
Liberalism: Introduction, Origin, Growth and Elements

Article shared by : **Nitisha**

ADVERTISEMENTS:

Introduction:

The scholars, after a thorough research, have concluded that the liberalism as a political ideology is not the outgrowth of the twentieth century's intellectual progress. Its origin can be traced to the political ideas of the fourteenth century. During the last six centuries the concept had to face several situations and had to overcome uphill tasks in the sense that many political systems, individuals and organisations stridently opposed it on various grounds some of which had solid foundations.

The flood-like appearance of Marx's and Engels' works and Marxian literatures eclipsed though temporarily, the growth and influence of liberalism. The establishment of Bolshevik government in Russia in 1917 kindled the hope in the minds of anti-liberals that with the weapon of Marxism the rapid advance of liberalism could be stopped and particularly an anti-liberal atmosphere could be built up in the Third World states.

At first Moscow and later on Beijing opposed liberalism tooth and nail. Ultimately the academic and political worlds were deeply plunged into the

conflict between two leading ideologies of the world—liberalism and socialism. The recession of the Cold War in the mid-seventies and finally the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991 turned the condition of liberalism upside down. It was being felt that only liberalism could provide solace to all people of the world. It was capable of solving the basic problems both economic and political.

Origin and Definitions:

The word liberal is derived from the Latin word liber which means free men. Liberalis is also a derivative of liber. The central idea of all these words is freedom or liberty. Liberal also denotes generosity or open-mindedness. Open-mindedness/generosity indicate liberty in taking food, drink, social attitude, behaviour and selection of the alternatives.

Thus we find that freedom is always associated with the word liberal. In the middle Ages when the French people used the word liber they meant that people will have freedom in respect of their selection of alternatives and pursuit of thoughts and ideas.

There are large numbers of definitions of liberalism which convey more or less same ideas.

Some are noted below:

“It means the belief that it is the aim of politics to preserve individual’s rights and to maximise freedom of choice” (Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics).

Advocates of liberalism have used some selected words to denote the meaning of liberalism. It means political to (1) Freedom and choice. The freedom to select alternatives which are suitable. (2) Liberalism is a systematic political creed. (3) It is the manifestation of reason and toleration in the face of tradition and absolutism. (4) Freedom, equality, liberty etc. are embodied in the liberalism.

ADVERTISEMENTS:

As an adjective “liberal” implies an attitude of mind, rather than a political creed. But the noun liberalism designates a Political Creed and this was used specifically in the early parts of the nineteenth century. Robert Eccleshall in his noted article Liberalism has stated that liberalism, in ultimate analysis, is a political ideology intimately associated with the birth and evolution of the capitalist world. So we can say that as a political ideology liberalism means to pursue policies of freedom in political and economic spheres and clear restrictions on the activities of state authority.

Liberalism does not embody a particular meaning. It is a cluster of meanings, in different periods it has meant different conceptions. For example, it is an intellectual movement whose purpose is to curb the power and authority of state and to ensure freedom of individuals. It has been observed by a recent analyst that liberalism is an ideology based on a commitment to individualism, freedom, toleration and consent.

Hence we can say that in modern sense liberalism are both an ideology and a movement whose purpose is to strengthen the cause, progress etc. of individuals through the vindication of right to select the choicest alternative and for that purpose to endorse the restrictions upon the authority of state.

Liberalism, strictly speaking, an offshoot of capitalism since it was believed that the meteoric growth of capitalism could be possible only through an adoption of liberal policies which contain an allowance of maximum freedom to investors and producers. Thus, liberalism is an economic and political doctrine.

Rise and Growth of Liberalism:

It is really an uphill task to ascertain the origin of liberalism because an ideology cannot be created at a particular point of time. However, it's quite safe to say that liberalism was born in England during the middle of seventeenth century.

Here again the readers may be cautioned that the seeds of liberalism existed in British society even before that time.

ADVERTISEMENTS:

Nevertheless, we can say that several factors and writings of a number of persons contributed to the origin of their political ideology:

(1) The collapse of feudalism is an important cause of the origin of liberalism. Let us explain it briefly. In the feudal period the feudal lords practically controlled the economy and politics along with the church and its fall opened the advent of capitalism and emergence of a middle class which aspired to have a positive role in politics. The capitalist class and the middle class did not want the dominant role of the church.

The capitalists supplied the finance for the management of state and the middle class supplied executives and administrators. Slowly but steadily these two classes captured the power of the state and wanted to impose restrictions upon the government. In this way there arose liberalism in embryonic form.

(2) Eccleshall in his article Liberalism maintains that Enlightenment is another factor of the growth of liberalism. The thinkers and philosophers of the Enlightenment period were sceptical about the role of laws, administration, custom etc. They strongly advocated for the rational reconstruction of society so that the individuals can get enough freedom. Autocratic rule or dictatorial administration was vehemently opposed.

(3) Two major events of the second half of the eighteenth century helped the emergence of liberalism. These two events are: Declaration of American Independence in 1776 and the Declaration of the Rights of Man in 1789. Both these events furthered the progress of liberalism. American war of independence was not simply a war of the independence of a particular nation but a major war against colonialism which contained the seeds of liberalism. On the other hand, after the French Revolution, Declaration of Rights of Man heralded the collapse of autocratic rule in France and its wave spread to other parts of Europe and this accelerated the advent of liberalism.

(4) The writings (including philosophy) of some men were conspicuous in advancing the emergence of liberalism. Some of them may be stated briefly. John Gray says that Thomas Hobbes may be regarded as an exponent of liberalism. Hobbes' (1588-1679) "Closeness to liberalism lies in part in his uncompromising individualism. It is found also in his egalitarian affirmation of the equal liberty of all men in the state of nature and his rejection of a purely hereditary title to political authority". Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677) was also a precursor of liberalism. He was mainly concerned with natural rights, freedom, curtailment of political power, maintenance of peace and security.

Behind the birth of liberalism there was a very important role of John Locke (1632- 1704). Locke, by many, is regarded as the father of modern nationalism. His Two, Treatise of Government, A Letter Concerning Toleration are regarded by many as potential sources of liberalism. Gray says that Locke's thought harbours a number of themes which confer a distinctive complexion on English liberalism that persists up to the time of John Stuart Mill.

His theory of natural rights, right to property, concept of consent, constitutionalism, people's right to dislodge a government for its failure to act in accordance with the terms and conditions of contract are classic examples of liberal thought.

The major ideas of liberalism enunciated by Locke were carried out by many who belonged to the latter part of the eighteenth century and early years of nineteenth century. To be brief Locke vigorously championed the central themes of liberalism. Tom Paine (1737–1809) was another figure whose thought symbolises the ideas and spirit of liberalism.

Paine strongly advocated for natural rights and limited government which later on became the focus of liberal thought and philosophy. His limited government is nothing but minimal government or state which has been elaborated by Robert Nozick. J. S. Mill and several other political scientists thought that people's liberty, rights and other interests could only be assumed through the constitutionalism, representative government and constitutional declaration of human rights.

Elements of Liberalism:

Liberalism has been branded by many as meta-ideology which means that it encompasses many principles, values and elements within its fold. Whereas other ideologies do not possess this capacity. The following are the main elements/principles/values of liberalism—Individualism, freedom, reason, toleration, consent, constitutionalism, equality and justice.

1. Individualism:

Individualism is the central idea or theme of liberalism. It believes that the interests or welfare of the individual should be given primacy over all other values and principles. Individual is the basic concept of political theory and

arrangements shall be made to safeguard his interest. Liberalism says that since a political system consists of individuals it should be the chief objective of this system to see that their interests are fully protected and the individuals are quite capable of doing their own job. The role of the state is to some extent like a night watchman.

This conclusion is based on certain presumptions such as they are reasonable and do not harm others. They are capable of pursuing their own interests and outside interference will not produce any benefit. To reach the goals (the development of individual's personality, protection of interests, allowance of freedom etc.) it is essential that the society is to be restructured suitable for people.

It has been suggested by liberal thinkers that establishment of market economy, curtailment of state authority to the minimum level, non-governmental organisations must have maximum freedom to operate etc. The liberalism believes that all these are indispensable for the development of the latent qualities of the individuals. That is why it is frequently said that the primacy of the individuals is the core of liberalism or liberal political philosophy.

2. Freedom:

Another important core value, principle or element of liberalism is freedom. To the liberals it is the value of supreme importance because without it the individual will simply be a unit without any dignity. Moreover, liberty or freedom is the best vehicle for developing the best qualities. But the liberals do

not advocate for absolute or unrestricted freedom because freedom/liberty will do more harm.

They are in favour of chained or restricted liberty. J. S. Mill (1806–1873) was the pioneer of individual liberty but he favoured the association of law with freedom because he believed that restriction is for the general welfare of the community. The famous British historian Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997) developed a famous concept of liberty which states that liberty/freedom has two concepts—negative and positive.

The negative liberty implies that man should be allowed to enjoy an atmosphere free from all sorts of restrictions. This was the contention of classical thinkers. But modern liberals do not think of liberty where there shall be no restrictions. It is positive liberty because real liberty is one which implies laws and restrictions.

3. Reason:

Liberalism harbours upon reason. To put it in other words, liberalism and reason are inseparable from each other.

This relationship can be viewed from angles more than one:

(1) Mention has been made earlier that liberalism partially the product of Enlightenment which strongly emphasises that man is rational being and guided by reason and rationality. The advent of Enlightenment emancipated man from age- old superstition, ignorance and bondage. Enlightenment also established the age of reason.

(2) Since individuals are rational and reasonable they are quite capable of taking any decision and to judge what is good and what is bad for them. In that case there is no necessity of imposing any decision by any outside power/authority.

(3) The liberals believe that real progress of society could be achieved only through the individual initiative and outside interference will dampen the spirit

of initiative.

(4) The primacy of reason ultimately led Adam Smith (1723-1790) to enunciate a doctrine of laissez-faire. A large number of philosophers and thinkers enriched the various aspects of Enlightenment through their philosophy and ideas. Enlightenment in all possible ways gave priority to reason and rationality. "Rationalism is the belief that the world has a rational structure and that this can be disclosed through the exercise of human reason and critical enquiry".

4. Toleration:

Toleration is another value/element of liberalism. In any society there is found different opinions, religious sects or communities of belief and faith. All of them must live side by side peacefully and for this is required toleration. Also various ideologies and opinions make a society diverse. It is the basic feature of any society. Liberalism believes that all these diversities must exist side by side.

One community/section has no right to impose its decision or belief of another. Only in authoritarian community imposition of ideas and belief happens. On the other hand, liberalism attempts to accommodate all the beliefs, faiths, ideologies and opinions. Lord Ramakrishna very frequently said many are the opinions and many are the ways.

The noted French philosopher Voltaire (1694-1778) once said "I detest what you say but I will defend to the death your right to say it". This opinion of Voltaire clearly shows that he forcefully advocated for the practice of toleration. Massacre of St. Bartholomew (1572) is the manifestation of the most hated type of intolerance.

Not only this massacre, numerous other events took place in various parts of European society and they were definitely black spots of society. What liberalism wants to impress upon us is that toleration ought to be practised by all sections

of body politic and if it is not done the progress will be adversely affected which will be a loss for whole humanity.

5. Consent:

Consent is another value/element of liberalism. The idea of consent though very old, its modern appearance took place in the hands of the contractualists, such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Both of them assertively argued that the members of the state of nature assembled together to take a decision about the setting up of a body politic and behind this decision there was the consent of all. Locke dealt elaborately with consent and this was one of the pillars of his liberalism.

The freedom fighters of America raised their arms against the British rulers and said that they had no consent behind British rule in America. We hold the view that consent is a very important element of any democratic government and this has been variously explained by many in numerous forms. It is generally held that representative form of government is the most popular embodiment of consent. J.S. Mill was a great defender of government based on consent.

The liberal thinkers even go a step ahead and declare that every law and policy must be based on the consent of those for whom these are made. In this way consent has become an integral part of democracy and liberal political philosophers are of the opinion that all forms of pluralist societies (also liberal societies) must start from below. That is, consent of all or majority must constitute the basic structure of society.

6. Constitutionalism:

Constitutionalism is an important principle/value/element of liberalism. It has two meanings—narrow and broad. In its narrow meaning constitutionalism means certain limitations upon the government specified by constitution. The

narrow meaning further states that whenever a government intends to discharge any function or adopt a policy it must follow the restrictions.

In broader sense it implies values, principles and ideas which act as guide to the government. Whenever the government proceeds to some work it must implement these values, principles, ideas etc. The objective is to give proper credence to the aspirations of the people and to translate them into reality.

Constitutionalism is a basic principle of liberalism. It, in simple language, states that government's business never specifies that it has the unlimited freedom to do anything without considering the advantages or disadvantages of the common people. It must follow certain basic rules and procedures laid down in the basic or ordinary laws.

Needless to say that this idea was first formulated by Locke and in the later periods it was adhered to by many. This is called constitutionalism or liberation. We can further state that constitutional principles must be observed by both the rulers and the ruled and none has the authority to act arbitrarily. The arbitrariness and constitutionalism are the issues situated at two opposite poles. Constitutionalism is another name of limited government or the theory of limited state.

7. Equality:

Liberalism is based on another principle and it is equality. Though we treat it as a political principle/value it is also a religious and moral principle because the religious- minded people generally say that every person is born equal as Rousseau said man is born free. So it is unreligious to deprive him of his equal status with others.

The religious people also believe that it is never the intention of God to create inequalities among men and if an artificial distinction is created among men that will go against the will of God and in that sense it is immoral. We can further

observe that as a political ideology liberalism has also built up a nexus with religion.

ADVERTISEMENTS:

But liberalism is also an ideology of practical world. In any society all the individuals cannot claim same levels of merit, intelligence and capacity of hard work and in that case there must arise clear differences in remuneration. This must be admitted. Idleness and hard work cannot be equally remunerated and if done so that will make way for the appearance of gross injustice. None will be ready to demonstrate his ability.

This type of social inequality does not infringe upon the concept of equality. Equality as a principle in political science asserts that none will be allowed to enjoy special privileges ignoring the common minimum privileges to which everyone has legitimate claims.

8. Justice:

Though justice is a principle of both socialism and liberalism, the latter gives it more importance and politically declares that the very basis of liberalism is justice. The liberal justice has several forms or meanings. We note few of them. It is the declared policy of liberalism that each individual will have his due share and since all men are born equal none can deprive other of the share.

All the persons have same status in society and there shall be an atmosphere so that people can enjoy the status. "Liberals, fiercely disapprove of any social privileges or advantages that are enjoyed by some but denied to others on the basis of factors such as gender, race, colour, creed, religion or social background. Rights should not be reserved for any particular class of persons. The most important forms of equality are legal equality and political equality". Liberal conception of justice further draws our attention to the point that the door of opportunity shall be open to all.