

THE HINDU

After 74 years of independence, can India truly be counted among the world's freest?

Annie Zaidi

August 14, 2021

Protecting my freedom means protecting my power to think, believe, act, speak as I choose. And I would be a fool to not protect it with my life
Squeeze your eyelids over your irises, until the inner mirror fogs over, and say the word 'freedom'. What image do you see?

I see a keen blue and bale upon bale of cottony white sky. Freedom to me is an unbroken expanse, full of light, full of beauty and unlimited potential. Like the sky, it is unfailingly present. Like the sky, it is simultaneously universal and particular, and forever in need of watching. It changes each hour of each day, and my slice of sky can grow black and thunderous even as it remains blue for another citizen in another town. Yet, the sky is comprised of the same materials everywhere.

What of freedom: what is it made of? In an article about the dangers of a philanthropy-centric approach to pressing problems rather than a rights-based one, political philosopher Gwilym David Blunt had posed an interesting question: 'Let's say a kindly benefactor offered you a better standard of living than that which you currently enjoy, or can realistically aspire to, and credibly promises to treat you very well. The only condition is that they would own you. Would you accept the offer?'

I know I would not. And yet, why? What is it about this word — freedom — that I am willing to pay for it with my life? Why did our ancestors pay the ultimate price? Thousands were executed in 1857 and in the 90 years that followed, tens of thousands lost precious years of youth and health as they were jailed, exiled, stripped of their properties. The word *gulaam*, slave, was used to describe the status of India before we won Independence in 1947. It is a question still worth asking: what made us feel enslaved?

'Legally free'

Most Indians were legally free while being part of the British empire. Many owned businesses, or joined the army or the civil service, or travelled to Europe to study. Many of our freedom fighters had studied law in Britain. Some were also free to declare political allegiance to an Indian prince rather than to the British crown. What does 'freedom' mean then?

Artists in Jammu carry a floral map in time for today's programme.

Artists in Jammu carry a floral map in time for today's programme. | Photo Credit: PTI
Freedom does not flow from Parliament. Britain had a Parliament and it enacted laws to the detriment of millions in South Asia. Shashi Tharoor writes in *An Era of Darkness* that India enjoyed a 25% share of the global textile trade in the early 18th century but once British traders turned 'rulers' — or 'governors' as they were described — they set about imposing trade monopolies leading to 'the first great deindustrialization of the modern world'. There are legends of weaving looms being smashed in Bengal and heavy tariffs imposed on Indian textiles exports while import duties were removed. Similarly, the British shipping industry petitioned Parliament and, in 1813, Tharoor writes, the law was changed so that lighter vessels (which applied to Indian ships) could not sail between the Indian colonies and the U.K. In 1814, Indian-built ships were denied British registration, so they could not trade with Europe or the U.S.

Farmers too were taxed to 'the utmost limit'. Where traditional elites had accepted agricultural produce as revenue, the British changed the rules so that only money was accepted, which made no allowances for crop failure. This led to large-scale rural indebtedness and famines. This was achieved through legal means; the right to collect revenue in India came through an act of Parliament.

This is why self-rule or swaraj was desirable. We needed a government that would suffer the consequences of the laws they enacted. We needed businessmen who did not ship off profits to foreign shores. We needed taxes to be spent locally.

Loss of autonomy

This is also why leaders like Gandhi asked Indians to destroy British-made textiles and to learn weaving. He was not driven by a blind hatred for anything foreign. He understood the problem: de-skilling and loss of autonomy. Weaving was a rejection of an unfree and unfair market, controlled by political forces that didn't care enough about the welfare of workers. The salt satyagraha was another such rejection of laws that hurt people.

Enslavement, impoverishment and discrimination are inextricably linked. If the essence of the colonial enterprise was a drain of wealth, the freedom struggle was a fight against inequality. Not only were the laws skewed against Indian industries and artisans, non-whites were kept out of senior-most positions in the armed forces and civil services. Sites of entertainment and travel were segregated. Such discrimination drew Indian elites into the struggle for freedom even at the cost of their lives and personal liberty. However, not all of them wanted to return to the lives their ancestors lived. True freedom is incompatible with inequity and Indian society was traditionally unequal. Before gaining self-rule, therefore, our view of the 'self' that could 'rule' had to change.

The leaders of the movement for Independence worked to safeguard and extend our freedoms through a Constitution that guarantees all citizens equal rights. They also endorsed affirmative action, land redistribution, access to water, and universal franchise as a way of making freedom real and not a hollow idea. India eventually became the world's largest democracy on the

strength of regular elections, which changed governments when they disappointed voters. Seven decades passed. Have we grown up to be counted among the world's freest people?

The Cato Institute is a public policy research organisation that measures human freedom, which it defines as 'a social concept that recognizes the dignity of individuals' or 'the absence of coercive constraint'. This index reflects a mix of personal and civic freedoms including free speech, the right to assembly, and religious and economic freedoms. Since impoverishment is linked to independence, it also measures how much citizens are paid, whether their jobs are in the formal economy with benefits, and the status of food, clothing and shelter. Rule of law is key, as is the question of whether the law applies to everybody, including state authorities.

The Human Freedom Index of 2020 ranks India at 111 of 162 nations. The highest-ranked countries have democracy and income and health safety nets. New Zealand came out on top (it should not surprise us that it was able to handle the COVID-19 crisis better than wealthier nations like the U.S.). Since the previous year's report, India dropped five places on the list, with a score of 6.43 on a scale of 0 to 10. Among South Asian nations, India scores lower than Indonesia, Malaysia and Nepal. On rule of law, we made no progress between 2008 and 2018. Over the same period, religious freedoms shrank from 6.7 to 5.0, and the freedom of identity and relationships shrank from 7.5 to 5.7.

Patterns from history

Yet another organisation, Freedom House, released its Freedom in the World report this year with expressions of concern about a global democratic decline. India was downgraded to 'partly free' (for comparison, China is listed as 'not free' since it is not a democracy). We were listed as 'free' just one year ago and our score was reported as 'the worst decline among the world's 25 largest democracies'. Frequent and extended Internet shutdowns, suppression of protests, and a discriminatory citizenship law were major reasons cited. The report acknowledged that elections were held, but it also pointed to criminal cases filed against students, attacks on journalists, weakening of academic freedom, the use of the sedition law, the scapegoating of Muslims during the pandemic, as well as the status of women.

We may dismiss international report cards, but we should recognise patterns from history. When we were not independent, the British government censored newspapers and arrested activists who criticised unfair laws. Police were used to quash civilian protests, often using brute force. How different are contemporary curbs on free speech and the state's treatment of dissenters and critics of government policies?

India has also dropped two places on the World Press Freedom Index, ranked 142 among 180 nations. Sweden, New Zealand and Switzerland were again among the top countries. On every index, it is obvious that democracy, personal and civic freedoms, and equality are intertwined.

An assault upon one strand damages the fabric as a whole, even if such an assault is supposedly approved by a majority. In its 2019 report, the Cato Institute had pointed out that political freedom does not mean unrestrained democracy. Instead, it was 'ideally some combination of the

division of power, limited government, decentralization, and structural characteristics designed to control the powers of the majority’.

The materials of which freedom is made are rule of law, equality before the law, access to justice, personal security, the right to diverse beliefs and practices. But one person’s freedom is defensible only so long as they are not assaulting another’s. If one set of people trample on the freedoms of another set, freedom itself loses meaning.

In India, authentic freedom — economic, personal, civic with easy access to services and judicial intervention — is not accessible to most. Adam Gondvi, an alias for Ram Nath Singh, a poet from Uttar Pradesh, wrote:

Sau mein sattar aadmi filhaal jab nash-

aad hain

Dil pe rakh ke haath kahiye desh kya

azaad hai

Kothiyon se mulk ke meyaar ko mat

aankiye

Asli Hindustan to futpaath pe aabaad hai

[Among a hundred men, when seventy

are miserable

Hand on heart, is the country free?

Do not judge by the number of

mansions

Real India lives on the pavement]

I think of this verse every time I walk past clusters of people living on the street, sometimes with no more than a string cot and a bundle of clothes hooked on a tree branch. I don’t know whether Adam Gondvi wrote these words in the 1970s, 80s, or 90s, but it was doing the rounds on social media in 2020. The question remains valid. How do we measure the nation’s freedom?

Web of power

Freedom is tied up with a web of power that determines how much a citizen's labour and profit are used for their benefit, how taxes are spent, and how they are treated when they disagree with those more powerful. The truth is, hundreds of millions live in a constant state of insecurity, fighting for survival, with equality not even discussed as a goal worth chasing.

Our gut and our history books should tell us that inequality and the curtailment of the freedoms of one set of people is usually in aid of disproportionate assumption of power by a narrow elite that gains control of ports, civic infrastructure, land, water, forests, mines, and, ultimately, food. The only way to remain free is to keep a sharp eye trained on who profits at whose expense, and who is punished for upholding the principle of equality.

We can do this, or we can fail. The sky won't fall, but our share of sunshine and rain can be looted.

It has taken me a long time to see freedom as a kind of omniscience. It simply is, like the earth, like air and sky. If one person, one ethnicity, one nation, is un-free, it does not mean that freedom itself has disappeared from the face of the planet. It just means that someone's access to it has been cut off. A man in prison may long for a walk under the stars at midnight. Or a woman might long to do the same and be denied it in the name of her security. The stars, the aching beauty of the night, the cool air remain the preserve of only those who may walk unchallenged.

To return to Blunt's question, the answer is no, I would not surrender my freedom to any kindly benefactor. Not even if I was starving. If I am owned, I am made unequal, and inequality will only deepen my impoverishment. To be un-free strips me of my right to profit from my labours, to choose where I live and with whom, and what to do with my body and mind.

The philosopher John Locke argued that man (or, a human being) is naturally free, and remains so, as long as he may think or move, or not, as he prefers. Preference or choice distinguishes a free man from an un-free one. Protecting my freedom means protecting my power to think, believe, act, speak as I choose. And I would be a fool to not protect it with my life.