

# **FACULTY OF JURIDICAL SCIENCES**

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# Lecture-35



# Liberalism: Introduction, Origin, Growth and Elements

## 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.

“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.

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.

**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.

## **MCQ**

1.. The modern Liberals are:

A. Opposed to nationalization of industries

B. In favour of nationalization of large scale industries only

C. In favour of nationalization of all industries

D. In favour of promoting small scale and cottage industries

2. Modern individualists are for:

A. Concentration of all powers in the hands of the state

B. Abolition of state

C. Decentralization of authority

D. Increasing powers of state

Answer & Explanation

3. Which one of the following criticisms against Liberalism has been wrongly listed?

A. Liberalism paves the way for anarchy by limiting the claims of authority

B. Liberalism leads to negation of individual liberty by concentration too much of power in the state

C. Liberalism does not provide any viable solution to the problems of the third world

D. Liberalism abandons freedom and rational discussion if it poses a threat to the capitalist system

4. Individualism is also known as:

A. Idealism

B. Syndicalism

C. Laissez Faire

D. Collectivism

5.. The modern individualists consider the state as:

A. Omnipotent

B. Indispensable

C. One of many groups

D. Superfluous

