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NEHRU AND HIS CONCEPTION OF LIBERTY

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Nehru’s conception of liberty
Evolution of Pt. Nehru’s conception of liberty can be traced in religious-scientific experiences which he had met in his early childhood. His interaction with the religious scriptures helped him to fancy floating in unrestricted manner in this universe. He accepted that he “dreamt of astral bodies and imagined myself flying vast distances.”

He seems to have experienced this flying often, though only in his thoughts. For Nehru flying is symbol of freedom as he reveals that flying is a great experience as “it has been vivid and realistic and countryside seemed to lie underneath me in a vast panorama.”

He feels that this imagination is realistic, a thought which matured when he interacted with the scientific phenomenon and events later on when aviation started to fascinate and influence him much. Nehru was enthralled with these developments. Nehru said with excitement that “those were the days of the Wright Brothers and Santos Dumont (to be followed soon by Farman, Latham and Bleriot), and I wrote to father from Harrow, in my enthusiasm, that soon I might be able to pay him a week end visit in India by air.” These were fascinations of a young mind but were strong enough to entrench in his psyche as strong urge for free movement with no barriers.

Interaction with the Theosophical thoughts, Annie Besant, F. T. Brooks was another source of evolution of liberal thinking of him though he had lost interest in Theosophy quite early. F T Brooks brought him in close contacts with great books as Oliver Twist, David Copperfield of Charles Dickens, Tess of the d’Urbervilles of Thomas Hardy, Vanity fair of Thackeray and
Adventures of Huckleberry Finns of Mark Twain etc. These literary masterpieces were impregnated with lofty values and humanistic concepts. The intrinsic value of liberty, equality was revealed to him. This all happened when Nehru was only eleven years old, an age in which most of the children and adolescents of today and their parents are involved only in materialistic and hollow things.

It seems that ancestral background was also an important influence on his thinking as his father studied hard, worked hard in his profession and created a western environment in the house, from here he ventured into the study of history and great philosophers of all times. Rousseau, J S Mill appears to have influenced his maturing process during his interaction with these great minds.

Nehru’s concept of liberty at initial level is synonymous with the freedom of the country, he thinks in terms of macro liberal framework and translates it into a nationalistic vision. This can be captured easily by deciphering his early days. The home atmosphere was influencing him, he was turning to be a nationalistic in true sense. Nehru found himself in a state of great turmoil. Freedom of the country was a thought which had matured from his fanciful day, a child was alive in the evolution of his concept of liberty as he stated that “nationalistic ideas filled my mind. I mused of Indian freedom and Asiatic freedom from the thrall of Europe. I dreamt of brave deeds, of how, sword in hand, I would fight for India and help in freeing her.”

In this evolutionary process his understanding of historical developments of other nations also played a crucial role as he went to study G. M. Trevelyan’s books on Italian nationalist Garibaldi in England at the age of about fifteen years, he “studied the whole Garibaldi story in them {two volumes} carefully.” and started to conceptualize and dream a similar battle of freedom against Britishers in India as “India and Italy got strangely mixed together.”

Nehru’s transformation was quick towards the thought of liberating the country because it had to ensure the liberty of masses in every walk of life. His macro understanding of freedom was never devoid of its relationship with its unit, the individual. He was an individualist who assigned the most important role to an individual in the whole scheme of human existence. For him there was no separation between the macro and micro aspects of existence. He concludes that “peace can
come when nations are free and also when human beings everywhere have freedom, security and opportunity.”7

This thought has border less meaning like air which knows no boundary. He believes in the universal freedom of human race, not of few. He wants a comprehensive envelope of freedom to all without any distinction. “The freedom that we envisage is not to be confined to this nation or that or to a particular people, but must spread out over the whole human race. The universal human freedom cannot be based on the supremacy of any particular class. It must be the freedom of the common man everywhere and full opportunities for him to develop.”8

This thought process reflected itself when he envisaged it for people of India. He had already crystallized thoughts of human freedom as a basis of legal framework when he presented the Objective Resolution in Constituent Assembly on 13th December 1946 which was adopted on 22nd January in 1947. It was later adopted as Preamble of the Constitution with some alterations. The resolution read “wherein shall be guaranteed and secured to all the people of India justice, social economic and political: equality of status, of opportunity, and before the law; freedom of thought, expression, belief, faith, worship, vocation, association and action, subject to law and public morality.”9 His statement proves that he is convinced with no exception that liberty in multiple dimensions of human life can ensure the all round growth and progress of the individual.

His concept of liberty is not unrestricted. Man is free to the utmost level but not to that extent when liberty of one injures the interests of the other. He borrowed this thought from J S Mill, father of thought of liberty, who always made a distinction in between the self regarding and other regarding action of the individual. In Mill’s opinion man is sovereign over his body and soul and free to the highest level in this sphere but when his actions and thoughts harm the others, individual has to limit the thoughts and actions so that other is not harmed. Liberty of one can not be unrestricted with respect to society. Pt. Nehru states it in his own way that he is “too much of an individualist and believer in personal freedom to like over much regimentation [but] in a complex social structure individual freedom had to be limited, and perhaps the only way to read personal freedom was through some such limitation in the social sphere.”10
This belief has expressed itself in the form of reasonable restriction for the fundamental rights in our constitution where individual liberty has been restricted on logical grounds and balanced with the social and political liberty in a comprehensive and legal manner.

Nehru further takes concept of liberty to a lofty level by classifying the liberty and states that “the lesser liberties may often need limitation in the interest of the larger freedom.”

Larger freedom may belong to a collective group which may include the nation state or society as a whole. He is firmly in support of the sacrifice of lesser liberties if the question of attainment of higher liberty emerges ever, the Indian freedom struggle is testimony of this concept where many including Nehru himself assigned the superior place to freedom of the country and went with smiling faces inside the prison.

His concept of liberty is not devoid of nationalism where everyone is equal and thinks for the nation. It is true that nation building is not possible without the acceptance of equality and liberty in every sphere of national life. Nehru is albeit unsure about the exact relationship between the liberty and equality but sure at least that both are intrinsic to a good life and a progressive nation state.

Their closer relationship can evolve into a higher self for an individual though both may have to accommodate each other in certain respects. Speaking in 1949 in San Francisco, USA he pondered over the relationship of liberty with equality in a pensive mood. “Take equality, I am not quite sure if ultimately the concept of equality can be coordinated with freedom, because when you bring equality it may interfere with someone’s freedom. So there is a slight conflict not a final conflict, but there is a conflict. Perhaps in understanding the problems of the world today, you might put it in this way: the while in the nineteenth century, and later, the concept of freedom was given considerable emphasis and very rightly, in this middle twentieth century the idea of equality is gaining more force. Until you balance the two ideas of freedom and equality, both of which are important, and each of which has to be limited to some extent in order to coordinate with the other, you will not solve the problem of today.”

Nehru follows Harold Laski, whom he always maintained in high esteem, in the analysis of this relationship. For Laski liberty without equality has no value, both are complementary. Nehru also accepts it but is also concerned about the philosophical question of their relationship, he
attempts to balance both and searches in it the solutions of many of the world problems including the problem of nation building. In India he succeeded in implementing the equality with liberty where the legal-social equality of today precedes the liberty. Even the fundamental rights of law of land starts with the equality followed by the six freedoms.

Institutionalization and protection of concept of liberty was always in the mind of Nehru, even during the days of freedom struggle when liberty of the masses was always under suppression, he took a big step and went to establish the organization for its protection. “An Indian Civil Liberties Union was established in 1936 by Jawahar Lal Nehru and continued to operate under Nehru’s leadership until independence. Rabindranath Tagore was its honorary president and Krishna B. Menon was its first secretary.”

Nehru’s conception of liberty has given India much, in today’s critical environment of South Asia where liberty of vast sections of society is under suppression in many neighboring countries in the name of religion and power is used by a patriarchal and orthodox society to serve religion and gender specific interests, where universal values are rejected and law of lands are flouted, all these make liberty as a laughing stock in these nations but here in India WE enjoy many fruits of liberty. Women walk and work with equal esteem with men, depressed classes raise their voices and attain the political power, society move forward with youth venturing in untrodden fields with innovation and entrepreneurship, within the families girls now voice their thoughts and in Universities and schools a liberal knowledge is disseminated without any hindrance.

Surely several greats of the country have contributed to reach this standard and put India different from its many neighboring countries but contribution of Nehru is unparallel in this respect. His conception of liberty in many ways has matured as one of the greatest edifice of Indian political and social system.

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