

Freedom and the Feminist Challenge Day 3

Module 2, *Feminism and Freedom*

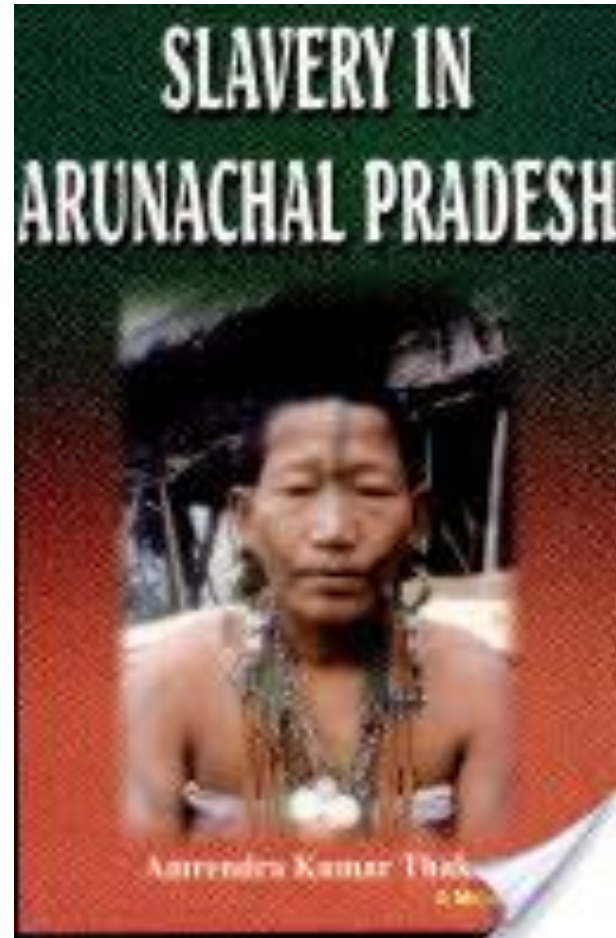
Tshisimani Centre for Activist
Education

Freedom – the power of an idea

- The idea of freedom has played a big role in the history of political thought and struggle.
- In the name of ‘freedom’ struggles for social change have been waged
- Across different political traditions, there is no agreement on what freedom means.

“The history of freedom is really a history of contests over its constructions and exclusions”

AK Thakur



- There is also fierce contestation on ‘who’ should be free and how freedom comes about.
- The boundaries of freedom are always shifting.
- Bernard Gallie’s (1955) speaks about “essentially contested concepts”. Freedom qualifies as one.
- There have been times when freedom was synonymous with calls for formal legal and political equality, while at other times freedom had economic, social and personal dimensions.

What exactly is freedom? What does it mean to be free?

- Throughout history, there are big contestations about what freedom means
- Our starting point is to look at **4 conceptions of freedom** that are tied to 4 moments and struggles in history AND the big questions that each conception brings to the fore

Conception 1: Political Rights and Equality

Freedom as the end of the absolute rule of the monarchy and the rise of individualism

Freedom from overbearing and arbitrary power of the state/church/king

Freedom for individuals to own property and to enter into contracts with other individuals in society

Freedom to choose a government through regulations elections

Equal rights and an end of privileges linked to the “accident of birth”

An end to absolute arbitrary power

Freedom as synonymous with calls for formal legal and political equality

Conception 2: Freedom as emancipation from slavery (the case of Saint Domingue Haiti)

The campaign to abolish slavery led to fierce debates about what freedom would look like for those who were forced into chattel slavery

Was freedom about a formal end to slavery and allowing the former slaves to be free to enter into employment contracts as waged workers?

Was freedom about a complete separation between the slaves and labour regime of the plantation?

What would freedom mean in the absence of land (property) ownership? Could the slaves be free when they were still suffered economic dependence on the former slave masters/ planter class?

What about self-ownership or “property in one’s self” and self-sufficiency?

What about other rights of citizenship like voting and equality before the law regardless of race?

Conception 3: Social and economic Freedom

Freedom is not possible for so long as society is organized around private property ownership, which allows for the exercise of excessive and unaccountable power by capitalist.

In a society organized around the market and around the idea of competition, our ability to fulfil our needs and desires is tempered with.

The majority's ability to realise their dreams and desires is severely constrained by the coercive power of capital.

'Social freedom' can only be won with the total abolishment of private ownership of property and the establishment of a system of interdependent cooperation, cooperative production, and communal ownership and deliberation.

Conception 4: Freedom as Independence (post WWII)

Freedom became closely associated with the idea of forming sovereign nation states.

In this framework, decolonisation had the following dimensions:

- It would provide freedom from foreign rule and domination
- It would create space for colonised people to chart their futures – self determination
- Independence would provide space to advance radical social and economic programmes which in some cases included socialism.

What these conceptions of freedom tell us

- The major contestations in society – who is free and who is not? What is the marker of unfreedom? In what ways do people feel unfree?
- Conceptions of freedom tell us about social relations and the structure of society. What is the source of wealth and how is wealth distributed?
- Who are the contending forces in society? Who is the oppressor? Who is the oppressed? What is the social condition that they are struggling against?
 - Views on the state
 - Views on property
 - Views on social relations
- Conceptions of freedom are also forms of social critique

What these conceptions of freedom tell us

- Definitions and meanings of freedom do not develop in a vacuum
- They are part of the contestations that take place between different groups in society
- In some meanings, there is a yearning to recover a lost past, to restore what has been lost or taken away and to make claims about the future
- In the process of challenging their subjugation, oppressed people have played a key role in our understanding of freedom.

- They have borrowed what they deemed useful from different political traditions and from those who already enjoyed freedom.
- Ideas about freedom travel. They get taken up, refined, made specific and relevant to the social condition and order that the oppressed people seek to overturn
- Ideas about freedom are indigenised and are fused with already existing ideas
- Victory of freedom in one place can raise questions about freedoms of others
- Freedom is a constant struggle!

What does Feminism say about these conceptions of freedom?

Feminists look at these conceptions of freedom and make several claims which all start with the question: What about gender? What about women?

“Feminists[...]have argued that “freedom” is defined within dominant discourses specifically for heterosexual white men of economic privilege. They seek an extension and even a refiguring of the concept [of freedom] to apply to their experiences of exclusion and oppression” (Brown [1995](#); Cohen 1995; Mills [1997](#); Hirschmann [2003](#)).

Feminist Challenge to dominant conceptions of freedom?

- How some of these conceptions of freedom ignored women's oppression and treated this oppression as natural and as something that cannot be changed
- How these visions of freedom ignored women altogether – the subject of freedom as a masculine, economically privileged, white and heterosexual figure
- How those fighting for freedom from foreign (colonial) domination and freedom from the institution of slavery ignored women's experiences of these social realities
- Women's oppression treated as less important to oppression on the basis of race and class exploitation
- These dominant conceptions of freedom miss the political nature of gender relations and how gender relations are about power relations

Feminist visions of freedom

Feminism is not just a response to the blind-spots in the dominant conceptions of freedom

It is also about making a case for new visions of freedom

1. These new visions are about understanding the source of women's oppression (unfreedom) and what it will take to change this
2. Looking at women's everyday experiences as political experiences not just personal issues
3. Challenging the separation between the private and public sphere, the personal and political
4. Understanding how reproductive labour is a source of women's unfreedom
5. How women's freedom will not fall from the sky or be won only after capitalism and colonialism have been toppled

Feminist conceptions of freedom have covered issues as varied as sexual freedom and pleasure, bodily integrity, autonomy and reproductive freedom, freedom from fear and harassment, economic freedom, social freedom.

“Visionary feminism is a wise and loving politics. It is rooted in the love of male and female being, refusing to privilege one over the other. The soul of feminist politics is the commitment to ending patriarchal domination of women and men, girls and boys. Love cannot exist in any relationship that is based on domination and coercion. Males cannot love themselves in patriarchal culture if their very self-definition relies on submission to patriarchal rules. When men embrace feminist thinking and practice, which emphasises the value of mutual growth and self-actualisation in all relationships, their emotional well-being will be enhanced. A genuine feminist politics always brings us from bondage to freedom, from lovelessness to loving”.

– bell hooks

