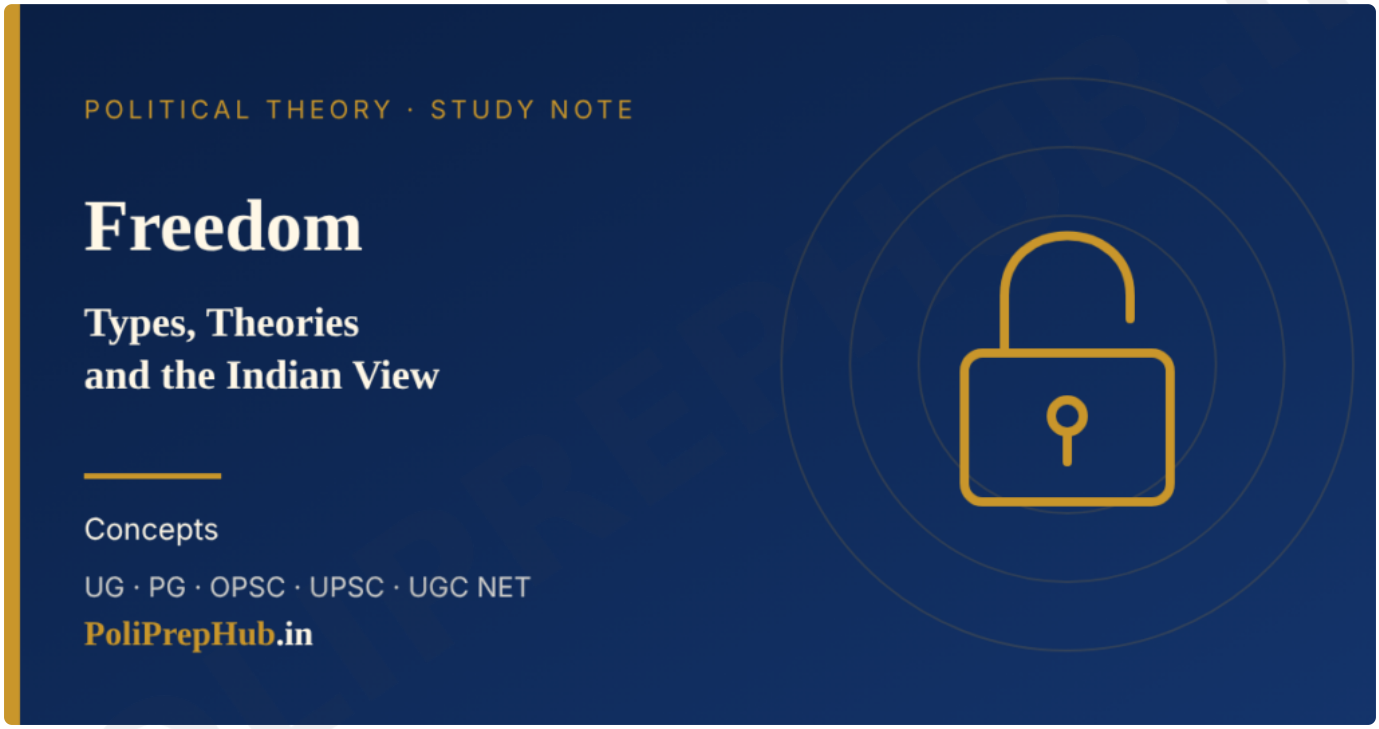
POLITICAL THEORY

Freedom: Meaning, Types, Theories and the Indian Perspective

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • November 11, 2026 • 38 min read



Few ideas have stirred human beings as deeply as freedom. Wars have been fought for it, empires have fallen because of the demand for it, and the constitutions of modern states begin by promising it. A farmer who is free to choose his crop, a student who is free to choose her subject, a citizen who is free to criticise the government and a nation which is free from foreign rule all enjoy freedom, but in different senses. In everyday speech, freedom seems to mean the absence of restraint, the power to do as one likes. But a little thought shows that a society in which each person could do whatever he liked would soon be a society in which the strong would rule the weak, and in which few could really be free.

Freedom in political theory is therefore a more careful idea, which asks what kinds of restraint are justified and what conditions allow a person to live as his own master.

The word liberty is used in political theory with nearly the same meaning as freedom, and in this note, the two terms are used together. Freedom is closely tied to rights, equality, law and justice, and it has been the central value of liberalism. Questions about freedom arise whenever we ask how far the state may interfere in the life of the individual, how far society may demand obedience, and what a person needs in order to make real choices. In this note, the meaning, features, kinds and theories of freedom are explained, with the limits on freedom and the Indian perspective.

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1. Meaning and definitions of freedom

The English word freedom comes from the Old English *freodom*, and liberty from the Latin *libertas*, which meant the status of a free person as against a slave. In its simplest sense, freedom is the condition of a person who is not under the control of another, and who can act according to his own will and choice. Political theory separates two things which are joined in the word: the absence of external obstacles to action, and the presence of the means and the capacity to act. A man who is not forbidden to travel, but has no money for the ticket, is free in the first sense and unfree in the second.

Scholar	Definition in brief
J. S. Mill	Liberty means the freedom to pursue our own good in our own way, so long as we do not deprive others of theirs
Harold Laski	Liberty is the eager maintenance of that atmosphere in which men have the opportunity to be their best selves
Thomas Hobbes	Liberty is the absence of external impediments to motion
John Locke	Freedom is not a liberty for every man to do what he lists, but to dispose of his person and possessions within the law
Montesquieu	Liberty is the right of doing whatever the laws permit
Isaiah Berlin	Negative liberty is freedom from interference; positive liberty is the wish to be one’s own master
T. H. Green	Freedom is a positive power or capacity of doing or enjoying something worth doing or enjoying
Gerald MacCallum	Freedom is always of some agent, from some constraint, to do or become something
Amartya Sen	Freedom is the real opportunity to achieve what a person has reason to value, the capability to lead the life one wants
Philip Pettit	Freedom is non-domination: not being subject to the arbitrary will of another
Rousseau	Obedience to a law one prescribes to oneself is liberty

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Seeley	Liberty is the opposite of over-government

Mill on liberty. John Stuart Mill, in *On Liberty* (1859), defined liberty as the right of an individual to pursue his own good in his own way, so long as he does not try to deprive others of theirs or impede their efforts. He held that the only purpose for which power can rightfully be exercised over a member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, physical or moral, is not a sufficient reason for interference. This is called the harm principle.

Laski on liberty. Harold Laski, in *A Grammar of Politics*, described liberty as the absence of restraints upon the existence of those social conditions which, in modern civilisation, are the necessary guarantees of individual happiness. By this, he meant that liberty is not merely the absence of restraint, but the presence of those social conditions, such as education, work and rights, in which a person can be his best self. He held that liberty is therefore always a matter of degree, and must be made equal for all.

Seeley and Barker. J. R. Seeley, in *Introduction to Political Science*, held that liberty is the opposite of over-government, which stresses the negative side. Ernest Barker held that liberty has a negative side, which is freedom from interference, and a positive side, which is the freedom to develop the self, and that in a state, liberty is the product of law.

Hobbes and Locke. Thomas Hobbes, in *Leviathan*, gave a physical definition of liberty as the absence of external impediments to motion, so that a man is free to the extent that nothing stops him from doing what he is able to do. John Locke, in the *Second Treatise*, took a different view, that freedom under law is not a liberty to do as one pleases, but a liberty to follow one’s own will in all things where the law has not forbidden, free from the arbitrary will of another. For Locke, where there is no law there is no freedom.

Berlin on liberty. Isaiah Berlin, in his lecture “Two Concepts of Liberty” (1958), separated the negative sense, in which a person is free to the extent that no one interferes with his activity, and the positive sense, in which a person is free when he is his own master, guided by his own reason and purposes. He held that the positive idea is open to abuse, since a ruler may claim to know the true or higher self of the people and force them to be free.

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Sen on freedom. Amartya Sen, in *Development as Freedom* (1999), argued that freedom is both the end and the means of development. He defined freedom as the capability of persons to lead the lives they have reason to value, and spoke of five instrumental freedoms: political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees and protective security. For Sen, poverty is a deprivation of capabilities, and a hungry person is unfree even if no one forbids him anything.

Pettit on freedom as non-domination. Philip Pettit, in *Republicanism* (1997), revived the republican idea of freedom as the absence of domination, which means that a person is free when no one has the capacity to interfere arbitrarily in his choices, even if the person does not in fact interfere. A slave with a kind master is still unfree, because the master has the power to interfere. This differs from the liberal idea in that mere non-interference is not enough.

Freedom and the related ideas.

Concept	Meaning	Difference from freedom
License	Unrestrained action without regard to others	Freedom is limited by the rights of others; license is abuse of freedom
Rights	Claims recognised by society and the state	Rights are the specific guarantees of freedom
Equality	Equal status, treatment and opportunity	Equality provides the equal conditions in which freedom is enjoyed by all
Autonomy	Self-rule, acting by one’s own reason	Autonomy is the inner side of freedom; freedom also needs outer conditions
Independence	Freedom of a nation or person from outside control	National independence is one form of political freedom
Power	Capacity to act or to influence others	Power of the state may limit freedom, and power of the person is part of positive freedom
Anarchy	Absence of government	Anarchy removes law and therefore the security on which freedom depends

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2. Nature and characteristics of freedom

Freedom is easy to feel but difficult to define. Its main characteristics, as found in political theory, are given below.

- **Absence of arbitrary restraint.** Freedom means that a person is not subject to the arbitrary command or force of others. A worker who can leave his job is freer than a bonded labourer who cannot. Restraints which are lawful, equal and for the good of all, such as traffic rules, are not seen as taking away freedom, but arbitrary restraints are.
- **Presence of opportunity and means.** Freedom is not only the absence of obstacles, but also the presence of conditions in which a person can make real choices. The right to education means little to a child who has to work to eat. Green, Laski and Sen all stress this positive side of freedom, which is why the modern state provides schools, health care and employment.
- **Exists only in society and under law.** A person alone on an island has no freedom in the political sense, since there is no one to restrain or protect him. In society, law gives equal freedom by preventing the strong from dominating the weak. Locke said that where there is no law, there is no freedom, and Montesquieu said that liberty is the right to do what the laws permit.
- **Limited by the freedom of others.** Freedom is not license. My freedom to swing my arm ends where your nose begins, as the common saying goes. The freedom of each is to be consistent with the like freedom of all, which is the equal liberty principle of Mill and of Rawls.
- **Linked with choice and responsibility.** A free person has the power to choose, and also bears responsibility for the choice. A person who is forced to act is not held responsible in the same way. This is why the law excuses acts done under compulsion and why democracy trusts citizens to make decisions at the ballot box.
- **Has an inner and an outer side.** The outer side is freedom from external control, and the inner side is the power of the person to rule himself by reason and conscience, and not by passion, fear or habit. Rousseau, Kant and Gandhi gave importance to the inner

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side, speaking of self-rule and self-control.

- **Universal in claim.** Freedom is claimed for all persons, and not for a class or race. The movements against slavery, colonialism and caste were based on the claim that all human beings are entitled to freedom. A freedom enjoyed by a few at the cost of the many is a privilege.
- **Means and end together.** Freedom is valued as an end in itself, because a free life is a human life, and as a means, because it allows a person to develop his talent and society to progress through discussion and experiment. Mill defended freedom of thought and speech as the way by which truth is discovered.
- **A matter of degree and of context.** No one is completely free or completely unfree. A citizen of a democracy may have wide political freedom but little economic freedom, and the reverse may be true elsewhere. The degree of freedom changes with time, place and the stage of development of a society.
- **Needs protection by institutions.** Freedom is secured by constitutions, rights, independent courts, free press and elections. Where these are weak, freedom is easily lost. The saying that eternal vigilance is the price of liberty expresses this need.
- **Connected with equality.** Freedom for all requires some equality, since great differences of wealth and power make the freedom of the poor unreal. Laski held that liberty is not possible without equality, and Ambedkar placed liberty, equality and fraternity together as a unity.
- **Dynamic and expanding.** The content of freedom grows as new conditions arise. The freedom of the eighteenth century was largely about religion, speech and property, and the freedoms of today also cover privacy, information, the environment and the rights of women, children and minorities.

3. Dimensions and types of freedom

Kinds of freedom according to the sphere of life.

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Kind	Meaning	Examples
Natural liberty	Freedom of man in the state of nature, before government	Described by Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau; limited only by natural law
Personal (individual) liberty	Freedom of the person from arbitrary arrest, detention and harm; freedom to live one's own life	Life, bodily integrity, privacy, choice of dress, food, partner
Civil liberty	Freedoms enjoyed as a member of civil society, protected by law	Freedom of speech, assembly, association, movement, religion, property, fair trial
Political liberty	Freedom to take part in the government of the country	Right to vote, to stand for election, to hold office, to criticise the government, to form parties
Economic liberty	Freedom from want and exploitation, and freedom of economic activity	Right to work, fair wages, freedom to choose a trade, freedom of contract, security against unemployment
Social liberty	Freedom from social discrimination and the full enjoyment of social life	Equality of status, abolition of untouchability, freedom from gender discrimination
Religious liberty	Freedom to follow, practise or change one's faith, or to have none	Freedom of conscience, worship, propagation
Moral liberty	Freedom of the person to follow his reason and conscience	Rousseau's moral freedom; Kant's autonomy
National liberty	Freedom of a nation from foreign rule; self-determination	Freedom movements against colonial rule; independence
International liberty	Freedom and equality of states in the world community	Sovereign equality of states, freedom of the seas
Domestic liberty	Freedom within the family and household	Freedom of women to study, work and choose marriage

Negative and positive freedom. Isaiah Berlin made this distinction the most discussed in the theory of freedom.

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Point	Negative freedom	Positive freedom
Question asked	What is the area in which I am left alone?	Who or what controls me; am I my own master?
Meaning	Absence of interference or obstacles from others	Capacity and opportunity for self-direction and self-realisation
Role of the state	Should be limited to protecting life, liberty and property	May act to provide conditions, such as education and welfare
Main supporters	Hobbes, Locke, Bentham, Mill, Hayek, Nozick, Berlin	Rousseau, Hegel, Green, Marx, Laski, Sen
Main danger	Neglects the poor, who have no means to use their freedom	May be used to justify coercion in the name of the “real self” or higher good
Example	Freedom of speech with no censorship	Right to education that enables a person to speak with understanding

Berlin held that negative liberty is the safer idea, because positive liberty has been used by tyrants who claimed that they were forcing people to be free. Critics, such as Charles Taylor and Gerald MacCallum, answered that the two cannot be separated so sharply. MacCallum argued that all freedom is a triadic relation, which means that it is always the freedom of some agent, from some constraint, to do or become something. The dispute between the two concepts is therefore often a dispute about which constraints and which goals should be counted.

Freedom as non-domination (republican freedom). A third idea, from Roman and Renaissance republican thought, and revived by Philip Pettit and Quentin Skinner, holds that freedom is the absence of domination, which means of the standing capacity of others to interfere arbitrarily. A person who depends on the goodwill of a master is not free, even if the master never interferes. This idea supports checks on power, the rule of law and a mixed constitution.

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Freedom as capability. Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum hold that freedom is the real capability to achieve valuable functionings, such as being nourished, educated, healthy and taking part in the life of the community. This view brings freedom close to the idea of development and human rights.

Other pairs of concepts.

Pair	Meaning
Individual and collective freedom	Freedom of the person, and the freedom of a group or a people to follow its culture and to govern itself
Freedom to and freedom from	Freedom to do something, such as to vote; freedom from something, such as hunger or fear. Franklin Roosevelt named four freedoms in 1941: of speech, of worship, from want and from fear
Formal and substantive freedom	Formal freedom is the legal permission to act; substantive freedom is the actual power to do so
Internal and external freedom	Freedom from inner compulsion, such as ignorance and passion; freedom from outside force

4. Theories of freedom

Classical liberal theory. The early liberal thinkers saw freedom as the absence of interference by the state, and the protection of the individual’s sphere of life, liberty and property.

- **Hobbes.** He defined liberty as the absence of external impediments, and held that subjects keep freedom in the areas where the sovereign’s law is silent. Though he gave the sovereign absolute authority, his idea of liberty as lack of obstacles became the base of the negative concept.
- **Locke.** He held that natural liberty is the freedom to act within the law of nature, and that in civil society, freedom is under law made by consent. The purpose of law is to preserve and enlarge freedom, and a government which acts arbitrarily may be resisted.

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- **Montesquieu.** In *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), he held that political liberty is a tranquillity of mind arising from the opinion each person has of his safety, and that it can exist only where power checks power. This is the origin of the separation of powers.
- **Adam Smith and the economic liberals.** They argued for freedom of trade and contract, and held that individuals pursuing their own interests in a free market promote the general good. Later, Friedrich Hayek, in *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960), defended freedom as the absence of coercion, and saw the rule of law and the market as its safeguards, and Milton Friedman linked economic and political freedom.

Rousseau and the general will. Rousseau held that man is born free, and that civil society must be organised so that each, while uniting with all, obeys only himself and remains as free as before. This is possible when the citizens obey the general will, which they make themselves. Freedom is therefore obedience to a law which one has prescribed to oneself. Critics say that the idea can be misused to force a minority to follow what the majority or the rulers call the general will, which is the phrase to “force men to be free”.

Kant and moral autonomy. Immanuel Kant held that true freedom is autonomy, which means acting on the moral law that reason gives to itself, and not on desire or outside command. Freedom is the base of human dignity, and persons must be treated as ends and not as mere means. Kant also defined the legal freedom as the independence from the compelling will of another, in so far as it can coexist with the freedom of everyone else under a universal law.

J. S. Mill’s theory of liberty. In *On Liberty*, Mill defended individual freedom against both the government and the pressure of public opinion, which he called the tyranny of the majority. He gave the harm principle, that society may restrict a person’s liberty only to prevent harm to others. He set out three areas of freedom: freedom of thought and discussion, freedom of tastes and pursuits (including the plan of one’s own life), and freedom of combination among individuals. Mill gave four reasons for free speech: the silenced opinion may be true; it may hold a part of the truth; even a true view held without challenge becomes dead dogma; and the meaning of the doctrine is lost if not contested. He also defended individuality, that people should be free to experiment in living. In *The*

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Subjection of Women, he applied the same principle to the legal subjection of women. Critics point out that the distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding acts is hard to keep, since most acts affect others, and that he applied the principle only to civilised societies, which is an imperial prejudice.

Idealist and positive liberty: Hegel and Green. Hegel held that freedom is realised in the rational state, and that true freedom is obedience to reason in the laws and institutions. T. H. Green, in his lecture “Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract” (1881), held that freedom is a positive power or capacity of doing or enjoying something worth doing or enjoying, in common with others. He said that the state may remove obstacles to this freedom, such as ignorance, bad housing and drink, and so justified factory acts, public education and public health measures. This moved liberalism from the minimal state to the welfare state.

Marxist theory. Marx held that in class society, the freedom of the market conceals the real unfreedom of the worker, who is free to sell his labour but is forced to do so for a living, a condition he called wage slavery. Freedom in the bourgeois sense of the right of private property is the freedom of the owners. Real freedom needs the end of exploitation and alienation, and the control of production by the associated producers, so that, in the words of the *Communist Manifesto*, the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all. Engels held that freedom is the recognition of necessity. Critics point out that socialist states have often restricted political freedoms in the name of economic freedom.

Berlin’s value pluralism. Isaiah Berlin held that liberty is one value among others, such as equality, justice and happiness, and these may conflict with each other. He defended negative liberty as the area which must be guarded against the state, and warned that the pursuit of a single perfect ideal, in the name of positive freedom, has led to tyranny. His pluralism holds that no single formula can settle conflicts of values.

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Libertarian theory. Robert Nozick, in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, held that individuals have rights of self-ownership which no one may violate, and that the state is justified only in a minimal form of protection against force, theft and fraud. Taxation for redistribution, he said, is like forced labour. Libertarians such as Hayek and Nozick see freedom primarily as non-coercion. Critics argue that this ignores the unfreedom caused by poverty and gives little protection to the weak.

Republican theory. Pettit and Skinner hold that freedom is the status of a citizen who is not dependent on the arbitrary will of another, and that it requires the rule of law, a mixed constitution and an active citizenry. The republican view is between the liberal and the positive views, since it asks for protection against domination without requiring a single idea of the good life.

Capability approach. Sen, in *Development as Freedom*, held that development is the expansion of real freedoms people enjoy. Poverty, tyranny, poor economic opportunities, systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities and intolerance are “unfreedoms”. Sen noted the famous observation that no famine has occurred in a functioning democracy with a free press, as free speech and elections make governments respond. Martha Nussbaum listed ten central capabilities that every person must have.

Feminist theory. Feminists note that the traditional account of liberty took the male head of the household as the free person, and left out the unfree position of women within the family. Mary Wollstonecraft argued for the education of women as the base of their freedom, and Mill for legal equality. Modern feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* (1949), and Carole Pateman, have shown how gendered social roles limit the choices of women, and have called for freedom within the private sphere, including freedom from domestic violence and reproductive choice.

Existentialist view. Jean-Paul Sartre held that human beings are condemned to be free, which means that a person always has a choice and cannot escape responsibility. Freedom here is the condition of human existence, which is a different sense from political freedom.

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Theory	Chief thinkers	Idea of freedom	Role of the state
Classical liberal	Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, Smith	Absence of interference; life, liberty, property	Limited, protects rights
General will	Rousseau	Obedience to self-made law	Expresses the general will
Moral autonomy	Kant	Acting on moral law given by reason	Protects equal freedom under law
Harm principle	Mill	Individuality and self-development	Interferes only to prevent harm to others
Idealist	Hegel, Green	Positive power to realise one’s best self	Removes obstacles; welfare measures
Marxist	Marx, Engels	Freedom from exploitation and alienation	Needs social ownership; the state to wither away
Value pluralist	Berlin	Negative liberty as a protected area	Limited, balances conflicting values
Libertarian	Hayek, Nozick	Non-coercion; self-ownership	Minimal state
Republican	Pettit, Skinner	Non-domination	Rule of law and checks on power
Capability	Sen, Nussbaum	Real opportunity to achieve valued functionings	Positive role in development
Feminist	Wollstonecraft, de Beauvoir, Pateman	Freedom in private as well as public life	Must address gender inequality

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5. Safeguards of freedom

Freedom needs protection, and the usual safeguards are these.

- **Written constitution and bill of rights,** which put basic freedoms beyond the reach of ordinary majorities.

- **Independent judiciary and judicial review,** which protect individuals through writs and strike down laws that violate freedom.
- **Rule of law,** under which no person is punished except for a breach of law, and all are equal before it.
- **Separation of powers and federalism,** which divide power and so prevent its abuse.
- **Democratic government,** with free and fair elections, an opposition and accountability of the government.
- **Free press and public opinion,** which expose abuse of power and keep citizens informed.
- **Economic security,** because a person who is hungry or dependent cannot use his freedom fully.
- **Education and a spirit of vigilance,** so that citizens know their freedoms and defend them.
- **Decentralisation and strong civil society,** where local bodies, unions, associations and movements provide ways of exercising and defending freedom.
- **Independent institutions,** such as human rights commissions, information commissions and election commissions.

6. Freedom, law, equality and limits

Freedom and law. Many people think that law is the enemy of freedom, because law restrains. Locke and Montesquieu answered that law is the condition of freedom, since without law each person would be at the mercy of every other, and the strong would rule. Law protects the freedom of each by limiting the freedom of all in equal measure, and a good law widens real freedom by securing life, property, contract and the equal rights of all. Yet law may also be unjust, as in the case of laws which deny freedom to some groups, such as slavery, apartheid or the colonial press laws. Freedom therefore requires laws which are made with the consent of the governed, are general and equal, and are made by a procedure under the constitution.

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Freedom and equality. Freedom and equality are sometimes seen as rivals. If people are left free, differences of talent and luck will lead to unequal wealth, and to restore equality the state must restrict freedom by taxation and regulation. Defenders of the market, such as Hayek, held that equality of results can be achieved only by coercion. Others, such as Laski, Tawney and Rawls, answered that freedom without equality is hollow, because those who are poor and uneducated have little freedom in practice. Tawney said that freedom for the pike is death for the minnows. Rawls tried to resolve the conflict by giving priority to equal basic liberties, and allowing inequalities only if they benefit the least advantaged. Ambedkar, in his speech of 25 November 1949, held that liberty, equality and fraternity form a union of trinity, and that to divorce one from the other is to defeat the very purpose of democracy.

Freedom and authority. Freedom needs authority, since a free society needs a state to enforce law, but authority must be limited. Many thinkers tried to find the right balance: Locke by consent and the right of resistance, Montesquieu by separation of powers, Mill by the harm principle, and modern constitutions by rights and judicial review.

Freedom and community. Communitarians such as Sandel and Taylor argue that freedom is not found by isolating the individual, but in taking part in a community, and that civic virtue and shared values are conditions of freedom. Liberals answer that community must not suppress individual dissent.

Limits on freedom. Since freedom is not license, it can be limited for certain reasons: the prevention of harm to others (Mill), the protection of public order and security, the protection of health and morals, and the rights and reputation of others. The limits must be set by law, be reasonable and proportionate, and must serve a legitimate purpose. Article 19(2) to (6) of the Indian Constitution list such grounds, which include the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the state, public order, decency or morality, contempt of court, defamation and incitement to an offence.

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7. The Indian perspective on freedom

Ancient and classical thought. The Indian tradition has a rich idea of freedom, though its centre of gravity is not political liberty as such. The Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita speak of *moksha* or *mukti*, which means liberation from the bonds of ignorance, desire and rebirth, and the Gita says that a person who acts without attachment to the fruits of his deeds is free. This is an inner freedom, close to the moral autonomy of Kant. Buddhism teaches release from suffering by self-discipline, and Jainism teaches the freedom of the soul from karma. In political life, early republics (*ganas* and *sanghas*) governed by assemblies, the village councils (*sabhas* and *samitis*), and the principle that the king ruled under dharma, set limits on arbitrary power. The *Arthashastra* of Kautilya placed the welfare and security of the subjects as the duty of the king. In society, however, the caste and gender hierarchies denied equal freedom to many.

Bhakti, Sufi and reformist currents. The Bhakti saints, such as Kabir, Ravidas, Basava, Mirabai and Tukaram, and Sufi teachers, held that all human beings are equal before God, and challenged caste and ritual authority, so that they expanded the freedom of conscience. Emperor Akbar’s policy of religious tolerance, and Ashoka’s edicts calling for respect for all sects, are examples of the political side of this tradition.

Colonial rule and the idea of freedom. British rule introduced liberal ideas such as the rule of law, the free press and representative institutions, which Indians used to demand freedom, while at the same time it denied political liberty to the people. The reformers of the nineteenth century, such as Raja Rammohan Roy, who defended freedom of the press and campaigned against sati, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotiba Phule and Savitribai Phule, saw social freedom for women and the lower castes as part of the larger freedom of the nation. Dadabhai Naoroji spoke of “swaraj” in 1906, and Tilak declared that swaraj is the birthright of Indians. In 1929, the Congress at Lahore declared the goal of *purna swaraj*, complete independence.

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Gandhi on freedom (swaraj). For Gandhi, swaraj was not just political independence, but self-rule at every level: of the individual over his own passions, of the village over its own affairs, and of the nation. In *Hind Swaraj* (1909), he held that real swaraj is self-control, and that to replace the English with Indians who rule in the same way would be English rule without the Englishman. He said that swaraj means the capacity to resist authority when it is abused, and defended non-violent civil disobedience as the means. He stressed that freedom is bound up with truth, non-violence and duty, and held that freedom without self-restraint becomes license. He also saw freedom as including the end of untouchability, the dignity of women and economic self-reliance through khadi and village industries.

Tagore on freedom. Rabindranath Tagore, in his writings and in the poem “Where the mind is without fear”, imagined a freedom of the mind, a country where knowledge is free and the mind is led forward into ever-widening thought and action. He criticised narrow nationalism and held that political freedom without freedom of spirit and education is hollow. He founded Santiniketan as an experiment in free education.

Nehru on freedom. Jawaharlal Nehru saw freedom as political independence, social and economic equality, and freedom of thought. In his speech “Tryst with Destiny” on 14 August 1947, he spoke of the end of an era and the promise to end poverty, ignorance, disease and inequality of opportunity. He linked freedom with the building of democratic institutions, scientific temper and planning for development.

Ambedkar on freedom. B. R. Ambedkar defined freedom in the context of the oppressed. He held that political freedom is of little worth to those who remain socially enslaved by caste. In *Annihilation of Caste*, he held that liberty includes freedom of movement, freedom of occupation, and freedom from the social system which fixes the status of a person by birth. He held that liberty, equality and fraternity, though named in the French Revolution, were drawn by him from the teaching of the Buddha and not from the Revolution. His key idea was that political democracy cannot last unless it is based on social democracy, and he warned that the contradiction of political equality and social and economic inequality would endanger the structure.

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M. N. Roy and radical humanism. M. N. Roy, after leaving Marxism, advanced the idea of radical humanism, based on the freedom of the individual as the measure of all social progress, and argued for a party-less democracy built on local committees of people.

Freedom in the Constitution of India.

- **The Preamble.** It secures to all citizens liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship, along with justice and equality, and fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual.
- **Article 19(1).** It guarantees six freedoms to citizens: speech and expression; assembly peaceably and without arms; association or unions; free movement throughout the territory of India; residence in any part; and practice of any profession or trade. The original seventh, on property, was deleted by the 44th Amendment.
- **Article 20.** It protects against retrospective criminal laws, double jeopardy and self-incrimination.
- **Article 21.** It states that no person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law. The Supreme Court has read it very widely.
- **Article 21A.** Free and compulsory education for children aged 6 to 14.
- **Article 22.** Protection against arrest and detention: to be told the grounds, to consult a lawyer, and to be produced before a magistrate within 24 hours, with special provisions for preventive detention.
- **Articles 25 to 28.** Freedom of conscience and the free profession, practice and propagation of religion, subject to public order, morality and health.
- **Articles 23 and 24.** Freedom from exploitation: ban on forced labour, trafficking and child labour in hazardous work.
- **Articles 29 and 30.** Cultural freedom of minorities.
- **Article 32.** The remedy of the Supreme Court for enforcement of these freedoms.
- **Directive Principles.** Economic and social aims of Part IV, such as an adequate livelihood, support the positive side of freedom.

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Landmark cases on freedom in India.

Case	Year	Main holding
Romesh Thappar v. State of Madras	1950	Freedom of speech includes freedom of circulation of publications; first major press freedom case
A. K. Gopalan v. State of Madras	1950	Narrow reading of personal liberty and preventive detention
Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India	1978	Law depriving liberty must be just, fair and reasonable; widened Article 21
Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala	1973	Basic structure; fundamental freedoms cannot be destroyed by amendment
ADM Jabalpur v. Shivkant Shukla	1976	During the Emergency, held that the right to move courts for enforcement of Article 21 could be suspended; later widely regarded as wrongly decided
Shreya Singhal v. Union of India	2015	Struck down Section 66A of the Information Technology Act as violating free speech
K. S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India	2017	Right to privacy as a part of life and personal liberty
Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India	2018	Decriminalised consensual same-sex relations between adults
Shayara Bano v. Union of India	2017	Set aside the practice of instant triple talaq
Indian Young Lawyers Association v. State of Kerala	2018	Women’s entry to the Sabarimala temple; equality and freedom of religion

The Emergency and later experience. The Emergency of 1975 to 1977 suspended many freedoms, imposed press censorship and led to detention of thousands without trial. It showed that formal constitutional rights are not enough, and that the vigilance of citizens, the courts and the press is needed. The people’s verdict of 1977 and the 44th Amendment of 1978, which made it harder to suspend rights under Articles 20 and 21, were a response.

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Present debates concern free speech and social media, sedition and security laws, internet shutdowns, privacy, freedom of the press, freedom of religion and conversion laws, the freedom of women to choose, the rights of minorities, and the balance between development and the freedom of tribal and local communities.

8. Importance and limitations of freedom

Importance.

- **Condition of human dignity.** To be free is to be treated as a person who can think and decide for himself, rather than as an instrument of others. Slavery and servitude deny this, and the struggle against them was a struggle for human dignity.
- **Allows development of personality.** Freedom of thought, expression, occupation and movement lets a person find and use his talents. Mill held that individuality is one of the elements of well-being, and that a society which suppresses it becomes stagnant.
- **Basis of democracy.** Democratic government depends on freedoms of speech, assembly, association and the vote. Without them, elections are a ritual, and citizens cannot hold rulers to account.
- **Search for truth and progress.** Free discussion allows errors to be corrected, and new ideas to be tried. Scientific, social and moral progress have depended on the freedom to question, as the history of science and reform shows.
- **Protection against tyranny.** Freedoms form a shield against the abuse of power by rulers, as seen in the freedom of the press, the right to a fair trial and freedom from arbitrary arrest.
- **Promotes economic growth and welfare.** Economic freedom, such as the freedom of occupation, contract and enterprise, encourages initiative. Sen has shown that political freedoms also help to prevent economic disasters, such as famines.
- **Supports pluralism and tolerance.** Freedom of conscience and expression lets different faiths, languages and cultures live together peacefully, and prevents the imposition of one view on all.

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- **Basis of national self-respect.** National freedom lets a people shape its own future and culture, and its achievement through freedom movements gave pride and self-confidence to colonised peoples.
- **Ethical value of self-rule.** The capacity to rule oneself by reason, as taught by Kant, Gandhi and the Gita, is a high human value which freedom makes possible.
- **Enables social reform.** Freedom to criticise customs and institutions has made possible the movements against caste, untouchability, sati, child marriage and discrimination against women.

Limitations and difficulties.

- **Disputed meaning.** The word freedom is used for very different things, so that people may agree in praising it and still disagree on what it requires. W. B. Gallie counted it among the essentially contested concepts.
- **Danger of license.** Unlimited freedom harms others, as in hate speech or pollution, and so freedom must be balanced with the rights of others and public order.
- **Conflict with equality and security.** Freedom may conflict with equality, as when property rights limit redistribution, and with security, as when surveillance is justified to prevent terrorism. No simple formula settles such conflicts.
- **Formal freedom without means.** Freedom may exist only on paper for the poor, the illiterate and the dependent. The legal freedom to contract does not protect a worker who has no alternatives.
- **Misuse of the positive idea.** The idea of freedom as self-mastery may be used by rulers to impose a particular idea of the good life, as Berlin warned.
- **Majority tyranny and social pressure.** Even where the law gives freedom, public opinion, caste, community or the market may restrict it, as Mill noted. Social boycott, honour-based violence and trolling on the internet are examples.
- **Cultural differences.** Societies differ in the importance they give to individual freedom and to community and duty, and the claim of universal freedom is sometimes seen as

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Western. Defenders reply that dignity and freedom are valued everywhere.

- **Uneven access.** Women, minorities, Dalits, tribal groups and the disabled often face barriers in using the freedoms the law gives them.
- **New threats.** Digital surveillance, data collection, concentrated media ownership and algorithmic control raise new risks to freedom, from private as well as public power.
- **Tension between individual and collective freedom.** The freedom of a group, such as a community's right to its customs, may conflict with the freedom of individuals within it, as in debates about personal laws and religious practices.

9. Critical analysis

The first and oldest question in the theory of freedom is whether it is a matter of the absence of interference or of the presence of power and opportunity. Berlin's distinction is useful, since it warns against a state which claims to know the real good of citizens and compels them to follow it. Yet the sharp division between the two ideas is hard to keep. Almost every limit on negative freedom, such as a law against theft, protects some other person's freedom, and almost every measure for positive freedom, such as compulsory schooling, restricts someone. MacCallum's triadic formula makes this clear: every statement of freedom names an agent, an obstacle and an end. The real disagreement, therefore, is about which obstacles count, and the poverty of the destitute worker, who is not stopped by any law but is still unable to choose, is the standard example that those who favour the positive view use.

The second question is the relation between freedom and the market. Hayek and Nozick defend the market as the expression of free choice, and see redistribution as coercion. Marxists, Greens and Sen answer that the market gives freedom only to those who have resources, and that unregulated markets create dependency, insecurity and environmental harm. The republican view of Pettit gives an interesting middle position, since it asks whether a person is dependent on the arbitrary will of another, such as a landlord or an employer, and so supports labour laws and social security without requiring a single view of the good life.

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The third question is about the limits of liberty. Mill’s harm principle is the best known guide, but it has been criticised, because it is hard to separate acts which concern only oneself from those which affect others, and because the notion of harm is itself disputed. Patrick Devlin argued that society may use law to protect its moral fabric, while H. L. A. Hart replied that immorality alone is not harm. The debates on hate speech, obscenity, blasphemy, privacy and surveillance in India and elsewhere repeat this argument. The courts apply the test of reasonable restriction and proportionality, but the outcome depends on the changing standards of the society.

The fourth question is about the Indian experience. The Indian tradition spoke of inner freedom, as in moksha and Gandhi’s swaraj, and of the limits of royal power by dharma, but also supported hierarchies of caste and gender. Ambedkar’s critique shows that the freedom promised by the nationalist movement had to include freedom from social domination, and the Constitution tries to join political liberty with social and economic justice. In practice, the formal freedoms in Part III are enjoyed unevenly, and laws on sedition, preventive detention and internet shutdowns, along with social pressures of caste and community, restrict them. At the same time, the judiciary has widened freedom through public interest litigation and the broad reading of Article 21. A critical student should therefore ask not only what the Constitution says, but who actually can use these freedoms.

Finally, new technologies have changed the meaning of freedom. Large companies collect data on every person and shape what he sees and buys, and states have new means of surveillance. These powers are not covered well by the older idea of freedom as protection against the state, and they support the republican concern with domination by private as well as public power. A modern theory of freedom must therefore include privacy, control of data and fair conditions of work, in addition to the older freedoms of speech, movement and religion.

10. Authors and books for UGC NET

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Author	Book or work	Main contribution on freedom
Thomas Hobbes	*Leviathan* (1651)	Liberty as absence of external impediments
John Locke	*Two Treatises of Government* (1689)	Freedom under law; natural liberty
Montesquieu	*The Spirit of the Laws* (1748)	Political liberty and separation of powers
J.-J. Rousseau	*The Social Contract* (1762)	Freedom as obedience to the general will
Immanuel Kant	*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785)	Freedom as moral autonomy
J. S. Mill	*On Liberty* (1859)	Harm principle; freedom of thought and individuality
T. H. Green	"Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract" (1881)	Positive freedom
Harold Laski	*Liberty in the Modern State* (1930); *A Grammar of Politics* (1925)	Liberty as conditions for the best self
Isaiah Berlin	"Two Concepts of Liberty" (1958)	Negative and positive liberty; value pluralism
Friedrich Hayek	*The Constitution of Liberty* (1960)	Freedom as absence of coercion; the rule of law
Gerald MacCallum	"Negative and Positive Freedom" (1967)	Triadic concept of freedom
Robert Nozick	*Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974)	Libertarian rights and the minimal state
John Rawls	*A Theory of Justice* (1971)	Priority of equal basic liberties
Philip Pettit	*Republicanism* (1997)	Freedom as non-domination
Quentin Skinner	*Liberty before Liberalism* (1998)	Republican freedom
Amartya Sen	*Development as Freedom* (1999)	Freedom as capability
Erich Fromm	*Escape from Freedom* (1941)	Psychological burden of freedom

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M. K. Gandhi	*Hind Swaraj* (1909)	Swaraj as self-rule and self-restraint
Rabindranath Tagore	*Nationalism* (1917)	Freedom of mind and critique of narrow nationalism
B. R. Ambedkar	*Annihilation of Caste* (1936)	Liberty, equality and fraternity; social democracy

11. Practice questions

Long answer questions

- Define freedom and discuss its nature, characteristics and kinds.
- Distinguish between negative and positive freedom with reference to Isaiah Berlin. Is the distinction sharp?
- Explain J. S. Mill’s views on liberty and the harm principle. How far are they valid today?
- Discuss the relationship between freedom and equality, and between freedom and law.
- Examine the Indian perspective on freedom with reference to Gandhi, Tagore, Ambedkar and the Constitution.

Medium answer questions

- Explain the republican idea of freedom as non-domination.
- Describe Amartya Sen’s idea of freedom as capability.
- What are the safeguards of freedom?
- Distinguish between freedom and license.
- Write a note on Gandhi’s idea of swaraj.
- Explain Green’s idea of positive freedom.

Short answer questions

- State the harm principle.
- What is meant by civil liberty?

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- What is MacCallum’s triadic concept of freedom?
- What is meant by moral freedom?
- What are the six freedoms under Article 19(1) of the Indian Constitution?

Very short answer questions

- Who wrote *On Liberty*?
- Who wrote “Two Concepts of Liberty”?
- Who wrote *Development as Freedom*?
- Name the Article of the Indian Constitution that protects life and personal liberty.
- Who said that freedom is the recognition of necessity?

Objective questions

1. The harm principle is associated with (a) Locke (b) Mill (c) Hobbes (d) Bentham.
2. The distinction between negative and positive liberty was made by (a) Berlin (b) Green (c) Hayek (d) Rawls.
3. Freedom as non-domination is the idea of (a) Pettit (b) Nozick (c) Hegel (d) Burke.
4. Hind Swaraj was written by (a) Tagore (b) Gandhi (c) Nehru (d) Tilak in 1909.
5. Freedom of speech and expression in India is guaranteed by (a) Article 14 (b) Article 19(1)(a) (c) Article 21 (d) Article 32.
6. The author of *The Constitution of Liberty* is (a) Hayek (b) Friedman (c) Mill (d) Laski.
7. Freedom as capability was developed by (a) Amartya Sen (b) John Rawls (c) Isaiah Berlin (d) Robert Nozick.
8. The case which held that procedure under Article 21 must be fair, just and reasonable is (a) A. K. Gopalan (b) Maneka Gandhi (c) Kesavananda Bharati (d) Shreya Singhal.

Analytical prompts

- Is a person who is poor and uneducated free, even if no law restricts him?

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- Should freedom of speech include the freedom to offend? Discuss with reference to Mill and Indian law.
- Can freedom and equality both be fully achieved, or must one be sacrificed for the other?
- How far does digital surveillance threaten freedom, and who should protect it?

Key takeaways

- Freedom is the condition in which a person is not subject to arbitrary control by others and has the opportunity to act according to his own choice.
- It is different from license, and is always limited by the equal freedom of others and by law.
- Freedom has many kinds: personal, civil, political, economic, social, religious, moral and national.
- Berlin separated negative and positive liberty; Pettit stressed non-domination; Sen stressed capability.
- Mill’s harm principle, Rousseau’s general will, Kant’s autonomy, Green’s positive freedom and Marx’s critique give the main theories.
- Freedom needs equality, law and institutions as its conditions and safeguards.
- In India, the tradition of moksha and swaraj, the thought of Gandhi, Tagore and Ambedkar, and Articles 19 to 22 shape the idea of freedom.
- Freedom is a contested and changing idea, which must be defended against new threats, such as surveillance and social pressure.

Twenty books for further reading

1. J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*
2. Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*
3. Friedrich Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*
4. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*

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5. Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*
6. Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*
7. Harold Laski, *Liberty in the Modern State*
8. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*
9. J.-J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*
10. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*
11. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*
12. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*
13. Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*
14. Ian Carter, *A Measure of Freedom*
15. M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*
16. Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism*
17. B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*
18. Granville Austin, *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation*
19. Rajeev Bhargava and Ashok Acharya (eds.), *Political Theory: An Introduction*
20. Andrew Heywood, *Politics*

Frequently asked questions

What is freedom in political theory? Freedom is the condition in which a person is not subject to arbitrary control by others and has the opportunity to make real choices and to develop himself.

What is the difference between freedom and license? Freedom is the liberty to act within limits set by the equal rights of others and by law, while license is unrestrained action that disregards the rights of others.

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What is the difference between negative and positive freedom? Negative freedom is the absence of interference by others, while positive freedom is the presence of the capacity and opportunity to act as one's own master.

What is Mill's harm principle? It says that the only reason for which power may rightfully be used against a member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.

What freedoms does Article 19 of the Indian Constitution give? It gives citizens the freedoms of speech and expression, of peaceful assembly, of association, of movement throughout India, of residence in any part, and of practising any profession or trade, subject to reasonable restrictions.

How did Gandhi understand freedom? Gandhi held that real freedom, or swaraj, is self-rule and self-restraint, beginning with the individual and the village, and not merely the transfer of political power from the British to Indians.

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