

Q: Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains”; discuss this quote of Rousseau.

“Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains” the opening sentence of Rousseau’s book ‘the Social Contract’ summarises his entire philosophical thoughts about nature and fate of man (women as well) in modern society.

This quote of Rousseau re-affirms his views expressed in his two discourses; first discourse on Science and Arts and second discourse on originality of equality. In those discourses, Rousseau held the view that modern civilization, the science, literature, civil society, and private property have actually corrupted and de-based the nobility and purity of human nature. They had the effect to make man competitive, egoistic, selfish, jealous, cruel, and immoral. Man lost both his political and personal liberty in modern society.

Man is born as free and equal soul. He is neither rich nor poor, neither man or woman (yes! sex is different from being man/women), neither master or slave, neither black or white. But as he grows and gains his consciousness and frames his identity, he feels the chain of bondage everywhere. His identity and status, privileges and rights, his entire existence is determined by social conventions about sex, colour, race, nationality, wealth, success, etc. Man finds himself dominated by fellow man. He himself being denied equal rights, resources, privileges, opportunities. He found himself bound by the chains of oppressive laws not of his own making. Those laws are made by someone else to keep him in chains.

Not only in political domain he found himself in chains but also in private domain, in the civil society- marriages, family, even in interpersonal relations- the man finds himself in chains. In marriage, women are subjected in the name of sex. Inequality, dominance and restrictions are part of family life. Some of these restrictions are nothing less than the chain. Even the interpersonal relations in modern society become market mediated relations based on exchange value of man. Interpersonal relationships, instead of being the source of joy, become another chain for him.

In a nutshell, Rousseau’s account of man’s losing his freedom in modern society goes like this. As a natural creation man has a free soul. In the state of nature, before the advent of civil society, he lived in bliss having only two feelings of self-love/ self-preservation and pity for others. He had the capability of perfectibility and through that made his life better and better. He lived in himself in the lap of nature. He had no obligation or rights in respect of others. Hence, there was no competition, no ego, no enmity. The life of man in state of nature as noble savage was simple, frugal, contented and peaceful. Man enjoyed complete freedom.

But all this changed with the advent of civilizational progress, rise of society, and private property. Individuals possessing superior natural abilities acquired more material resources, stopped others using them (claiming them as his private property). This caused socio-economic inequality. Society became divided in social classes-

‘have’ and ‘have nots’. Those who possessed more property became the dominant class and started subjugating (dominating) those having less or no property. Domination based on property also extended to inequality and subjugation based on sex, colour, race, nationality. Soon the dominant class captured the political power.

Powerful/resourceful dominant class framed laws legitimizing private property- This legitimized inequality and made it legal. By laws and many social conventions, they denied property rights and equal opportunities to fellow man based on sex, colour, class. Thus, modern society took away both political, personal and moral freedom from the man.

In his social contract, Rousseau not only identify and reveal the bondage of man in modern society but also provide a solution in the form of his device of social contract and general will. To him, when man enters into a social contract with one and all to form a sovereign political community, he develops from a man to citizen. When he participates in deliberations and communication with fellow citizen to frame the general will, he is exercising his ‘real’ or ‘true’ will guided by his ‘higher self’. The general will so formed is in the common interest and common good of the society. Laws and policies flowing from general will are just, right, and egalitarian. The man, by obeying those laws is gaining moral freedom as he is obeying none other than himself as author of those laws. Thus, through the general will he regain his moral and personal freedom. As a equal member of the sovereign political community, he is not dominated or ruled by any other than himself. Hence, he also regains his political freedom. Thus, by the innovative device of Rousseau’s social contract and general will the man regain both his political and personal freedom along with the material comforts and civilisational advancements of the modern society. Rousseau claimed to have reconciled the greatest dialectic of the human life, that is, the contradiction between natural freedom and civic life in modern society.

In conclusion, the famous quote of Rousseau depicts the dilemma of human condition in modern society. Man born as free and equal soul is segregated, branded, normalised and identified on the basis of sex, colour, nationality, material possessions, success and all other parameters socially constructed to give privilege and domination to few over the unfortunate many. Hence, the man who is born free finds himself everywhere constrained, differentiated, dominated, denied equal rights and liberty. Thus, he found himself everywhere in chains. Those chains are not natural but social creation. Man has chained other man. This is the tragedy of modern civilization and Society. Despite its tremendous material progression, it has failed to give back the freedom to men as was his right as a free and equal soul when he was born.