

Liberty in a Finite World

1789 is the year of the Declaration of Human Rights, the constitution of the first modern revolution. "Liberty, property, security and resistance to oppression" were to be the undeniable rights of the individuals. But liberty was to be first. And liberty meant different things to different people.

For Marquis de La Fayette who commanded American troops in the American Revolution, and who was the main proponent of the Declaration adopted on August 26, 1789, liberty was not only the abolition of classes, castes and privileges. It was more than Voltaire's liberty, "the freedom to do what one has the power to do". It was freedom of enterprise, "the power to do anything that would not harm the others". This conception of liberty is today becoming obsolete, and requires overhaul.

But one should not forget: The French revolution, and throughout Europe the subsequent collapse of the "ancien régime", has precisely taken place because liberty, for everybody and especially merchants and entrepreneurs, meant the possibility of self-fulfilment, and the possibility of moving upwards in the social system. Therefore, liberty, as a powerful driving force, operating in conjunction with the tools of the industrial and scientific revolutions, can be recognized as the key value which has made possible the achievements of modern society: democracy, secularism, security, welfare, and (to some extent) peace.

Today, we may convincingly argue that another major revolution and collapse was triggered by the same conception of liberty: the end of communism and the breakdown of the USSR. Communism, based upon a denial of private property, the second item in the 1789 Declaration of Human Rights, had challenged western capitalism for more than seventy years. Yet, why should this not be seen as a confirmation of the correctness of La Fayette's conception of liberty?

The world of the French and Industrial revolutions was a world of infinite resources, a world of receding but endless frontiers: Material and spiritual progress were to spread and become universal; natural and social sciences were to supplement whatever nature and human beings were unable to provide. Most nation-states were either sufficiently self-reliant to have independent internal policies, or powerful enough to build empires at the expense of less developed countries. And, above all, the spirit of liberty suggested that nothing was impossible.

The contemporary world is painfully discovering that we definitely live in a finite world. That we will have to live with limited resources, and with an uneven distribution of them, either physical or intellectual. That the world will have to keep its social and cultural diversity, not just because of history, but because no social system is perfect, and because democracy needs a plurality of values, and a plurality of social alternatives to choose from.

The quintessence of democracy is solidarity, not only "one man - one vote". La Fayette's liberty was quite possibly essential in order to reach a sufficient level of material security for all. True democracy became then a realistic possibility because there was potentially enough to satisfy everybody's basic needs, and sufficient education for everybody to comprehend the mutual advantages of a full fledged welfare system. That this happened first in Europe was neither an accident, neither a consequence of western culture. "Necessity is the mother of invention", said Plato. Thus, the roughness of the northern climate, and centuries of fighting for survival, made solidarity a social necessity. And today, in the world-village, with an ever increasing demand on limited resources, democracy and solidarity are becoming global necessities.

The spread of knowledge and the ease of access to information are giving us at this point of time a wider view of the state of things in the world. The expected growth of world population is casting more than a serious doubt on our ability to provide the essential needs of man. His future requirements for food, housing, education, water, energy and the other essential amenities for civilised life would only be met through radical changes which we cannot forecast even in our wildest dream. We still have in our midst, violence, abuse of children, starvation, hunger, discrimination of all sorts, exploitation, injustice, inhuman treatment of minorities. The expectations and promises which accompanied the end of the second World War in 1945 of a better world have not been fulfilled.

In the United States there are 30 million people who live in absolute poverty and of these 13 million are children. Recently there was shown on the television a picture depicting the tragedy in the life of a working class estranged mother of small girl: The child had to be abandoned in a public place so that her mother could find a job. What kind of liberty is that? The same evening the news item together with pictures showed us the ugly situation prevailing in Zaire. The tug-of-war between battling factions always leads to suffering and misery to the innocent. That evening we saw a school in Kinshasa crowded with small children, all of them underfed, diseased and many abandoned. Could liberty in such a country have prevented that?

We are far away from the conditions which must exist for the individuals to enjoy the maximum of civilised living. In the United States, they have had democratically elected governments for two centuries, and resources which have made their country the most powerful of the super-powers. The size of her economy bears no comparison, yet it is a land where inequalities and social injustice are still rampant. This state of affairs is common in many countries where democratically elected governments operate.

The other case is not an isolated one either, although the reasons for the social unrest may vary. Zaire is a ruthless military dictatorship. The breakdown of law and order has led to a chaotic condition where the weak are the worst sufferers: Democratic government does not operate. Many parts of Africa, some countries of Latin America and Asia offer the same ugly situation of discrimination, of hunger, of torture, of abuse and of injustice. The absence of a democratic set-up in most of those countries adds to the uncertainty of a better to-morrow.

The life of the individual and his welfare represent the most important element in the society in which he evolves. Institutions set up in such an environment are first and foremost meant to serve his needs.

All of this raises the question - what in the present conditions do we mean by a "good society"? Are we being unrealistic when we try to identify utopia? The harsh realities of life in society make us realise that we cannot leap into utopia. We are moulded, each community, by our history. But it is right that we attempt to define the good society. This is an exercise which compels us to examine our assumptions and basic values, and to clarify our views on our own society.

What matters most is liberty: How the individual fares in society, his relations with other individuals and with the State, as represented by the Executive, and how he is affected by its decisions and policies.

What does the individual look for in a good society? The first requirement must be security: the confidence that he can go about his normal affairs in peace. The word must be given a very wide meaning and cover an extensive range. The citizen must live without entertaining a fear of going without food and a home, fear of not having medical attention when in need, fear of not being able to look after his children and to provide for their health and education, fear of being unemployed. Adam Smith, the writer of "The Wealth of Nations", linked this requirement with social justice:

"No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of its members are poor and miserable. It is but equity, besides, that those who feed, clothe and lodge the whole body of the people, should have such a share of the produce of their labour as to be themselves tolerably well fed, clothed and lodged."

It would take a century before the concept of the "Welfare State" would be fully developed. This happened fifty years ago, in 1943, when William Beveridge, later made knight and a lord, produced his report commissioned by the Churchill Government. This became a blue print for the British Labour Party and after the elections of 1945, the Welfare State was born; security from the cradle to the grave. I was a student in England at the time, and although the idea did not obtain universal adoption, yet it revolutionised the mind of social workers, politicians, and largely of those who cared. Adopted in modified form or otherwise, Welfare Services now cover Education, Health, Family Care, Old Age Pensions, Unemployment Benefits, and are operating in capitalist and socialist states.

The financial viability of the Welfare State has been put at risk by two major factors - the unpredicted rise in levels of unemployment in many industrial countries, and the increase in the expectation of life. Governments in developed and developing countries have found that the cost of providing welfare services has increased to such an extent as to seriously allow them to consider revising or curtailing their commitments. Old people and the children of lower income groups are likely to be the sufferers. But society in general is threatened when more and more social victims such as unemployed start being penalized by cuts in welfare payments. The policy decisions for such erosion depend a great deal on the philosophy adopted regarding inequality in society, and this depends a great deal on the underlying conception of liberty.

Two models are possible. What we might call the Fabian view considers that the good society would be one where inequalities are lessened - even if not eliminated. In this perspective, Voltaire's view on liberty would dominate, and freedom will increase as power is more evenly distributed. What we might call the Reagan/Thatcher view is that inequality does not matter very much. Liberty is La Fayette's. We thus have a contrast between a picture of society consisting of a mass of competing individuals, each with his hand against everyone else, where there is no such thing as a community, and a society which values cooperation and mutual aid.

In societies in transition from the traditional to the modern, we can see both side by side. In the Mauritian village, when anybody is building a house, he will call on his neighbours and friends to help in pouring the concrete roof. But he will probably have to hire labour for the rest of the work. What we call the "communautaire" coexists together with the "commercial".

If we grant that the good society will ensure that the mass of its citizens should have access to the necessities of life (however defined) how far should we depend on the forces of the market to achieve this? And what should be the role of Government in such a society?

The case of inequality and the use of market forces is strong. The caste system, in various forms, has been a successful device for stabilizing large societies and preventing empires from collapse for centuries, in ancient or modern times. And policies which ignore market forces have generally ended in disaster. But all this is far from either believing that inequality does not matter or that total reliance on the market will give us the good society. Although we certainly have to accept a degree of inequality, a more egalitarian society and a better distribution of income, which have been advocated over a long time now, are worth pursuing.

In order to ensure that social commitments stay as a polity of solidarity among men, it is only fair that expenditure is balanced with the revenue available. In the context of a finite world, this means that we have to reinvent both Beveridge and Keynes, and that we have to stop borrowing from the future. In practical terms, this means that to satisfy everybody's needs we are no more free to act as if everybody's greed was without consequences. In order to preserve our resources, be they the people or the natural environment, liberty cannot be the license to do everything.

Indeed, the term "liberty" has many meanings; it may be used as a cover for naked self-interest. The Oxford philosopher Isaiah Berlin - himself a convinced liberal - pointed out that belief in certain types of freedom has played its part in generating great and lasting social evils. "Advocacy of non-interference ... was used to support politically and socially destructive policies which armed the strong, the brutal and the unscrupulous against the humane and the weak, the able and ruthless against the less gifted and the less fortunate. Freedom for the wolves has often meant death to the sheep." But in spite of this, freedom from oppression must be regarded as an important element in the "good society".

As I have emphasised, the finite world may necessitate limitations on our freedom of action. If we are threatened by global warming, we should be willing to accept limits on our use of motor cars or on the destruction of forests. Our exhaustion of natural resources may reflect the excessive liberty of past exploiters. And the more scarce resources become, the more likely are restrictions on our freedoms.

But any general principle, when taken to its logical conclusion, is likely to be a nonsense. The good society demands a fair compromise between several desirable purposes. The nature and scope of this compromise will necessarily reflect the specific circumstances of the society and its environment. This implies tolerance, another dimension of liberty, and at the same time another restraint over it, especially at the international level, in the society of nations.

In effect, all our experience shows that a society in which a minority - or even a majority - tries to impose its belief on the whole community, has within itself the seeds of conflict. A free and secure society is thus a tolerant society, a society which is tolerant of religious and ethnic differences. I must admit that this view raises difficulties. But, as a Mauritian, I am strongly conscious of the need for mutual acceptance among the various communities making up our nation. Among a population of a million, we have Hindus, Catholics, Moslems, Buddhists and others. We have communities of Indian, African, European and Chinese origin. Without a degree of mutual acceptance, we would not have survived and prospered.

More than this: diversity itself is a good thing. A world with a wide range of opinions, cultural traditions or political and social attitudes is in some sense better than one of world-wide uniformity. However, the good society depends very much, although not exclusively, on the policies adopted and their implementation by individual governments. As a minimum, a good Government must offer the following guarantees:

- (a) the establishment of the Rule of Law;
- (b) the presence of an independent judiciary;
- (c) a democratic and secular form of government with periodic elections;
- (d) the freedom of expression;
- (e) the adherence to the United Nations and international Human Right treaties and covenants.

The observance of these obligations goes deep in the absolute requirements which must prevail so that the individual may enjoy the fruit of his labour and the liberty which he has always sought, but was denied by kings, dictators, despots and bad rulers at different periods of world history, or even now in many countries where elementary democratic practices are not present.

There remains the conflict between ideologues and pragmatists. Anybody who, like myself, has spent many years in public life, will tend towards a pragmatic view of the good society - a bias towards problem solving and the practicable. But pragmatism without a body of belief - without what we may call ideology - is likely to be barren. For this reason, the possibility of a periodic change of government involving a fresh look at the society's values has to be part of the good society. One of the virtues of a democratic system is that it provides a painless way of achieving this.

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Veerasamy Ringadoo