UNIT 12: LIBERALISM AND ITS PRINCIPLES

UNIT STRUCTURE

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12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to

- Explain the origin of liberalism.
- Understand the characteristics of liberalism.
- Describe the classification of liberalism
- Understand the effects of liberalism in society.

12.2 INTRODUCTION

Liberalism is a worldview related to political philosophy consists of the ideas of liberty and equality. It advocates a wide array of views depending on their understanding of these principles, but generally they support ideas such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, free markets, civil rights, democratic societies, secular governments, gender equality etc. It is the culmination of developments in western society that produced a sense of the importance of human individuality. As a political doctrine it takes protecting and enhancing the freedom of the individual to

be the central problem of politics. They typically believe that government is necessary to protect individuals from being harmed by others. Liberalism first became a distinct political movement during the age of enlightenment and it became popular among philosophers and economists in the western world. It rejected the prevailing social and political norms of hereditary privilege, state religion, absolute monarchy and the Divine Rights of kings.

The word 'liberalism' is derives from the Latin word "liber" which means "free" or "not a slave". In everyday use, it also denotes generous and open-minded, as well as free from restraint and from prejudice. The central idea of all these words is freedom or liberty. Open-mindedness and generosity indicates liberty in taking food, drink, social attitude, behaviour and selection of the alternatives.

Liberalism as a political and moral philosophy is centered on two main principles - these are individualism and liberty. Firstly, liberalism places the individual at the heart of society and argues that the highest value social order is one that is built around the individual. Secondly, the purpose of society is to allow individuals to reach their full potential if they want to, and the best way to do this is to give the individual as much liberty as possible. These two key principles are the foundations upon which the various elements of liberalism spring forth.

Liberalism believes that society should be organized in accordance with certain unchangeable and inviolable human rights, especially the rights to life, liberty and property. It also holds that traditions do not carry any inherent value, that social practices ought to be continuously adjusted for the greater benefit of humanity, and that there should be no foundational assumptions viz. the Divine Right of Kings, hereditary status or established religion that take precedence over other aspects of government.

Liberalism has a narrow and broad perspective. At the narrow level, liberalism may be viewed from political and economic points of view. And from the broader level, it is like a mental attitude that attempts in the light of its presuppositions to analyze and integrate the varied intellectual, moral, religious, social, economic and political relationship of human beings. At the social level, it stands for secularism. Here freedom is related to religion

and morality. Liberalism lays stress on the value of free individual conscious of his capacity for self expression and unregulated development of his personality. Again liberalism implies the ideal of free trade coupled with internal freedom of production at the economic level. However it stands for political liberty and the right to property at the political level.

12.3 ORIGIN OF LIBERALISM

John Locke was the first to develop a liberal philosophy, including the right to private property and the consent of the governed. These ideas were first unified as a distinct ideology by him who is generally regarded as the father of modern liberalism. Locke developed the radical notion that government acquires consent from the governed, which has to be constantly present for a government to remain legitimate. His influential Two Treatises (1690), the foundational text of liberal ideology, outlined his major ideas. His insistence that lawful government did not have a supernatural basis was a sharp break from previous theories of governance. Based on the social contract principle, Locke argued that there was a natural right to the liberty of conscience, which he argued must therefore remain protected from any government authority. He also formulated a general defense for religious toleration in his Letters Concerning Toleration. Locke was influenced by the liberal ideas of John Milton, who was a staunch advocate of freedom in all its forms. Milton argued for disestablishment as the only effective way of achieving broad toleration. Nevertheless, the idea of natural rights played a key role in providing the ideological justification for the American and the French revolutions, and in the further development of Liberalism.

In France, the Baron-de-Montesquieu advocated laws restraining even monarchs, rather than accepting as natural the mere rule of force and tradition. In the late French Enlightenment, Voltaire argued on intellectual grounds for the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in France. Again Rousseau argued for a natural freedom for mankind for changes in political and social arrangements based around the idea that society can restrain a natural human liberty, but not obliterate its nature.

Another major contributing group to the ideas of Liberalism are associated with the Scottish Enlightenment, especially David Hume and Adam Smith. Hume's most important contribution to Liberalism was his assertion that the fundamental rules of human behaviour would eventually overcome any attempts to regulate them. Adam Smith expounded the theory that individuals could structure both moral and economic life without direction from the state and that nations would be strongest when their citizens were free to follow their own initiative. John Stuart Mill also popularized and expanded liberal ideas in the mid-19th Century, grounding them in the instrumental and the pragmatic, particularly in his "On Liberty" of 1859 and other works. Towards the end of the 19th Century, though, splits were developing within Liberalism between those who accepted some government intervention in the economy, and those who became increasingly anti-government, in some cases adopting varieties of Anarchism.

In the 20th Century, in the face of the growing relative inequality of wealth, a theory of Modern Liberalism (or New Liberalism or Social Liberalism) was developed to describe how a government could intervene in the economy to protect liberty while still avoiding Socialism. Among others, John Dewey, J.M. Keynes, Roosevelt, Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman and John Kenneth Galbraith can be singled out as influential in this respect. In Europe and North America, the establishment of social liberalism became a key component in the expansion of the welfare state.

12.4 ELEMENTS OF LIBERALISM

Liberalism has been branded by many as meta-ideology which means that it encompasses many principles, values and elements within its crease. John Gray identified four essential elements of liberalism. These were individualism, egalitarianism, universalism and meliorism. But egalitarianism, universalism and meliorism are critical components of liberalism. Along with individualism the other important elements of liberalism are- 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.

2. Freedom:

Another important core value, principle or element of liberalism is freedom. For the liberals it is the value of supreme importance as without it the individual will simply be a unit without any dignity. Furthermore, liberty or freedom is the best vehicle for developing the best qualities. But the liberals do not advocate for absolute or unrestricted freedom as freedom will do more harm.

The liberals are in favor of chained or restricted liberty. J. S. Mill was the pioneer of individual liberty but he favored the association of law with freedom since he believed that restriction is for the general welfare of the community. The famous British historian Isaiah Berlin has developed a famous concept of liberty according to which liberty has been discussed through 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 as real liberty is one which implies laws and restrictions.

3. Reason:

Liberalism and reason are inseparable from each other. This relation can be viewed from many angles. Firstly, liberalism partially the product of Enlightenment which strongly emphasizes 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.

Secondly, 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 authority.

4. Toleration:

Toleration is another element of liberalism. In any society there are different opinions, religious sects or communities of belief and faith. All these must live side by side peacefully and for this purpose toleration is required. It is the basic feature of any society. Liberalism believes that all these diversities must exist side by side. One community 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.

5. Consent:

Consent is another 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.

6. Constitutionalism:

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

7. Equality:

Liberalism is based on another principle i.e. equality. Though we treat it as a political principle it is also a religious and moral principle since 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. As a political ideology liberalism has also built up a nexus with religion.

8. Justice:

Though justice is a principle of both socialism and liberalism, the latter gives it more importance. It is also declared politically that the very basis of liberalism is justice. The liberal justice has several forms or meanings. It is the declared policy of liberalism that each individual will have his due share and since all men are born equal. No one can deprive other of the share.

While individualism is probably the most important element, egalitarianism, universalism and meliorism are less effective components of liberalism. Egalitarianism means equal opportunity in the sense promoted by classical liberals. It does not mean equality in a positive way.

Universalism implies that the moral principles that follow liberalism apply to all human beings, no matter what culture they are in.

Meliorism is the belief that human beings have the capacity to become better just as their social and political institutions can become better.

12.5 CHARACTERISTICS OF LIBERALISM

John Hallowell has pinpointed the following characteristics of liberalism:

- Liberalism is a principle in the absolute value of human personality and spiritual quality of the individual.
- It believes in the autonomy of the individual will.
- It is an idea in the essential rationality and goodness of man.
- Liberalism believes in the inalienable rights of the individual, particularly the rights of life, liberty and property.
- Liberalism believes in individual freedom in all spheres of life-political, economic, social, intellectual and religious.
- Liberalism believes that truth is accessible to man's natural reason.

12.6 PRINCIPLES OF LIBERALISM

As liberalism tends to pragmatic rather than theoretical has many principles and regain prominence most specifically in response to the recent problems of the world. The basic principles of liberalism are-

1. **Liberation of Individual over the state:** Liberalism is often used upon the founding of the country that divorced the relationship between the individual and the state. The prevailing concepts of the time held that an individual was property of the state and the founding fathers sought to utilize liberalism to give individuals their own rights that were independent of the state. The individuals were no longer properties of the state, but they were human beings who deserved their own inalienable rights.
2. **Promotion of Freedom:** As liberalism upholds individual rights, it has the principle of promotion of freedom. Freedom to vote, speaks a person's mind, publish government criticisms, protest and own weapons are all associated with the rights of an individual. The main tenant of liberalism is that individuals may do as they please as long as it does not harm others or affect their freedom.
3. **Associated with progress:** The term liberalism is used to connote progress by many thinkers. It implies progress as it seeks to constantly re-evaluate the overbearing presences of the government. It always

tries to bring the power back to the individual as it promotes future change instead of being back stuck in tradition.

4. **Respect minorities:** One of the great principles of liberalism is its capacity to respect minorities and minority traditions. Liberalism promotes equal rights for all. Regardless of beliefs, liberalism holds that individuals deserve to practice their own beliefs as long as it does not limit the freedom of others.
5. **Equality of opportunity:** Equality of opportunity is an important principle of liberalism. It is the stage where everyone starts out with the same opportunities i.e. access to similar levels of education, healthcare etc. and it's up to the individual to do what they want with these opportunities. It differs from socialism that wants equality of outcome, where everyone comes out with an equal outcome regardless of their actions or decisions.
6. **Believe in smaller government:** Liberalists tend to believe in smaller governments which are very democratic and accountable to the people.
7. **Openness:** Openness is also the principle of liberalism. The followers of liberalism believe on free market, public education and both small government and representative democracy. It is also right and proper to end colonialism.

12.7 CLASSIFICATION OF LIBERALISM

In political philosophy two major currents of thought within Liberalism are found-- Classical Liberalism and Social Liberalism:

- Classical Liberalism holds that the only real freedom is freedom from coercion, and that state intervention in the economy is a coercive power that restricts the economic freedom of individuals, and so should be avoided as far as possible. It favors economic policy to maintain individual liberty, peace, security and property rights and opposes the welfare state.
- Social Liberalism argues that governments must take an active role in promoting the freedom of citizens, and that real freedom can only exist when citizens are healthy, educated and free from poverty. Social Liberals believe that this freedom can be ensured when governments guarantee

the right to an education, health care and a living wage, in addition to other responsibilities such as laws against discrimination in housing and employment, laws against pollution of the environment, and the provision of welfare, all of which would be supported by a progressive taxation system.

As with many political philosophies, there are several forms and variations of Liberalism, including the following:

- Conservative Liberalism is a variant of Liberalism representing the right-wing of the Liberal movement. It combines liberal values and policies with conservative stances. Unlike Liberal Conservatives, however, who tend to be more committed to authority, tradition and established religion, Conservative Liberals are supporters of the separation between church and state.
- Economic Liberalism is the theory of economics in Classical Liberalism that developed during the Enlightenment, particularly by Adam Smith. It advocates minimal interference by government in the economy. Libertarianism, Neo-liberalism and some schools of Conservatism, particularly Liberal Conservatism are often referred to as Economic Liberalism.
- Neo liberalism refers to a program of reducing trade barriers and internal market restrictions, while using government power to enforce opening of foreign markets. In some ways it is a modern attempt, championed by Conservatives to revert to a more pure Classical Liberalism.
- American Liberalism is largely a combination of social liberalism, social progressivism, and mixed economy philosophy. It is distinguished from Classic Liberalism and Libertarianism, which also claim freedom as their primary goal, in its insistence upon the inclusion of positive rights (for e.g. education, health care and other services and goods believed to be required for human development and self-actualization) and in a broader definition of equality.
- National Liberalism is a variant of Liberalism commonly found in several European countries in the 19th and 20th Century. It combines nationalism with policies mainly derived from Economic Liberalism.

- Ordo liberalism is a mid-20th Century school of Liberalism, developed mainly in Germany. It emphasizes the need for the state to ensure that the free market produces results close to its theoretical potential.
- Paleo liberalism is a term though largely ambiguous, means extreme Liberalism, and very socialist or socially libertarian Liberalism, and opposed to Neo liberalism.
- Cultural Liberalism is a liberal view of society that stresses the freedom of individuals from cultural norms.

12.8 IMPLICATION OF LIBERALISM

There are some important implications that liberalism has for society. Since individuals can only truly be individuals when they make their own decisions, there is a requirement for the government to take a liberal approach to society that is made up of individuals. Individuals are to be controlled neither for the state's benefit nor even for their own 'benefit'. However, that classical liberal argue that any kind of state interference other than that pertaining to upholding the harm principle will harm the individual - no benefit is possible. Such a belief does not mean that there will be continuous conflict. Classical liberals believe that individuals can voluntarily come together and form peaceful associations. Melleuish stressed that liberty should not be confused with competition or Social Darwinism, but that it involves the freedom of people to cooperate. Another implication is that the government should not force people to reach their potential as any such attempt by government would probably hinder overall potential. For example, the redistribution of goods to help the poor reach their potential requires taxes, and these impose restrictions on the already successful to further their potential even more. Although liberty is the best way for individuals to reach their potential, it should also be acknowledged that liberty has value in itself. As a result if people want to be hermits they should be allowed to do so. Furthermore, this liberal approach applies to individuals as well - individuals should not force their beliefs on other individuals. An individual that is forced but not convinced is still of the same mind and any such

action following would be the result of fear and not conviction would be morally wrong. In addition to the harm principle, there is the 'free-rider' problem whereby individuals benefit from the good works of others and through no effort of their own. Hence, there is another possible justification for state intervention to prevent such free-riding. Liberalism is not only morally good, but it provides society with the most material wealth as a by-product of individuals reaching their full potential. Finally, another area where government intervention may be legitimate is in the case of individuals who are not able to exercise judgment and make their own choices. Therefore, liberalism can shape society in many different ways, but always in the advancement of individual freedom.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1) What is Liberalism?

Q2) According to Liberalism, what is necessary what is necessary to protect individualisms?

Q3) What is literal meaning of the term 'liberalism'?

Q4) What are two main principles of Liberalism?

Q5) Who for the first time has developed liberalism?

Q6) Who is the author of the book, 'Two Treatises'?

Q7) Who is the author of the book, 'On Liberty'?

Q8) What are the two essential elements of liberalism identified by John Gray?

Q9) What are the two major thoughts of liberalism found in political philosophy?

Q10) What is cultural liberalism?



11.7 LET US SUM UP

We have discussed the concept of liberalism and its principles. The basic points of this philosophical thought are:

- Liberalism is a multi-faceted ideology with wide-ranging implications for society.
- It takes protecting and enhancing the freedom of the individual to be the central problem of politics.
- There are two basic grounds of liberalism-individualism and liberty.
- John Locke was the first profounder of liberalism.
- Liberalism has some important elements- freedom, reason, toleration, consent, constitutionalism, equality, justice etc.
- Liberalism has some significant principles that create great implication in society.
- There are basically two divisions of liberalism-classical liberalism and social liberalism. Besides it some other classifications are also found.



12.10 FURTHER READINGS

1) Andersson, Emil. 2011. Political Liberalism and the Interests of Children: A Reply to Timothy Michael Fowler,' Res Publica, 17: 291-96.
2) Beitz, Charles. 1997. Political Theory and International Relations, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
3) Benn, Stanley I. 1988. A Theory of Freedom, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
4) Bentham, Jeremy. 1952. Manual of Political Economy in Jeremy Bentham's Economic Writings W. Stark (ed.), London: Allen and Unwin.
5) Bentham, Jeremy. 1823. Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart (eds.), London: Athlone Press.

6) Berlin, Isaiah. 1969. Two Concepts of Liberty,' in his Four Essays on Liberty, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 118-72.

7) Guido, De Ruggiero. 1927. The History of European Liberalism, trans. By R.G. Collingwood. Gloucester, Mass. Peter Smith

12.11 ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1: Liberalism is a worldview related to political philosophy consists of the idea of liberty and equality.

Ans to Q2: Government

Ans to Q3: The world liberalism is derives from the Latin term 'liber', which means 'free' or 'not slave'.

Ans to Q4: Individualism and liberty.

Ans to Q5: John Locke

Ans to Q6: John Locke

Ans to Q7: J.S. Mill

Ans to Q8: John Gray

Ans to Q9: Classical liberalism and Social Liberalism

Ans to Q10: Cultural liberalism is a liberal view of society that stresses the freedom of individuals form cultural norms.

12.12 MODEL QUESTION

A. Very short Questions

Q1: What is liberalism?

Q2: From which term 'liberalism' is derived?

Q3: Who was the profounder of liberalism?

Q4: What are the two basic grounds of liberalism?

B. Q1: Write short note on

a) Classical liberalism

b) Characteristics of liberalism

Q2: Write about individualism as an element of liberalism.

Q3: Is freedom a necessary element of liberalism? Give your comments.

C. Long Questions (Answer in about 300-500)

Q1: Explain the principles of liberalism.

Q2: Discuss justice and equality as elements of liberalism.

Q3: Explain the origin of liberalism.

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