

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)



*Rousseau is known as the **father of French revolution**. The slogans of **liberty, equality and fraternity** come from Rousseau. The greatest contribution of Rousseau is the **theory of general will**.*

*As a thinker, Rousseau is unique in many contexts. He belonged to the time when everyone was praising science, rationality, modernity. **Rousseau emerged as a critic of modernity**.*

*Rousseau is known as '**thinker of paradoxes**'. Not only his language is paradoxical, his thoughts also give rise to paradoxical ideas. If he is inspiration for the supporters of democracy, he also provides fodder for totalitarians. If he is an inspiration for liberals, he is also inspiration for socialists.*

Rousseau's concern

*Rousseau represents the psychology of the person who is troubled with the changes happening during his time. i.e. modernization, industrialization, capitalism etc. Hence, he wants to "**go back to the nature**".*

Theme of Rousseau's political philosophy.

*The purpose of life is happiness. The source of happiness is freedom. Freedom is doing what one wants to do. In modern times, there is no freedom, it is just an illusion of freedom. The purpose of his **SOCIAL CONTRACT** is how to get freedom or happiness back. **SOCIAL CONTRACT** is the most famous work of Rousseau. The opening statement of the book is, "**Man is born free, but everywhere in chains.**"*

Ideas of Rousseau.

Human Nature

Man is essentially good. He has the feeling of self-love. As well as sympathy for others.

State of Nature

*It symbolize the life of man before the beginning of modern age or so called civilization. According to Rousseau, **State of Nature is the state of bliss and so perfect happiness.** Man was happy because he was acting according to his wish.*

Origin of Civilization

*It symbolizes origin of reason. Man became rational. In the words of Rousseau, "**Man was Noble Savage.**" and "**Thinking man is a depraved animal.**" When man was savage, uncivilized, he was good, and happy. When man became civilized, or rational, he got reduced to the level of depraved animal. The animal who is never satisfied, who is never happy. Earlier man was happy in the happiness of others but as reason developed the feeling of mine and thine came and thus the modern civilization reduced freedom and happiness.*

Contract

Since the present life is not the life of happiness, Rousseau suggests that man will enter into the contract. According to Rousseau there are two options.

1. Go back to nature. However, it is not practical.
2. Make changes in the present system.

*In present system, we can be free, subject to the condition we are able to live according to our '**real will**'. Man is free when governed by the laws where man has participated in making of such laws, subject to the condition – it is based on his real will (participatory democracy). Rousseau was from France, but he spent many of his years in Geneva, where the institution of direct democracy was in existence, hence he becomes the **champion of direct democracy.***

Features of the contract

*People enter in the contract (all people) and decided to act according to their real will. Rousseau has suggested that man has two types of wills i.e. **real will and actual will.** Real will represents what he desires, is always good. Actual will is how man acts – though sometimes not for his own good.*

Concept of General will.

*It is hypothetical concept. It is a **sum of real wills of all**. General will is always good will. Real will is always right. Though general will is the sum of the real wills of all, yet it is more than the sum of real wills.*

How General will is produced?

*People come together, enter into deliberation and decide that they will act with their real wills. General will can be called as '**will of the state**'.*

Who is state?

We, the people. State is sovereign, in this case people are state so people are sovereign. People are sovereign because they are governed by laws they have made themselves.

What is the core idea in Rousseau?

*The core idea is, when we follow the law made by state, we are free because we are acting as per our real will. Rousseau says **man should be forced to be free**. If somebody does not follow state or laws, state can punish that person.*

Why general will?

To be free and happy. To reconcile liberty and authority. Since we cannot go back to the state of nature, we have to find a system of authority, which ensures liberty.

How man will be free in presence of state?

When man is under self made laws.

How man will be truly free?

When man has participated in the formulation of laws, with real will.

Features of General will

It is a highly abstract and philosophical concept. Though it is sum of real wills, yet it is more than the real will of all. It is always good, right and universal and indivisible. When all will combine, it will result into body politic or state.

According to Rosseau ‘man should be forced to be free.’ It means state can force a person to follow the laws made by state representing the general will. In case a person does not follow state can punish. Thus he comes near to Hobbes.

Example of general will: In context of India, the concept of general will can be seen in the preamble, mentioned as ‘We the People.’ General will can be considered as ‘noble lie.’ It suggests that the present constitution has been given to us by ourselves, when we were acting with our real will. It means we are really free when we act according to the constitution. It is all right if state punishes any person who violates the constitution.

“Rousseau’s general will is Hobbes’s Leviathan with its head chopped off.”

Rousseau is known as thinker of paradoxes. His ideas give rise to contradictory thoughts. On one hand, he is seen as the champion of liberty. On the other hand, his theory provides basis for the justification of state absolutism / totalitarianism. Some scholars believe that there is no difference in Hobbes’s ‘Leviathan’ and Rousseau’s general will. If Hobbes suggests that “covenants without sword are nothing but words”, Rousseau suggests “Man should be forced to be free.”

Rousseau’s ideas were manipulated by totalitarian leaders like Hitler and Mussolini, to justify absolute powers of the state. However it would be injustice with Rousseau if we call him as totalitarian. When Rousseau gives the concept of general will, he also gives the pre-requisite that people should be participating in the formulation of laws, acting with their real will. The concept is very similar to the Gandhian concept of Swaraj.

Though his thoughts have been manipulated by totalitarian leaders, but it is wrong to call him totalitarian.

Rousseau as a thinker of paradoxes

Rousseau as a liberal.

The concern for liberty. Rousseau believes that property is necessary for good life.

Rousseau as a source of inspiration for socialists

Rousseau believes that private property is a cause of social inequalities. Rousseau inspired socialists because he emphasized that society has to be changed.

Rousseau as a champion of democracy.

He supports direct democracy. Man is free only when man is under the law, made by himself.

Rousseau as an inspiration for totalitarians.

State represents the general will, general will is always right. It means the laws made by state are always right and man can be forced to be free.

Rousseau as idealist.

His conception of real will is a metaphysical concept. The importance he gives to the collectivity.

Rousseau's idea of democracy,

Rousseau supports Participative Democracy