

Liberty without Equality is Privilege and Injustice, Equality without Liberty is Slavery and Brutality

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One of the biggest mistakes people often make while scrutinizing situations is that they apply the principles of liberty blindly without understanding equality. They hastily judge a situation completely isolating it from the social realities and power equations which are present in that society. The universality of human rights is undeniable, but we should also be aware of the unequal relations existing in the societies and the socio-economic hierarchies which create power structures, which are actually preventing these ideals of liberty to exist in that society. Therefore, while evaluating each and every event, we have to observe the positions of each party involved, the hierarchies of oppression present and also how these hierarchies are aiding one party at the expense of the other.

The hierarchies of coercion and oppression are so complex and interconnected that it requires very careful analysis to get a complete understanding of the underlying issues and how to dismantle them. But people are often quick to cast aside these difficult analyses and jump into a generalized and easy response which demonizes and attacks the individual or community which are already suffering from these coercive power hierarchies.

We are trained to only raise the ideas of liberty when it questions the power hierarchies which are existing in the society. Wage theft and exploitation of workers is considered normal, but when a poor underprivileged person from an oppressed community resorts to theft or robbery, the criminal justice system is quick to tag them with draconian Habitual Offenders Act and other colonial era rules to punish them and harass their community for years. The entire police and judicial systems are designed for the protection of those at the top of these hierarchies and their properties, and these legal systems are utilized for maintenance of these oppressive hierarchies.

How we perceive **what is violence** is a result of these power relations. Not all violence is treated equally, only violence which threatens the power structure is condemned and opposition is raised. For example, if an Adivasi man/a person from a de-notified community and a privileged upper caste rich man come to court in a matter of dispute, the justice system shouldn't be blind to the social realities and power equation existing between the two. By the very existence of an unjust social hierarchy in society and the marginalization that these communities face, justice

is in favoring and protecting the depressed classes. Anything else is further exacerbating the inequalities. This is also applicable when a woman comes out against a man with an accusation. We need to first understand the structure of patriarchy before we analyze this incident and decide. Especially this is more valid when the man is her boss or husband who holds power. The struggles suffered by those placed at the bottom of these hierarchies cannot be equated with those on the top. When similar punishments are given for similar crimes, the way punishment works for those on top and bottom are different. A fine of Rs. 5000 for a rich man is not equal to the same amount as fine for a poor man.

Rape is heinous crime, but rape of a lower caste women by upper caste men and upper caste women by a lower caste man are treated differently by society, we see huge protests for one but complete silence in another. Because one is considered norm and easily ignored and only other is considered an outrage. This selective blindness of the society needs to be condemned.

When a person of dominant caste or class commits violence, the systems of power which gives him privilege ensures that he remains safe from prosecution, and most of the time it won't even be considered a crime and treated as normal. The "men will be men" arguments, use of rape and parading to punish lower caste women, public attack on marginalized communities, burning their livelihood etc. are all authorized and treated as norm and no public backlash occurs nor there is any prosecution. The conviction rate for crimes against women and Dalits are so low because of that. Also, when crimes are committed by the underprivileged, the conviction is fast and outrage is huge. Most of the people populating prisons belong to the marginalized communities, most of them under trail and without money to even pay bail. Social inequalities and structures of exploitation should be considered as violence too. Once we see them exactly as what they are, we will be able to better understand the true nature of violence committed by different Individuals and communities and decide if they are justified or not. Every power structure that coercively oppresses people and exploits them should be considered as violence towards them and any action that challenges these structures should be considered as defense of human rights.

Our idea of justice has been blind for too long towards the social realities and power relations and people are often proud to badge themselves as being blind to these realities. In an era of deep structural inequality in terms of class, caste, color, gender, belief and orientation, being blind to these power structures is just reinforcing and accepting these inequalities. Constant will and effort is needed to understand these coercive structures. It is high time that justice opens it eyes and see the world more clearly and takes into account both liberty and equality.

While analyzing events, we have to see first whether the parties involved are equally placed in social hierarchy, whether they are equally represented in power structures, what are the social realities of that particular community, who is dominant, and who is marginalized. Understanding privilege is essential to understanding justice.

Another issue that is prevalent is that people who are in the most powerful places in the hierarchy are often very keen to figure out the coercive practices that exist in the communities which are placed at the bottom and call them out, but are completely silent of exploitation caused by the power structures that they are part of. The talks about Dalit and Black patriarchy, backwardness of superstitions and tribal rituals, performance of practices which are considered uncivilized and oppressive are part of such observations. But what they fail to understand is that most of these practices are a reflection of all the oppressive systems which exist around these marginalized and underprivileged communities. When communities live in a deeply unequal society, graded

inequality and hierarchical systems will emerge within those communities too. That is why Dalit patriarchy is considered a result of Brahminical patriarchy. Nothing gets created in isolation.

To start scrutinizing these hierarchies, we need to first address the marginalization and underrepresentation of these communities and destroy the power structures causing it. Affirmative action to bring a redistribution of power to those communities who are underrepresented in positions of power is a way to reduce these inequalities. So, the talk about liberty and equal opportunities against these measures by those who already enjoy privilege shows their lack of understanding of the social reality in the society. True liberty can only be achieved when all the power is distributed equally to everyone democratically. Freedom cannot exist in a society that has coercive systems of power hierarchy. Any such freedom becomes just the freedom of the dominant community to oppress the underprivileged.

When a person of minority or depressed class commits an act of violence against someone who is placed higher in hierarchy, they are doing it by pushing every system of power that is trying to drown them into submission. These systems are just to aid violence of those on top to freely execute violence on those at the bottom and stop them from reacting against the top. Basically, it is aiding violence in one and suppressing in another, therefore we can't equate violence of both these types. An example is that violence and looting during the BLM riots by protestors cannot be equated and condemned like the violence and police brutality unleashed on the black people by the state power.

Another liberty that is often used to suppress and demonize minorities is the Right to free speech. Any statement made by members of the dominant community would be considered free speech and should be free from backlash and scrutiny while anything that is questioning the power hierarchies will be considered as blasphemy. Most of the time, the free speech is used as an immunity to harass and demonize marginalized communities. Ideally, all speech should be free in a free society, but in an unequal society with graded inequality on different basis, those in power need to understand the responsibility to not harass these marginalized sections. In an unequal society, the speech of the powerful can have disastrous effect on those who are underprivileged as we have seen by the hate speeches being used to ignite violence against Dalits, Muslims and women recently.

The reach and impact of each person is related to the privilege they have, and when they make comments on the depressed communities in the name of free speech, it adversely affects these communities. Since the advent of social media, many bigoted comments by these privileged people are called out and criticized because of the democratizing power of these mediums, and the sudden push back these privileged people face for their comments is often cited as an attack on free speech. When a person who is underprivileged makes the same comment, it can be easily cited as free speech and let off, but in an unequal society, the privileged and dominant people shouldn't get away with making such responses and should be made answerable to these crimes. Example, when an internationally renowned billionaire author makes hate speech targeting a marginalized community and faces backlash for it, it is democracy trying to hold those who enjoy power and privilege accountable for their actions. If they want the true right to free speech, first they have to create a society where all people are equal and share equal power. Till then, since all people are not equal, all speech is also not equal. The impact matters, and they should be ready to face the consequences for their bigoted remarks.

Because most of the time, freedoms are only used by the oppressors to oppress the oppressed, freedom is becoming the freedom of the oppressor. That is the reason why minorities are to be

granted exclusive rights to ensure equality so that when principles of liberty can be enjoyed by everyone. For example, there is such a huge cry over criminalizing marital rape due to its potential for misuse, but the reality of the patriarchal society should put the women rights above men's fears.

An action or performance becomes a symbol of oppression only depending on the social reality of the society where the action is performed. The same act can be considered as both an act of hatred and as an assertion of freedom. Religion and practice of religion is a very complex phenomenon, and any analysis of it here is going to be an oversimplified version. People have various reasons for practicing religion and right to practice religion is a fundamental right. Most religions have internal hierarchies within it like caste, gender, class and many practices can be called backward and oppressive. But when we are scrutinizing these hierarchies and practices, we should not isolate these from the external hierarchies that exist in the society. Also, we cannot stand outside the realm of those who actually go through these experiences and judge them. Any discussing of whether these practices are coercive or not should include those who actually are impacted by these practices. For example, burning of Quran by feminists in Iran can be accepted as act of rebellion against coercive system of patriarchy imposed by the Government, but burning of Quran by Neo-fascist xenophobic elements in a European nation where Muslims are a minority are targeted and attacked cannot be accepted. Even though both acts are the same, our reaction to both should be different based on the social realities and oppressive power structures present there.

Underprivileged people are often deemed backward and attacked by privileged for their lack of education. They forget that these people are trapped in poverty and lacking education due to the very same systems of power which grants education and power to the privileged class, caste, and gender. People who are underprivileged practice superstitions and are deeply religious because they are marginalized. Some people argue that even privileged people are deeply religious and follow rituals. Even though the practice of religion is a matter of individual faith and every person has their own reason to follow them, the act of demeaning and belittling one practice as superstition and another as spirituality is based on the position of power they hold in these hierarchies. Most religions respect the social hierarchies present in the society and codify them as rituals so that it doesn't oppose those power structures. The extreme forms of patriarchy and casteism found in various religions are an example of this. Spirituality and religiosity are very complex processes with so many factors involved that we can't generalize the reason why people follow them. Still, the reasons for a privileged person to be religious is different from that of the marginalized. Religions help form communities of mutual aid which the underprivileged seek to survive the everyday oppression they suffer under all the coercive hierarchies they live under and hence, like every religion, these rituals form a part of their strong inter community bond. They are forming these kinships as an act of solidarity to the community which recognizes them as human beings.

To categorize people as backward and stupid for following these rituals further aids their marginalization. Of course, there are rituals within these communities which are highly patriarchal and oppressive to some sections, but these again, are a reflection of other forms of hierarchies that are present around them. Studies have shown that tribal communities were largely egalitarian before they were assimilated into "**civilization**".

If we want them to forego these superstitions or rituals, we need to stop blaming them and fight to abolish the hierarchies which systematically denies them access to education and information.

If we want to fight for rationality to help these people, fight the social hierarchies that force them to remain in darkness. One more important point to raise here is about what we consider as valuable knowledge and information. Only the information generated and distributed by those who hold power is considered as valuable and the knowledge which is held by tribals and other marginalized sections are considered backward and superstitious.

Another example of how we analyze a situation based on the social reality is with the issue of wearing a head cover (burqa or hijab) by Muslim women. In a place where it is forced by the patriarchal power structures, it should be condemned. But in places where it is worn out of personal choice, it cannot be. Many believe that those women who chose to wear hijab is doing so because of internalized misogyny and are pulling back the feminist movement. We cannot analyze an action purely on the basis of the act in itself and using our ideas of how people should behave without knowing their realities. When we see that a person is doing something that doesn't make sense to us, we should be trying to think about the power relations involved and see where the person is positioned with respect to it. In places of oppressive orthodox theocratic regimes which force women to wear it, it is symbol of oppression. In places when xenophobia is rampant and the mutual aid and solidarity among Muslims is built to form a community to ensure their safety, wearing it is a symbol of sisterhood and community, a symbol of hope and unity. Of course, forcing someone to wear hijab is wrong, but people should realise what exactly is forcing them, in one case it is the oppressive religious indoctrination which is forcing it, on the other side, it is the oppression and xenophobia and discrimination and fear created by the dominant community which is forcing these women to find refuge in their religion and community. The same thing can be oppressive and liberating depending on the situation. I apologize for using all these examples, since I am not a Muslim woman, I don't know what all can be the reasons for them to wear or not wear a hijab, but I understand that it should be personal choice and not by coercion. We can't decide what is oppressive for someone and what is not. All we can do is help them get the agency to decide it for themselves. The strength and perseverance of hijab clad Muslim women were visible when they lead the Anti CAA protests in Shaheen Bagh and elsewhere and it broke the myth of lack of agency in Muslim women.

Most privileged people decide what is oppression and what is liberty for someone else without actually trying to talk to the people involved and and try to force their ideas of freedom on people who are underprivileged. They are not ready to do the hard work of actually introspecting the power hierarchies that keep them in positions of privilege. They believe that people are inherently stupid and they need to be taught what is good and better for them. They consider themselves to be saviors, almost like "white man's burden" used by Europeans to colonize the world. What they should instead realise is that just providing equality in society by destroying the coercive power structures is sufficient for people to find meaning and understanding of liberty themselves, for liberty is so innate to human nature.

This is similar to how rich people in a capitalist society blame the poor for their poverty. They happily ignore the power structures present that systematically harasses and marginalize people and also forget their own privilege. They dismantle all social security networks that are installed for social and economic mobility in the name of free market and recreate forms of oppression and coercion to extract labour from the underprivileged in forms equivalent to slavery. They masquerade debt traps as loans, monopolize industries, destroy democracy, commodify education and healthcare, create an army of unemployed low skilled workers as a reserve to drive wages down. All these acts of coercion are made legal through lobbying and bribing elected leaders

and state machinery. So instead of questioning these powers of exploitation, when we are only focused on rise in crimes and demands more policing, it just shows our lack of understanding and even willful ignorance of privilege.

Now coming to other side, there are few people that are too much addicted to idea of equality that they want a proletariat revolution immediately according to their terms and ideals. They see every struggle only through lens of class and ignore all the other social hierarchies which exist. They too are blind to the social realities and power equations and are haste to put the blame on the people themselves and assume that these people don't have the intelligence or agency to break the shackles themselves. So instead of educating the people and helping them realise their voices and identifying their chains, they want to be the leaders and saviors, **voice of the voiceless**, but what they are doing is snatching away the voice of the oppressed people and using them as mere pawns in their own rise to power. Since most of these saviors come from the dominant social and gender group, the equation of power remains unchanged even if agitation happens as the decision-making power still resides in the hands of the few. The right way to proceed is to be patient with the people and try to understand the structural hierarchies present in the society and also the forces of coercion which are subjecting these people to remain ignorant of their oppression and helping them realise their voice themselves, helping them identify what true democracy is and how to make and take decisions of their lives themselves instead of dictating to them what they ought to do.

Forcing an ideology in itself is oppressive. Instead teach people to recognize hierarchies of oppression and let them emancipate themselves. If the hierarchy is forcing them into servitude, then support them in breaking those hierarchies instead of diminishing them for being weak. For example, forcing Uighur Muslims into giving up their religious practices forcefully is a human right violation. If there are issues in the religion, let people identify it themselves and choose the change they want. Creating an environment free of coercion and force is essential for independent thought and development of human mind and rationality. Instead of deeming people as stupid and forcing change upon them, the people should be given resources to develop critical thinking.

It is easier to just lead people from the front as heroes, it is much harder to spend time and effort to create a culture of participatory democracy where people don't need leaders and they can decide what their future will be on their own and be free from all forms of coercive structures. We must give up on the idea of saviors who will come and save the poor and downtrodden. All humans have the understanding and agency to decide their lives themselves. Effort must be put in by to bring out that innate ability in people so that they can decide intelligently for themselves rather than casting these people as incapable of decision making and deciding what is good for them. Hero worship and blind allegiance to an ideology/person can itself create an authoritarian regime. However altruistic and benevolent and egalitarian it is, the idea of democracy is murdered and liberty will be non-existent in such a system where power is centralized. People don't need a party or a group of intellectuals to decide how to live their life. If you want to help people, first understand the hierarchies that oppress them, then help them identify these hierarchies and power structures, and help them create a democratic culture of decision making and distribution of power which helps them destroy these power structures.

“Educate, Agitate, Organize” – B R Ambedkar

This should be the way to go forward. The time for developing a culture of collective democratic thinking in all spheres of life, be it social, political, or economical is essential. Democratic decision making by decentralization and equal distribution of power is the only way to counter these power structures. Freedom and equality cannot be forced on people. Each person should decide what is freedom themselves and the community of free individuals will decide what true equality is. The recent anti-CAA, BLM and farmers protests has shown us an era of leaderless struggles based on solidarity and mutual aid.

All privilege results from some form of hierarchy. Class privilege stems from economic hierarchy, caste privilege comes from social structure which supports a caste hierarchy, gender privilege comes from patriarchy and so on. Analyzing a situation or event purely based on the that incident without recognizing the hierarchies involved is doing injustice towards the ones who are underprivileged and remain lower in the hierarchy. It will be better for society when each of us starts recognizing the actual social conditions and power relations which exist and then recognize the issue and try to solve it. Being willfully blind to these power relations and claiming to be neutral or impartial is just aiding the established hierarchy. Being neutral in an unequal society is injustice.

Most people are oppressed by one hierarchy or another, and they almost always identify these structures, but they are still blind to the privileges they have in another hierarchy. For example, Upper class/caste women suffer from patriarchy but are blind to their class/caste privilege, lower caste men can recognize caste but can be blind to patriarchy. Being blind of our privileges stops us from scrutinizing and identifying all the different forms of hierarchies that exist around us and divides us internally in our fight against oppression. The understanding of the hierarchies that oppresses us should be translated to understanding of the other hierarchies which exist elsewhere. Every power structure or hierarchy need to be scrutinized for their legitimacy and all coercive hierarchies should be dismantled for there to be a free and equal society. We need to understand as long as any of these hierarchies exist, we will never be truly free and equal.

No discussion about rights and justice is complete if it excludes the demands and views of the people who are most exploited due to it. We cannot create a just and free world from a top down approach forcing our ideals of liberty on people. We should stop monopolizing information and education so that each individual will be able to assert and decide for themselves what is in their best interests.

“Liberty without equality is privilege and injustice, equality without liberty is slavery and brutality” – Mikhail Alexandrovich Bakunin

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