attempt any trimming. In the garden, there would be many tall trees, and a carpet of short

grass. And all the bushes, creepers and vines that nature would support. In this garden, every human being would attempt to find a specialised niche in which to survive, and it is this freedom that would ultimately yield what Karl Marx had dreamed of: the greatest creative flowering of the human race.

The preamble to our Constitution promises us liberty as well as equality. It is the liberty that liberals wish to lay emphasis upon now. We indeed have very little liberty today. The World Economic Freedom Index rates us very close to the bottom of the league: the economically repressed nations. As long as we have exchange control there cannot be free trade.

The socialists have also instituted economic controls on the smallest players in society: there is licensing for rickshaw-pullers and this power is cruelly exploited. The same applies to street vendors, whose surpluses are swallowed up by the petty bureaucracy of police and municipal functionaries: the cutting-edge personnel of the predatory state. Our cities do not have a vibrant nightlife because of controls. With freedom, we could have a 24-hour economy, and life in the garden will flourish: there must be nocturnal creatures among us too, as there are in nature.

All this is not to undermine the political value of equality. Nehru's equality was different. He sought the state to promote the value. It is this that Minoo Masani objected to. Masani and his followers insisted that freedom comes first, not equality.

That is, liberty is the supreme political value and we should not sacrifice our freedom in a futile quest. There is still in existence a journal founded by Masani called *Freedom First*.

It is important for constitutional democracy that people value freedom. The purpose of a constitution is to limit the powers of the state and make it function as per set laws that guarantee the liberty of the citizens and also protect their property. Our strong state socialism is a complete antithesis of the notion of constitutional freedom. The socialists wanted power. Power over the economic lives of the citizenry. Equality, as a political value, was their excuse. Liberals do not seek power. They wish to destroy it. So that people can be free. Freedom, for them, is the supreme value.

The use of the audio visual media for more positive purposes like the ability to bring in the silent majorities, encourage them to speak for themselves and give enough space for their culture and literature. The human genius of compassion should be allowed to play when all other things are equal.

On the other hand there is genuine concern with the growing trend in films made for the cinema and TV to depict violence and scenes of rape in a gory manner. Even here it is not for the state to interfere but for voluntary regulation by those in the film and TV industry.

The example of how porno films shows in a theatre in Bombay died a natural death without the State having to interfere is a an example of self regulation though in this particular case filmgoers simply got tired of these films and stopped patronising such movies.

The writing of history should be left to scholars and historians and the state should not interfere. Governments of the day of whatever colour have a tendency to project their point of view. Hence this should be resisted.