

Department of Political Science

Dumkal College

For 1st Semester Honours Students

BASIC TENETS OF LIBERALISM

Liberalism is a principle of politics which insists on 'liberty' of individual as the first and foremost goal of public policy. Liberty, in this sense, implies 'liberation' from restraints particularly from the restraints imposed by an authoritarian state. This principle was evolved in the West in late seventeenth century in order to liquidate feudal privileges of the land-owning class and to create favourable conditions for the new entrepreneurial class to enable them to contribute to social progress.

In fact, liberalism is not a fixed mode of thought, but an intellectual movement which seeks to accommodate new ideas in order to face new situations and new challenges. However, its basic tenets may be identified as follows:

- (a) Man is a rational creature. He has immense potential to contribute to social progress as well as to his own good;
- (b) There is no basic contradiction between an individual's self-interest and the common interest of society. In fact, the common interest demotes a point of reconciliation between the diverse interests of different individuals
- (c) Man is endowed with certain natural rights which cannot be transgressed by any authority;
- (d) Civil society and the state are artificial institutions created by individuals to serve the common interest. They are entitled to demand obedience from individuals on the condition of fulfilling this function;
- (e) Liberalism believes in the primacy of procedure over the end-product. It means, if the procedure for arriving at a decision is right, the decision may be accepted to be right. Liberal view of freedom, equality, justice and democracy is a search for right procedure in different spheres of social life;
- (f) Liberalism promotes civil liberties of the individual, including freedom of thought and expression, freedom of association and movement, personal freedom (which rules out search

or arrest without a warrant) and strict compliance with legal and judicial procedure. Any restriction on individual freedom should be meant to ensure equal freedom for others;

(g) Liberalism upholds freedom of contract. No individual can accept any obligation without his own consent, and without consideration of mutual benefit. The state would function as an umpire in the enforcement of contracts. However, a contract concluded under pressure, or the one which compromises dignity of the individual, shall be void and finally,

(h) Liberalism holds that public policy should be the product of free bargaining between groups of individuals formed to pursue their specific interests.

In short, liberalism treats market society as the model of social organization where role of the state should be confined to the protection of individuals life and property, enforcement of contracts, and maintenance of minimum common services which would not be undertaken by private entrepreneurs. In liberal view, the state is a necessary evil. Liberalism treats the state as the means and individual as the end. It rules out absolute authority of the state.

Early exponents of liberalism include John Locke (1632-1704), Adam Smith (1723-90) and Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). All of them were English philosophers. Locke is known as the father of liberalism. Smith is known as the father of economics; and Bentham, the founder of utilitarianism. All of them defended the principle of laissez-faire which implies least interference of the state in the economic activities of individuals. They are the founders of classical liberalism which is called negative liberalism because it contemplates negative role of the state in the sphere of mutual interaction of individuals. In late nineteenth century, Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), an English philosopher, sought to reaffirm negative liberalism through the application of the principles of natural sciences to social organization. This version of liberalism paved the way for establishing capitalism in the economic sphere.

BROAD STREAMS OF LIBERALISM

Early liberal theory developed in two main directions: (a) individualism; and (b) utilitarianism. Individualism conceded primacy of the individual as a rational being. It required that individual's dignity, independent existence and judgement should be given full recognition while making public policy and decisions. It means, no individual shall be made to suffer in order to benefit any larger unit of society. According to this view, only an individual can have any rights; family, trade union, corporation or the state cannot have any rights which could be distinguished from the rights of their individual members. Similarly, no social unit can have any interests which could be distinguished from the interests of its individual members. Individualism supports a social and legal system which is based on voluntary transactions between individuals. This view strongly upholds market society model and holds that even

taxation should be confined to the provision and maintenance of common services. John Locke and Adam Smith are the early exponents of individualism.

On the other hand, utilitarianism stands for 'greatest happiness of the greatest number' where interest of the few may be sacrificed in the interest of the collectivity. Happiness is defined as the balance of pleasure over pain derived from various goods and services, acts and policies. Founder of this school of thought, Jeremy Bentham, observed that nature has placed mankind under two sovereign masters pleasure and pain. Human behaviour is guided by an urge to obtain pleasure and avoid pain. Moral principles and state policy should aim at promoting 'greatest happiness of the greatest number'. Bentham made no distinction between qualities of different pleasures. He insisted on maximizing the quantity of pleasure. But John Stuart Mill (1806-73) pointed to qualitative differences between different types of pleasure, and thus recognized the variety of tastes of different individuals. Further, he projected the liberty of individual as the highest value. These modifications in utilitarianism tilted it toward individualism and transformed its basic character. Mill also pleaded for taxation of the rich for the benefit of the poor, and thus paved the way for the welfare state.

In the nineteenth century, T.H. Green (1836-82), another English philosopher, sought to add a moral dimension to liberalism and thereby advanced a full-fledged theory of the welfare state. This tradition was further developed by L.T. Hobhouse (1864-1929), Harold J. Laski (1893-1950) and R.H. Tawney (1880-1962) all of them were English philosophers. Thus, the theory and practice of the welfare state flourished in the first half of the twentieth-century England. This theory contemplates positive role of the state in securing a dignified life to individuals. It is, therefore, called positive liberalism.

On the political side, liberalism promotes democracy; on the economic side, it promotes capitalism. Democracy is concerned with fulfilling needs and aspirations of ordinary people, but capitalism results in the concentration of economic power in the hands of the few who may use it against the interests of ordinary people. This situation is sought to be rectified by the mechanism of the welfare state.