J.S MILL ON LIBERTY

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Chapter-I

INTRODUCTION

The researcher through this project intends to portray the views of J.S Mill on liberty as highlighted by his essay, “On Liberty”. “On Liberty” is a philosophical work of 19th century, first published in 1859. To the Victorian readers of that time it was a radical work, advocating moral and economic freedom of individuals from the state. The most memorable point made by Mill in this work, and his basis for liberty, is that "Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign". 2

The researcher’s main emphasis will lie on describing the life of Mill, his basic concepts on liberty, and then critically evaluating his thoughts as he puts them in his essay, “On Liberty”

2 Alan M. Dershowitz, Introduction to ‘On Liberty’
CHAPTER-II

LIFE OF JOHN STUART MILL

John Stuart Mill was a child of prodigy, born on May 20, 1806 at Pentonville, London. He was a British philosopher, political economist, civil servant and Member of Parliament, and was an influential liberal thinker of the 19th century. He was an exponent of utilitarianism, an ethical theory developed by Jeremy Bentham, although his conception of it was very different from Bentham's.

John Stuart was educated by his father, with the advice and assistance of Jeremy Bentham. He was given an extremely rigorous upbringing, and was deliberately shielded from association with children his own age other than his siblings. His father was a follower of Bentham and his explicit aim was to create a genius intellect that would carry on the cause of utilitarianism and its implementation after he and Bentham were dead.

Mill was a notably precocious child which is highlighted by the fact that he was taught Greek at the age of three and was exposed to Latin, Euclid, and algebra at quite an early age. At the age of fourteen, Mill stayed in France for one year with the family of Sir Samuel Bentham, brother of Jeremy Bentham. The mountain scenery he saw in France made the deepest impression on him, which led to a lifelong taste for mountain landscapes. The lively and friendly way of life of the French also left a deep impression on him. However the intensive study which Mill went through at such a young age had injurious effects on his mental health and state of mind, and consequently at the age of twenty he suffered a nervous breakdown. Nevertheless, the depression eventually began to dissipate, as he began to find solace in the Memoires of Jean-François Marmontel and the poetry of William Wordsworth - his capacity for emotion resurfaced.

Mill refused to study at Oxford University or Cambridge University, and followed his father to work for the British East India Company until 1858. In 1851, Mill married Harriet Taylor after 21 years of an intimate friendship. His relationship with Harriet Taylor reinforced Mill's advocacy of women's rights. During the period, 1865-1868, he was a Member of
Parliament for City and Westminster, and was often associated with the Liberal Party. In 1869, he argued for the right of women to vote and called for various reforms of Parliament and voting, especially proportional representation, the Single Transferable Vote, and the extension of suffrage. He died in Avignon, France in 1873 and was buried alongside his wife.

While he was still in his teenage, Mill had begun publishing articles and essays in various publications. In 1843, he published *System of Logic*, followed by *Principles of Political Economy* in 1848 and *On Liberty* in 1859. His other important works include *Utilitarianism* (1863), *The Subjection of Women* and *Autobiography* (published after his death in 1873). It took scholars several decades before they fully examined John Stuart Mill’s unique and systematic contribution to ethical and logical traditions. For today’s students of economics, philosophy and politics, he remains a vibrant and preeminent figure.
CHAPTER-III

MILL’S CONCEPT OF LIBERTY

The concept of liberty carries three connotations,

(a) The notion of choice.
(b) The absence of constraints to make and exercise such a choice.
(c) The existing conditions that enable you to actuate the choice.

The liberty not to have one’s individual opinion suppressed by collective decisions of the society and state is at the core of J.S Mill’s understanding of Liberty.

Mill’s view on Liberty is based on the understanding of Utility ‘in the largest sense grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being.’ His essay ‘On Liberty’ seeks to protect individual liberty from the interference of State and Society. Mill enlarges the concept of liberty beyond the Utilitarian doctrine of Bentham by holding a view that a proper conception of happiness includes freedom as individuality. As per Mill, Individuality was a prerequisite for the cultivation of the self. This would enable society to progress as each individual is useful in proportion to the extent they differ from the rest.

Further Mill discussed Liberty under three aspects:

(a) Liberty of thought and discussion
(b) Principle of individuality
(c) Limits of authority over an individual’s action
CHAPTER-IV

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ESSAY ‘ON LIBERTY’

As Mill states in his autobiography, his essay ‘On Liberty’ was first conceived as a short essay in 1854. Over time as development of new ideas took place, he expanded and rewrote his work. His wife, Harriet Taylor was a significant part of the writing, though some scholars debate the extent of her influence on his thoughts.

Mill starts off by emphasizing the struggle between ‘authority and liberty’. He explicitly describes the tyrannical authority of the government, which according to him needed to be controlled by the liberty of the citizens. He supplements that without such limit to authority, the government attains a form of a ‘dangerous weapon’.

He divides the limits to be imposed to control the authority into two mechanisms; the necessary rights belonging to citizens and the establishment of constitutional checks to which the consent of the entire community was available for the enactment of important acts of the governing powers.

Mill suggests that the people would be contented to be ruled by ‘a master’, provided his rule guards them against tyranny. However, the development of democracy soon took place where there was no fear of tyranny over oneself. This, as Mill puts, is illusionary, ‘as the people who exercise powers in the democracy are not always the same people over whom the powers are exercised’. Further, he highlights one more demerit, saying that the democratic functions can only be carried out by a majority, and if consequently the majority wishes to operate against a particular minority section of the society, it can easily be done despite keeping in consideration, the wishes of the minority. This, he describes as ‘tyranny of the majority’.

Mill holds the view that the tyranny of the majority is worse than the tyranny of the government because it crosses the boundaries of political functions. Protecting a person against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling is more difficult than protecting him against a tyrant. People will be subject to what the society thinks suitable and will be governed by it. The majority opinion within the society is the basis of all rules of conduct within the society. Thus there would be no safeguard in law against the tyranny of the majority. Here, Mill criticizes this
approach and proves this as negative showing that the majority opinion may not always be the correct opinion. On a particular case people will either be for or against the issue and the side with an upper hand over the other prevails, but this is not necessarily correct.

According to Mill, for exercising power over an individual there is only one legitimate reason: “That the only purpose for which powers can be exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.”

The development of the ‘harm principle’ in ‘On Liberty’ is mentioned by Mill. The ‘harm principle’ regards that each individual has the right to act as he wants, so long as his acts do not adversely affect the person undertaking the action, then the society has no right to intervene, even if the person committing such act is harming himself. Exceptions to this principle, as enshrined by Mill, are those who are not capable of self government; i.e. young children, those living in backward states of society, etc.

Furthermore, Mill states that one may accept despotism over ‘barbarians’ if it is for their betterment, but this is only applicable if the barbarians are ‘non-age’ and cannot be sovereign over self. As soon as these people are capable of deciding for themselves, they should be given liberty from authority. As an illustration to this principle, the example of Charlemagne and Akbar the great was used, who were compassionate dictators who controlled and supposedly helped the ‘barbarians’

At this point, Mill divides human liberty when it’s private, into various manifestations. They include

(a) The freedom to think as one wishes, and to feel as one does. This includes the freedom to opinion, and includes the freedom to publish opinions known as the freedom of speech,
(b) The freedom to pursue tastes and pursuits, even if they are deemed "immoral," as long as they do not cause harm,
(c) The "freedom to unite" or meet with others, often known as the freedom of assembly.

Without all of these freedoms, in Mill's view, one cannot be considered to be truly free and liberty cannot be exercised.
CHAPTER- V

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the researcher feels that Mill was very contemporary in his thoughts and views on the principles of liberty as he highlighted it in his essay ‘On Liberty’.

This can be further supported by quoting a paragraph from chapter one of his essay, ‘On Liberty’

“The sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinion of others, to do so would be wise, or even right...The only part of the conduct of anyone, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign”

This paragraph much highlights that the notions of liberty as advocated by Mill were quite contemporary and can be highly regarded and justified in today’s context.

Therefore, the essay ‘On Liberty’ can be regarded as a highly unique piece of writing by Mill, which advocated various modern aspects of liberty which is totally warranted.
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