

## John Milton and the Issues of Liberty: A Study of His Age

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Payod Joshi

### Abstract

*This is true Liberty when free born men  
Having to advise the public may speak free,  
Which he who can, and will, deserv's high praise,  
Who neither can nor will, may hold his peace;  
What can be juster in a State then this?*  
*Eurip. Hicetid.*

Above lines were used by John Milton when he gave a speech to the Parliament of England for the liberty of unlicensed printing. In this speech he gave the supportive arguments in defense of free press. He said, *“Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.”* Today when we are facing the various threats to the freedom of speech and individual liberty with the emergence of rightist and fascist forces in the world scenario, above lines, said by Milton becomes so relevant. UNESCO reported that 62 journalists were killed in 2020 in the world. In our India Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare and Gauri Lankesh were killed by the religious fundamentalist groups in recent years. Journalists and intellectuals are facing unnecessary trials of court because they are criticizing the government. In contemporary scenario when we are debating the issue of intolerance and the limitations of freedom of speech, thoughts like Milton makes its importance. In this paper we are trying to analyse ideological patterns of Milton’s era because his era was facing the same questions regarding freedom of speech and individual liberty which we are facing today.

**Key words:** John Milton, issue of liberty, historical analysis, political philosophy.

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### <sup>1</sup>Corresponding author

*Professor, Political Science, M.L. V.G.C.Bhilwara*

## Introduction

### *The Quest for Liberty in Political Philosophy: A Historical Analysis*

Basically, the question of individual liberty is directly connected with the restrictions imposed on man by institutions like society, religion or state. So, there is a contradictory relation between man and institutions like State, Society and Religion. In the Greek political philosophy, the state was the moral instrument to achieving a good life. According to Aristotle good life should contain leisure. Leisure could only be found in society. As Joad observers regarding philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, "Beginning with the conception of man as a social and political animal, they argued that, from the very fact that he is social. It is natural for him to live in society. The life of the individual isolated from his fellows is a life against nature, and the real nature of the individual can in consequence only be developed in society. It is only by living in society that a man can realize all that he has it in him to be, only by intercourse with his fellows, by the realization of social duties and the fulfillment of social obligations that he can develop his full self. In addition, therefore, to the obvious benefits of security against violence and redress against injustice that the individual receives from the State, he owes it a debt of gratitude for its bestowal upon him of his own individuality in all its richness and with all its potentialities." (C.E.M. Joad, Introduction to :1924: 11) In Greek philosophy there were no difference between the state and society. They both were an end in itself because self-perfection and self-fulfillment could be achieved only through these institutions. State was the highest morality and it had a majestic real personality of its own which was superior and independent of individual. Hence, as critics says that Greek philosophy created a totalitarian state on the name self-perfection of a man.

Later on, with the rise of Roman Empire state became the legal institution for common wealth. In this age state was supposed to decentralize the authority with republican institutions. As Mahajan observed, "The Roman Empire gave birth to the legal notion of the state which was viewed as the Highest law- making power. Laws were applicable to both the governors and governed." (Mahajjn, V.D.: 1988: 160) Roman Empire gave birth political ideas like law & order, discipline, unity & strength, cosmopolitanism etc. They founded republican institutions like Senate, Tribunes, Consul, Assembly etc. In 509 B.C. when Romans founded their Republic, Roman citizenship meant special privileges including the Roman religion and laws.

But, in turn, the laws had to be obeyed to the letter. Roman political thinkers like Polybius and Cicero gave the doctrine of legalistic spiritualism. Cicero said, "Law is the subordinate of God." Laws were held in such reverence that Titus Manlius, an early consul, had his son beheaded for disobeying the law. (Alan Bullock and others :1968 : 56) However Romans were law-lover but Roman Law wholly depended on the patricians, upper class of society. Upper class of society did not want any change in custom based laws. For example, in 133 B.C. when the tribune Tiberius Gracchus proposed that the state should seize certain lands and divide them among the needy. But the big landlords opposed him and he was murdered. Similarly, when Julius Caesar came to power, he planned some reforms in government, he was killed. In this way can say that Roman Empire was based on laws and he adopted republican institutions but laws were governed by the upper class of society and there was no place for free citizens-plebeians. After a long struggle dictator Hortensius gave equal opportunity to plebeians with patricians. After 180 A.D. military men gradually took control of the state and the Roman Empire become weak. By A.D.500 Roman Empire had been submerged beneath a flood of barbarian invasion.

With the emergence of Christianity state came under the domain of religion looking to the expansion of church in public. Consequently, church became significantly powerful and it challenged the supremacy of the state. By A.D. 400 the Roman Empire had adopted Christianity as its state religion. As Bullock observes, "At first the pope's power was only spiritual; a domain over men's minds and consciences. But in time the pope become ruler over the actual territory around Rome. True, until the 11<sup>th</sup> century, popes ruled in the name of various Christian emperors, but even then, they were the real lords of central Italy." (Alan Bullock and others: 1968:74) In early Christian thought State and law was assumed as the result of sinful nature of man. Early medieval thinker who supports the authority of church gave arguments that state is a creation of God and the king is the representative of God on this earth. So, people must obey the state orders as they are the orders of God. This divine theory made state more powerful. But with this theological state, the power of the Church went on increasing and it started interfering with temporal affairs. The Pope as the head of the Church began to claim superiority over all kings. People were ruled by the two swords; one of church and one of state. Jain and Mathur throw light on this scenario," Before the Renaissance, the Europe society was generally regulated, inspired and controlled by religion. The complete dominance of the Catholic Church prevailed all over the

western and Central Europe from Lithuania to Ireland and from Norway to Finland, Portugal and Hungary. A man was governed by the church from his birth till death. The church was treated as a symbol of conventional beliefs and devotion to Christianity. It was a custodian of sacraments and moral values. The Church was a public institution rather than an individual or an optional one. A revolt against the Church was very difficult as it stood on a strong foundation. The Church was so influential that it exacted taxes like the state. The Bishop known as the “Pope” was the head of this supreme religious organization of the Christian world. He was selected by special priests called the “Cardinals”. The Pope was the supreme lawmaker, the chief justice and the supreme administrator of financial and other activities of the Catholic Church. He was also a ruler of the city of Rome as well as its adjoining “papal states”. Even the Emperors had to kneel before the Pope. He could dethrone any ruler of a Christian state of Europe. He could annul any law of the Catholic authority’s country which he deemed improper. He could also designate the highest authorities for the Catholic states in Europe. He exacted rents for the whole Christian land and issued his final verdict in the matter of marriage, divorce, testament and legitimate succession. Thus, the Church and the Pope were not only decisive powers in respect of the personal and religious life of man, but they had a great impact on social and political fields also.” Church imposed various taxes, charges and duties in the name of religion on masses. It also horrified the masses in the name of the divine world that if demands of the church are not met out it will be damned eternally in the hell. Horrified masses had no choice left only to follow the circulars of the church. With the emergence of such powerful church, state became weak and fragile. Consequent to this scenario feudalism came into existence.

After the decline of Roman Empire, a new system of decentralize political authority born. A large number of feudal lords come into existence. These small feudal states used to quarrel with each other for the collection of more and more revenue. Under the feudalism, political authority went with land and the relation of the individual with land determined his rights and duties. In such scenario man became mere a puppet in the hands both of church and state. He lost all his dignity and existence.

*Renaissance: Rebirth of human values with the demand of Liberty from Authoritarian Religion and Feudalism*

In the 17th century renaissance demanded reforms in the structure of Church. Renaissance means 'Rebirth'. It is the name given to the movement that began among the educated classes of Italy in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, developed there, and by the 16<sup>th</sup> century, had spread to the rest of Europe. Renaissance was actually a process of rediscover of the Greek and Latin human values. it turned out to be a convenient. It was a way of describing the period of transition between the medieval epoch, when Europe was "Christendom," and the beginning of the modern age. As Paul Johnson observed, "It also had some historical. justification because, although the Italian elites of the time never used the words "Renaissance" or "Rinascimento," they were conscious that a cultural rebirth of a kind was taking place, and that some of the literary, philosophical and artistic grandeur of ancient Greece and Rome was being recreated." (Paul Johnson, *The Renaissance: A Short History*, : 1928 : 3) . Renaissance made demand for religious liberty as well as individual liberty. Renaissance has established the ideology of rationality. It came with the notion that man has rationality. The first scholar of the Renaissance- poet Francesco Petrarch discovered in Greek and Latin writings an outlook close to their own growing belief in man's power and dignity. In this way Renaissance challenged the tradition of faith based on religion prevalent in the dark ages of history. So as a result of Renaissance, religious liberty was demanded against the Church and the Papacy. Renaissance was not against the religion but it emphasized the individual Christian's ability to self-govern by exercising liberty of conscience. As historian Davis said," Renaissance expresses those freedom- loving, intrepid ideas of people which had been imprisoned by the religious authorities in the Middle Ages." Renaissance gave the birth of a series of writers, artists, musicians, mathematicians and scientists who devoted their lives to a study of the classics and to set a value of humanity in society. They felt less dependent on the religious beliefs and show more interests in discovering the men's central role in the universe. Milton was the product of this Renaissance.

Renaissance not only gave the rebirth of classic literature, art and culture but it also gave rebirth of critical spirit of inquiry. With this critical inquiry many philosophers like Machiavelli and Hobbes come to the concluding point that every man wants wealth and power to insure his independent existence. They wrote in the support of powerful State because they wanted to destroy feudalism and popedom. Machiavelli considered popedom as an obstacle in the way of unification of Italy. Machiavelli was to be a hero of Italian national unification in the nineteenth century. Machiavelli writes as a Renaissance humanist in beautiful

Italian. He supports the concept of nation state instead of small feudal state. As J.S.McClelland observed, “Machiavelli thinks that there is no reason in principle why a prince well-versed in statecraft and with luck on his side should not be able to unite the warring principalities of Italy. The kings of the French have managed to unite the various French provinces into a single kingdom, so why not Italy? The short answer is, of course, the papacy, which Machiavelli regards as the real Italian problem. The papacy enjoys a prestige so enormous that even Borgia popes have failed to destroy it.” (J.S.McClelland, A History of Western Political Thought, Routledge : 1996 : 143-147) Further, McClelland writes, “He (Machiavelli) refuses to argue that Christian ethics as conventionally conceived are not ethics at all. We are to take seriously Machiavelli’s famous assertion that he was quite looking forward to going to hell because there he could enjoy for eternity the conversation of the ancient sages. Behind the moral bravado lies a real belief in hell’s existence and a real sense of his own sin.” (J.S.McClelland : 1996 : 143-147) In this way, Machiavelli’s political thoughts were un-Christian. As some critics say, he divorced the ethics from politics and separated the politics and the religion - as a first modern thinker of secular state.

Machiavelli considered feudalism as the main cause behind the weakness of Italy. So, he supported princely state. By ‘princely government’ Machiavelli means any government by one man. ‘One Man Rule’, though an ugly phrase, would be a much less misleading title for *The Prince*. (It might conceivably be that very simple readers of *The Prince* have a history of western political thought 146 unconsciously paraphrased the title to mean ‘the son of a king’, as if Machiavelli were advising sons to turn against fathers, and to replace traditional Christian kingship with self-aggrandising tyranny. This, for instance, seems to have been a stock Elizabethan view of Machiavelli; it often turns up in Shakespeare, not to mention Webster.) Machiavelli does advise new princes to be ruthless and devious, but this does not mean that all rule has to be ruthless and devious. And even the most cursory reading of the *Discourses* will show that Machiavelli by no means thinks that rule by one man has to be the typical form of government under which men are destined to live. In the *Discourses* Machiavelli makes it perfectly clear that the ruthless rule of a new prince is only one of the forms of government which men must live through, and it won’t necessarily last very long. Properly considered, princely government in Machiavelli’s sense in *The Prince* need only be an episode in the necessary cycle of development in a state from one form of government to another.

*The English Revolution: Transformation of Power from king to commons*

Alike Italy England was another center point of Renaissance. There was some tension between the Monarch and the people when Henry VIII (1509-47) first imposed Protestantism on the country and again when his daughter, Queen Marry (1553-58), religiously tried to bring Catholicism back. However, Protestantism was favored by the most of the England by Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603). But with the end of Elizabeth's reign the increasingly powerful Commons (Commons had the duty of taxes to the king for running the state) began to question her supremacy over themselves and Church. The questioning came to a head under James I (1603-25) who claimed that his Stuart family has divine right to rule. After him when his suborn son Charles I (1625-49), went to the war in France and Germany, taxes had to be voted for his closely campaigns. Charles was thus obliged to summon parliament in 1625. The Commons tried to use their tax-voting powers and they promised the king to give money for war if he would consent to rule in a less authoritarian manner. Charles gave way in order to get money from Commons, but very soon, he again claimed his supremacy over Commons and Church government, particularly his power to appoint bishops. So, in 1642, under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell, Parliament's army declared war on Parliament and Commons said, No Taxes without Representation. In 1649 Charles was executed. Cromwell- a ruthless, fanatically religious, and high-minded man – soon become supreme with army backing. He succeeded in enforcing law, order and Puritanism. After his death, Charles II (1660-85) was return to the crown ship with accepting the drastic reduction in royal power. His successor James II (1685-88) tried to force Catholicism on England. The struggle between monarch and parliament broke out again. With the bloodless revolution, the House Commons offered the throne to James's daughter Mary's husband William and the Crown transferred his power to the parliament. Hence, Constitutional Monarchy was established in Engalnd. ((Alan Bullock and others: 1968 : 200-201)

*Hobbes and Locke: Rise of the question of individual liberty and his natural rights*

In this transitional phase of power, England gave two great political philosophers to the world- Hobbes and Locke. They both favored Social Contract Theory for the state and assumed that state is not a natural institution as Greek thinkers supposed. In their views they established that state is created by man on

mutual consent. However, we can see a different thought between Hobbes and Locke regarding the nature of State. Hobbes assumes that existence of individual is important and in the seeking of this individual's natural right to preserve the existence, he supports totalitarian state. As John Morrow observes, "Hobbes produced an account of politics that was coloured by his experiences of the English Civil War and the events leading up to it. He made direct reference to contemporary disorders, particularly those produced by attempts to base political claims upon religious doctrines, or to give an independent political role to any person or institution other than the sovereign. The first of these objections applied as much to proponents of conventional ecclesiastical power as to radical sectarians; the second was directed at the pretensions of overmighty aristocratic subjects of the crown and at those who claimed that the English parliament had an independent representative role. As Hobbes put it: If there had not first been an opinion received of the greatest part of England that these powers were divided between the King and the Lords and the House of Commons, the people had never been divided and fallen into this civil war; first between those that disagreed in politics; and after between the dissenters about the liberty of religion." Further Morrow argues, "According to Hobbes, because a system of government based upon the principle of absolute sovereignty is the only way to avoid the evils of the state of nature, it is the only legitimate form of political authority. The state is fundamental to human well-being and is created by the voluntary actions of those who become the subjects of it. Individuals are therefore obliged to retain their place within this order and can be justly punished by the sovereign for failing to do so. Significantly, Hobbes believed that the consequences of a lack of order are so alarming that the threat of a return to the state of nature is far more to be feared than subjection to any conceivable sovereign." (John Morrow : 2005 : 33-36) Hence, Hobbes believes that for individual liberty maintaining order is necessary and it is not possible without a powerful state. The power of the state is justified by Hobbes solely on a utilitarian standard—the security of individual human beings, ignoring as irrelevant any consideration of custom, tradition, or supernatural sanction.

Locke considered state as a necessary evil. His middle-class father had fought on the side of parliament during the early stages of the war, and while the son professed strong royalist sympathies at the time of the restoration of the Stuart monarchy in the early 1660s, by the following decade Locke had become a harsh critic of royal prerogative. Locke differed from Hobbes is in his refusal to grant absolute authority to the sovereign. Locke argued that in the state of nature the



Law of Nature was obscured by man's biases and general ignorance. Life in the pre-political state, where men had a natural right to their life, liberty, and property, lacked "a known and indifferent judge, with authority to determine all differences according to the established law." Unhappily, natural partiality led humans "to violate the rules of common equity and evaluate and punish the actions of others unfairly." Finally, the state of nature offers no "power to back and support the sentence when right, and to give it due execution." Given these conditions, the freedom that each person enjoys within the bounds of the Law of Nature, and the property that they hold, is "very unsafe, very insecure." Only by entering into a voluntary contract and establishing formal government can each person hope to exercise their individual freedom and right to property unmolested. Where Locke differed from Hobbes is in his refusal to grant absolute. (W.M. Spellman. : 2011: 78)

In short, we can say that this was the time when the voice of individual liberty has started to be prime in human history. In the backdrop of this philosophical background many paradoxes and contradictions started taking place in society. The dominant religion Christianity divided in Catholic and Protestantism in view of the rise of demands for reformation in church. On the other hand, European states were trying to come in a larger nation state to combat feudalism. In this way this was the time in Europe when these two powerful institutions were under transitional phase. Both were trying to reshape and redesign themselves. The concept of individual liberty is the product of this period. This was the era of struggle of man's liberty and individuality. Renaissance has established the ideology of rationality.

### ***Milton: A Literary Voice of Human Values and Liberty***

It is truly said that every thinker and writer is the child of his time and it can be applied on John Milton also. Milton was the product of this time. The era of John Milton is the era of struggle of man's liberty and individuality. That was the time of English Revolution which we discussed in this paper earlier. This was the time when a debate regarding the sharing of political power among King, Church and Commons was going on in England. The question of humanity, liberty and rights were the center points of this whole debate. In 1670, Baruch Spinoza wrote in his book 'No one can transfer to another person his natural right, or ability, to think freely and make his own judgements about any matter whatsoever, and compelled to do so. That is why a government which seeks to control minds is considered

oppressive....” And further he observed, “A government which denies each person freedom to speak and to communicate what they think will be a violent government, whereas a state where everyone is conceded this freedom will be moderate.” (Guha, Ramchandra, *Democrats and Dissenters*, Penguin, 2016)

For a brief moment during the English civil wars, a group of writers and pamphleteers derisively reached out to a popular audience and advanced a truly radical claim on political power. Addressing small tradesmen, artisans, soldiers, and poor urban laborers, between 1645 and 1649 they called for universal manhood suffrage without property requirements, a written constitution, freedom of religion, equality before the law, and an end to military conscription. They also demanded a representative assembly that held lawmaking and executive power, and defended the right to resist any magistrate who failed to carry out his delegated trust. They put forward plans for a communal government in England based on an understanding of the law of nature whereby everyone had a right to subsistence. For them the natural state was one in which all shared in the common ownership of the land; the sin of private ownership was the root cause of inequalities, social abuse, and immorality. Milton was one of them.

Milton was not only against the government censors but he also challenged the government by his courageously unlicensed work *Areopagatica*. He took risk of punishment from government because he valued the freedom of speech, expression and printing. British Parliament passed an ordinance in 1643 to imposed restrictions on printing. According to this ordinance authors required to get prior approval from an official licenser before publication of printed materials. Milton published the tract anonymously, defying the ordinance’s prohibition. As John Alvis observes in his foreword to the new Liberty Fund edition of *Areopagatica* and other Political Writings of John Milton, throughout his life “John Milton pursued the one paramount project of discovering ground for his love of liberty in laws of nature and nature’s God.” More specifically, there is in Milton’s prose and poetry alike “the unifying theme of preparing individuals to understand and cultivate that coordination of freedoms and responsibilities that Milton identified in the phrase ‘Christian Liberty’- that is, the freedom to work out one’s salvation won for all mankind by the Saviour’s intercession, example, and express teachings”. (Simon Jenkins, [www. The Guardian.com](http://www.TheGuardian.com))

However, as Timothy Wilson argues that, “ John Milton’s ‘ancient liberty’ is not the liberalism of Thomas Hobbes or John Locke, where the telos governing human liberty is dispensed with, Rather, ‘ Paradise Lost’ cultivates Chistian virtues by reclaiming an ancient liberty within the traditional epic verse form and by returning to that which is first or most ancient Divine Will” ( Timothy H. Wilson, [theimaginativeconservative.org](http://theimaginativeconservative.org)) It can be derived from his work that he had not taken liberty as absence of all external constraints as Locke mentioned in his liberalism but for Milton liberty is a matter of being ‘ free to’ fulfil one’s end, the condition for which is a set of obligation.

For me, as a student of Political Science, it is important aspect of Milton that he wrote *Areopagatica*, and he published revolutionary pamphlet in the support of the voice of freedom. His explosive defense of free speech, at a time when such liberty was thought fit only for the state, might seem commonplace today. But from a writer living in the 17<sup>th</sup> century’s swirl of conflicting intolerances, it was sensational. ‘ Beware’, he cried, “ what persecution we raise against the living labours of public men, how we spill that seasoned life of man, preserved and stored up in books.” Who kills a man reasonsable creature, “but he who kills a good book kills reason itself”. These are the ideas of Milton which are required today the most.

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