Unit: 4 SOCIAL CONTRACT THEORY: ROUSSEAU

Unit Structure

4.1 Learning Objectives

4.2 Introduction

4.3 Rousseau's views on Human Nature

4.4 Rousseau's views on Social Contract Theory

4.5 Points of agreement and difference between Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau

4.6 Rousseau on General Will

4.7 Common Good

4.8 Criticism

4.9 Let us sum up

4.10 Further Reading

4.11 Answer to Check Your Progress

4.11 Model Questions

4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this you will be able to:

- Know what Rousseau's view of human nature is.
- Know what Rousseau's view of social contract is.
- Know what is general will and common good.
- Know what is the difference regarding Hobbes', Locke's and Rousseau's views of the state of human nature.

4.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we will discuss about Rousseau's view of human nature, social contract and general will. We shall also compare how Rousseau's view of the state of man's nature and social agreement of the individual different from Hobbe's and Locke's concepts. We shall see how inequalities between individual bond them to form a society. He is neither stressed on

the individual will nor on the authority but gives more importance on the 'will of all' or the 'general will' which we shall discuss in the chapter. We shall also discuss about common good and, check whether Rousseau's general will involves common good of all.

1.3 ROUSSEAU's VIEWS ON HUMAN NATURE

Like Hobbes and Locke, as we have already discussed in the previous chapters, Rousseau also discussed about the human nature before the formation of the society. According to Rousseau, before the origin of the society man live happily, freely, without any desires, any selfishness. This state is regarded as savage state according to Rousseau. There is perfect happiness among them. They were independent, contended and self sufficing. They were neither fearful nor selfish. There was a state of substantial quality among the individual. No distinctions were seen among them. But with the increasing number of individuals, the manner of their life change. They started discovering new things. Gradually they started progressing economically. They started having fixed homes, family and property. With this there emerge competition and preference. But society is not an intolerable state of human nature before and after formation of society, the happiest period of life in men is the earlier state.

According to Rousseau, the emergence of man from the primitive social condition must have been due to some fatal chance. They started living on agriculture and discovered many things. Co-operation among themselves emerged. There emerged a difference between rich and poor in terms of work ability. Property is the major source of inequality which leads to war, murder and other conflicts. To escape from such wickedness, civil society is formed. The final stage of inequality is the condition of master and slave.

Rousseau's idea of the state of nature might be historical rather than a psychological concept. But like Locke, Rousseau stopped himself from accepting the conditions he described. He has given just an idea about the state of nature to have an accurate concept about the contemporary

society. Like Hobbes, Rousseau also tried to form abstract qualities of human nature.

Rousseau holds that man's life is regulated by reason and emotions. In the state of nature, men are concerned about the well-being and protection of their own. At the same time, they are also unsatisfied with death and sufferings of other human beings. All the rules, laws and rights flowed from these two views of self-absorption and disappointment.

Men, according to Rousseau, use their own reason to deal with their surroundings. Reason and nature are incompatible with each other. Natural feeling of human gives peace and happiness to themselves. As soon as they start reasoning, the feeling of dissatisfaction crowded them.

Thus, from Rousseau's discussions it is clear that men in the state of nature live in the kingdom of heaven. They live happily and peacefully. But with the increase in number of the individuals many conflicts arise with regard to their individual property. In order to handle the deteriorating situation and to get back their peaceful state as before they enter into an agreement which is called social contract through which the society emerged.

4.4 ROUSSEAU's VIEWS ON SOCIAL CONTRACT THEORY

Social contract theory, as we have already discussed earlier is the contract between individual and society. We have already studied Hobbes' and Locke's views of social contract theory. Now let us see what is Rousseau's concept regarding social contract.

Rousseau discussed about this theory in his 'Social Contract' which was published in 1762. He tried to unite Hobbes' and Locke's theory to bridge the gap between the authority of the state and the liberty of the individual. He developed this theory by the method of Hobbes and the conclusion of Locke. It is Locke whom he followed to the end beyond. According to Rousseau, the individuals after forming a society placed all the powers not in the hands of the authority but it remain in the hands of the individuals. Thus, he shifts the power from the monarch to the people.

Rousseau holds that men are born free and are in chains and there can be no authority to have the highest power. But there is agreement between the individuals which retains the liberty. Through this agreement, the individuals enter into a social pact. In this pact a multitude of individuals become a collective unity and form a society. Thus, he is influenced by both Hobbes and Locke. According to him, there is equality among the individuals as each and every individuals rest all their rights and power to the society. Thus, no individual can claim anything. Rousseau states that men enter into the civil society for their mutual preservation. The authority of the society is chosen by the people by entering into the society for the sake of their own protection. According to Rousseau, the group of individuals entering into a society with an agreement between them is called sovereign which helps people to unite and take into account the different opinion of the individuals. There are different forms of government mentioned by Rousseau, namely, monarchy, aristocracy and democracy. All these forms of government contain different benefits and drawbacks. Rousseau's focus is to ensure that the government must consider the 'general will' of the society which we will discuss later. He is in favor of the democratic form of government which would address the needs of all the individuals. According to Rousseau, the original freedom, happiness and liberty of individuals are in the state before the emergence of the society. He favors people's sovereignty. According to him, state, law, sovereignty, etc. are interchangeable terms.

4.4 POINTS OF AGREEMENT AND DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HOBBES, LOCKE AND ROUSSEAU

4.4.1: Points of Agrrement

1) Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau believe in the social contract through which the society is originated and the relation between the individual and society has come into being.
2) Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau describe the state of human nature before the emergence of the society.

3) They agree that the conflicts and the problems of human in the state of nature are abolished by establishing the social contract.
4) They agree that the social contract that has been established by the individuals is a voluntary agreement.

4.4.2: Points of Difference

1) Although Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau describe the state of human nature before the origin of the society, yet their views are quite different.
2) According to Hobbes, men are selfish in their pre-social state. They seek to fulfill their own interests at the cost of others.
3) Locke, on the other hand, believes that before the formation of the society, the state of human nature is peaceful, happy and there is equality among the individuals.
4) Rousseau describes the state of human nature as earthly paradise and there are liberty, equality and fraternity for all.
5) Hobbes believes that the social contract that is established among the individuals is to get rid of the intolerable conditions of the state of nature. On the other hand, according to Locke, the social contract among the individuals is established to remove some inconveniences. But according to Rousseau, the social contract among the individuals is established to remove inequalities and injustice which is only possible by establishing a society.
6) Both Hobbes and Rousseau introduce one contract, i.e., social contract. But Locke introduces two contracts which are: social contract and political contract.
7) According to Hobbes, the individuals completely surrender their rights to the authority. But according to Locke, the individuals partially surrender their rights in order to protect others' rights. Whereas, according to Rousseau, the individuals surrender their rights not to their kings but to the general will.
8) Hobbes introduces absolute power of the authority; Locke discusses about the absolute freedom of the individuals;

Rousseau tries to reconcile the authority of the state with the liberty of the individuals.

4.5 ROUSSEAU ON GENERAL WILL

In the social contract theory, we have come across the term 'General Will'. Rousseau believes that after the formation of the society, the individuals put their powers under the supreme direction of 'General Will'. But the question is "what is general will?"

The term 'General Will' has been used in different sense by different writers. Sometimes, the term 'General Will' is used to mean that the majority of votes determine the "will of people". But according to Bosanquet, 'General Will' of people is determined by discussions rather than by voting. Mackenzie talks about "co-operative will" in which the individuals must compromise with their claims in order to fulfill the needs of other individuals whose needs are more important than that of their own. But 'General Will' is not mere compromise between different points of view, but arriving at a decision which is supported by all by removing the individual demands and look into the situation as a whole. Thus 'General Will' involves:

(1) A number of individuals agreeing a single decision.

(2) Good of whole group of the society by balancing of individual wishes.

Green defines 'General Will' as a sense of possessing common interests, a desire for common objects on the part of the people.

According to Rousseau, 'General Will' is the agreement of all individuals which include the "Will of All". It is one of the most important concept in Rousseau's philosophy. He contradicts 'General Will' from particular and contradictory will of individuals and groups. He states that the laws are made by keeping in view the general will of all the individuals. Thus, the freedom of the individuals and the authority go together and are not contradict to each other. When they follow the law, they follow themselves as the laws include the general will of individuals.

Rousseau further added that the general will represents the quality of the individuals. It is not an abstract ideal but includes the general wishes

of all individuals. For him, the participation of individuals represent their sense of justice. They are concerned with their own interests and in 'General Will' they do not come up with discussions but rather they follow their conscience in the "silence of passions".

'General Will' is also criticized by some scholars because the 'General Will' represents the rational interests of the individuals and group of individuals and at the same time it is not rational as it involves attachment of the individuals towards their society.

Rousseau holds that every individual take into account the common good of all and thus, they attain an ideal state which represents the 'General Will'. According to him, if the individuals are forced to follow the law then it would lead to force them to be free. He states that the authority or the government is powerful if and only if it takes into account the general; will of the individuals. The authority or the government would lose his power if it considers it to be the most powerful and if it would not follow the 'General Will' of the people.

Rousseau further added that 'General Will' is not a 'majority will' or a 'minority will' or a 'corporate will' or a 'specific will'. It is also not the sum of all will of people. But the 'General Will' is the will of all that involves the common good of all individuals. It does not involve compromise but involves the support of the individuals which represents their wishes. The 'Common Good' is a moral concept which involves justice. Thus, from the concept of 'General Will' it is clear that it involves 'Common Good' of all individuals. It is for the good of all that 'General Will' is taken into account. Otherwise, the society would have run by one single authority in which the 'General Will' of the individuals would have avoided.

4.6 COMMON GOOD

It refers to the 'good' of all individuals. Sometimes, the word common good is misunderstood as that which can be attained by avoiding the individual good as the two are contradictory to each other. But it is not true. In fact, common good and individual good go hand in hand. According to

Spinoza, a rational being cannot desire for something which is against the good of others. An individual is a part of the whole society; therefore, there is no gap between individual interests and common interests. No man is self-sufficient. He cannot attain perfection until and unless he participates in the social life. Thus, it is clear that the good of the society leads to the good of the individual who belongs to that society. Green holds that self-realization is the nature of common good. Basically, individual is concerned with their own interests. But he cannot live in isolation without a society. Human beings depend on society for their own survival. Therefore, he must look into the interests of the society in order to fulfill his own interests. Man cannot be fully egoistic. Even his egoistic motives lead him to altruism. As a social being, individual must think of the good of the society for his own good.

4.6 CRITICISM

Rousseau's theory has been criticized due the following reasons. Rousseau gives an unclear picture of 'General Will'. He defines 'General Will' in different senses. According to him, 'General Will' is the will which include the good of all. But on the other hand, he also defines 'General Will' as the will of the majority. Rousseau's theory of 'Social Contract' and 'General Will' are contrary to each other. According to Prof. Wayper, if the 'General Will' is considered as superior then the 'Social Contract' is meaningless and if the 'Social Contract' is necessary then 'General Will' cannot be regarded as superior. Rousseau makes a distinction between 'General Will' and 'Will of All'. But it is impossible to draw any such distinctions. According to Rousseau, 'General Will' deals with justice. But in reality it is impossible to harmonize 'General Will' with justice. Again, Rousseau is in favor of democratic form of government that would address the needs of all. But if 'General Will' or the 'Will of All' is considered to be absolute then it gives rise to dictatorship.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q No. 1: Where did Rousseau discuss Social Contract theory?

Q No. 2: What is the state of nature according to Rousseau?

Q No. 3: What is Social Contract theory according to Rousseau?

Q No. 4: What is 'General Will' according to Rousseau?

Q No. 5: What is 'Common Good'?

Q No. 6: What is a savage state?

Q No. 7: What are the forms of government according to Rousseau?



4.6 LET US SUM UP

- Rousseau discussed about Social Contract theory in his 'Social Contract' which was published in 1762.
- Man in the state of nature live happily, freely, without any desires and selfishness. This state is regarded as savage state.
- Rousseau believes that the emergence of man from the primitive social condition must have been due to some fatal chance.
- Men enter into their civil society for their mutual preservation. According to Rousseau, the individuals after forming a society place all their powers not in the hands of the authority but it remain in the hands of the individuals.
- 'General Will' is the agreement of all individuals which include the 'Will of All'. When the individuals follow law, they follow themselves as it includes the 'General Will' of the individuals.
- Common Good refers to the good of all individuals. As a social being, individual must think for the good of the society for his own good.



4.7 FURTHER READING

1) Chakravarty, Sibnath (1962), An Introduction to Politics: Modern Book Agency Pvt. Ltd.
2) Dunning, William Archibald (1920), A history of Political Theories From Rousseau to Spencer: The Macmillan Company.
3) Paul Sanatan, Das Dhrubajyoti (2016), Western Political Thinkers: Ashok Book Stall.
4) Sanyal Jagadiswar (1994): Guide to Social Philosophy: Sribhumi Publishing House.



4.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No. 1: Rousseau discussed Social Contract theory in his 'Social Contract' which was published in 1762.

Ans to Q No. 2: Rousseau describes the state of human nature as earthly pleasures and there are liberty, equality and fraternity for all.

Ans to Q No. 3: According to Rousseau, with the increase in number of the individuals in the state of nature, many conflicts arise with regard to their individual property. In order to handle the deteriorating situation and to get back their peaceful state as before they enter into an agreement which is called Social Contract through the society emerged.

Ans to Q No. 4: According to Rousseau, 'General Will' is the agreement of all individuals which includes the 'Will of All'.

Ans to Q No. 5: Common Good refers to the good of all individuals.

Ans to Q No. 6: According to Rousseau, before the origin of the society, man lives happily, freely, without any desires, any selfishness. This state is regarded as the savage state by Rousseau.

Ans to Q No. 7: According to Rousseau, there are different forms of government: monarchy, aristocracy and dictatorship.



4.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

A. VERY SHORT QUESTIONS

Q No. 1: What is Rousseau's idea of Social Contract?

Q No. 2: What is Rousseau's concept of 'General Will'?

Q No. 3: What is the state of human nature described by Rousseau?

Q No. 4: What is a Common Good?

Q No. 5: What is a savage state?

Q No. 6: How do individuals enter into a social pact?

Q No.7: Why does man enter into a civil society?

Q No. 8: Does Rousseau prefer autocratic form of government?

B. SHORT QUESTIONS (ANSWER IN ABOUT 150 WORDS)

Q No. 1: Explain briefly Rousseau's idea of the state of Human Nature?

Q No. 2: Explain briefly Rousseau's of Social Contract theory.

Q No. 3: Briefly explain the concept of 'General Will'.

Q No. 4: Write a short note on the relation between 'General Will' and 'Common Good'.

C.LONG QUESTIONS (ANSWER IN ABOUT 300-500 WORDS)

Q No. 1: What do you mean by 'General Will'? Explain the relation between 'General Will' and 'Common Good'.

Q No. 2: What do you understand by common good? State how this common good is to be realized?

Q No. 3: Critically discuss Rousseau's Social Contract theory.

Q No. 4: Critically discuss Rousseau's concept of 'General Will'.

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