

Political Philosophies

Liberalism

Emergence and Development

Liberalism is a doctrine that emerged out of the Enlightenment, the Glorious Revolution in England and the French Revolution. Each of these events embodied one major premise of liberalism. From the enlightenment emerged the view that there are no moral goals, which we know for certain to be absolutely right, and therefore to impose any particular way of life on the citizen of a state is wrong. From the Glorious Revolution emerged the view that the divine right of any kind of rule could not be justified and from the French Revolution the claim that the individual liberty is so sacred that no authority can violate it. It was a response to monarchical power, which claimed absolute authority in the name of the divine right

of king. In England it was a result of a reaction of the bourgeoisie against the power of the king to tax the subjects without the consent of the Parliament. In France it was a reaction against monarchy, which tried to prevent, a discussion and debate on political issues. The French bourgeoisie expressed its aspirations in the famous phrase "liberty, equality and fraternity". The bourgeoisie consisted mainly of businessmen, shop owners, merchants, bankers, intellectuals and professionals.

These classes wanted an end to the period of feudal anarchy where the nobles were constantly at war with one another. The classes were more interested in capital accumulation. Anarchy in society was not conducive to it. In the place of mercantilism they wanted economic system of free trade based on the principle of laissez-faire. These classes also wanted an end to the outmoded economic controls on trade, capital investment and business growth. They pleaded for the abolition of inherited privileges that distinguished aristocracy from the bourgeoisie. They sought the supremacy of Parliament. Montesquieu's *The Spirit of laws*. Bentham's *Fragment on Government* and Smith's *Wealth of Nations* were a series of landmarks in the evolution of liberalism.

Liberals argued that each individual was rational citizen capable of taking one's own decision. A good society was one in which their satisfaction or interests were maximized. Society was merely conceived as a conglomeration of individuals who rationally calculated their interests and sought power to that end. There was no such thing as social good or common good or public welfare apart from the good of the individuals with composing society. All that the society had was a collection of individuals with their own private interests.

Such interests were sought to be maximised through increased production and market mechanism. These were based on twin concepts of individual enterprise and the unlimited right to property. There was to be free competition. This competition determined the nature of production, the prices of the goods produced and the structure of human relationship as producers, buyers and

consumers. Market was the chief motivating force for the pursuit of all values. The individual took decisions on the basis of one's perception of its own individual interest. Liberals argued that if the individuals were allowed to pursue their rationally calculated interests, there would be equilibrium in society, and prices would then tend to be just what would induce buyers to buy what was produced, and producers to produce what would be bought'. This was expressed in Adam Smith's concept of "invisible hand." It meant that the general welfare was a function of their own acquisitive instinct. The state became rich in proportion to every member becoming rich individually. The divergent and conflicting interests were automatically harmonised as a result of it. Human beings were considered free in proportion to what has been, called "proprietor of their own person". Politics was conceived as autonomous, capable of rising above narrow vested interests. It was believed that some central organization was required to regulate human relationships in society. The state represents this organization. It was brought into existence to hold the ring for the pursuit of their interests by the individuals. The functions of the state were minimized. The task of the government was merely to reconcile conflicting interests. It was 'a necessary evil'. And, therefore, as Bentham argued, best government was the one which governed the least. The basic function of the government was to ensure our natural right to private property. Locke gave expression to this idea. Government had no right to exist if it failed to do so. The private interests sought to promote themselves through the institutional mechanism of competitive democracy.

The doctrine of liberty was tied to doctrine of equality. The words 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity' were embodied in the French Revolution. The American Declaration of Independence also embodied the same ideas. But these liberals were conscious of the substantial differences among individuals. What they meant was an equal opportunity to prove their worth. They rejected aristocratic claim on the basis of birth or heredity. It must be noted that their claim to equality was

only a political claim. They did not believe in economic equality. Certain sections indeed believed that economic inequality was not only inevitable but also positively good for all concerned.

In the second phase, this doctrine was modified in the later half of the nineteenth century by thinkers like J.S. Mill and T.H. Green. They believed that the interests of the individuals were tied to social interests. They linked up the idea of the individual good to the common good. Green recognized the existence of people who enjoyed less liberty than was enjoyed by slaves in the ancient world. It was noticed that the rich were becoming richer and the poor proportionately poorer. As a result of Industrial Revolution, monopolistic tendencies began to emerge. Control over economic life appeared to be passing into the hands of a few economically powerful persons.

Both Mill and Green, and Ranade in our own country, realized that each individual was entitled to equal opportunity. All of them moved to and fro between the individual and the community. Green insisted that individual freedom and fulfillment were attainable only through society. "There is a work of moral liberation", pleaded Green, "which society, through its various agencies is constantly carrying on for the individual". These liberals pleaded that the problem of distribution demanded an active interference of the state in the economic life of society. The state was a community of communities. It was expected to enforce standards of cleanliness and health. It was expected to ensure that large masses of humanity did not have to live in conditions of poverty and squalor. State was required to bring about conditions in which "there were chances of equal development of all. Ranade favoured the idea that the state must redistribute wealth in society by providing equality of opportunity and prospects of full employment to all.

This new version of liberalism lightly emphasised that whenever the individual found social experience frustrating, one had a right to expect that the state would come to its rescue. Society must provide opportunities not merely for increase

of wealth but also for development of total human personality. The concept of welfare state is a product of this line of thinking. In 1930s, Roosevelt initiated 'New Deal Programmes' on similar lines. The governments were expected to ensure the end of domination by a property owning bourgeoisie and maximise individual opportunity. They discarded the concept of free market as a guarantee of economic efficiency. The "invisible hand" may have importance in a system of equal competition but it did not have much relevance to an economic system in which there was grave inequality. The decisions of a very small number of business houses affected the life pattern of all individuals.

The welfare state thus tried to make education widely available. It regulated hours and work, wages and working conditions of labour, tried to curb employment of children in factories and monopolistic tendencies in economy. It was accepted that enlargement of economic liberty was necessary for a proper enjoyment of political or civil liberty by all. There was a change in liberal concept of justice. Rawls has expressed the idea thus the state must so arrange the scheme of benefits and burdens so that the least advantaged may share the resources of the fortunate. The revolution in the economic thought was brought about by John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946) and the report of Lord Beveridge on social insurance. The social insurance was treated as a part of a comprehensive policy of social progress. It was an attack on want. The state in organizing security, argued Beveridge, should not stifle incentive and opportunity. While the state should try to secure notional minimum for all, it should leave enough room for voluntary action. In India the Mahalonobis approach followed much the same policy. Tentative, piecemeal and adhoc attempts to change economy lost their appeal. People began to favour more comprehensive plans. They began to expect the state to work for full employment and planned economic growth, what Roosevelt described as freedom from want and Indira Gandhi as "Garibi Hatao". The state tried to correct social and cultural disadvantages. The

ideal of the welfare state is thus the climax of the development of the ideals of human equality, liberty and justice.

Tensions in Liberalism

There is a basic tension in liberalism. On the one hand, it is wedded to the market concept of society, to the unlimited right of man to the acquisition of property and ultimately to inequality. On the other hand, it seeks to curb the right to property for the common good and to provide equal opportunities to all, the claim that a market society maximises utilities has been challenged by various contemporary thinkers. McPherson has instead argued that true development for man consists in the development of his powers. According to him the earlier liberal view is contradictory in two ways. There is a tension between the view of man as "desirer of utilities" and man as "enjoyer and developer" of his powers. This has led to the confusion between unlimited right to property, to capitalist economy and ultimately to inequality and an egalitarian view on the other hand: So far it has not been possible to combine the two. The tragedy of the welfare state is that despite its faith in the ideas that the state must provide opportunities for not merely an increase in wealth but also for development of total human personality, in practice, it still tends to treat the maximization of utilities and profit as final. The major drawback of the welfare state is that it could not change the social structure in any fundamental way. The state provides subsidies, controls competition, monopoly, land use and labour use. But the prices are still a response to calculated decisions of the few who control economic power in society. Prices still control production of goods. They also determine their allocation.

This enables big corporations not only to determine prices but also control our tastes and life-styles.

Social living is an organic process in which life of the concrete individual has to be enriched by an increase in one's power to enjoy the out-side world. A liberal society maximises utilities, but does very little to maximise our powers or make us into

a better human being. We are constantly controlled and dominated by market forces. Moreover, public ownership and nationalization have led to bureaucratization and corruption in public life.

Empirical Liberalism

A word must be said about empirical liberalism. Mill and Green emphasized the moral dimension of democracy. They valued it because they thought that it was the most effective instrument for the improvement of mankind. But the empirical liberals like Schumpeter and Dahl treat democracy as a mechanism to bring about equilibrium in society. They are not concerned with moral issues. They regard the ideas of Mill and others as Utopian. For them democracy is essentially a competition between two or more elite groups for power to govern society. Some American political scientists even regard a low level of citizen participation as essential for the maintenance of equilibrium. For the nineteenth century, theorists, democracy was a humanist aspiration. For their counterparts in the mid- twentieth century America, it is essentially a market-equilibrium system. This view has a built in conservative bias. For it, whatever works is right, the existing system has somehow to be worked out. The concept of the market swallows up the concept of justice and equality. There has been some resurgence of libertarian doctrines in the name of human dignity and autonomy recently. This is leading liberalism on the one hand to the nineteenth century individualism and on the other to a concept of justice. The later trend has become significant. The nineteenth century liberalism emphasized liberty. The early twentieth century replaced liberty by equality. Now, both are being synthesized and transformed by a concept of justice in terms of the Aristotelian ideal of character, self-knowledge, virtue and good-life. Society is being viewed as a community of individuals. These individuals too have autonomy, of their own. It is being argued that the community ought to be, based on a strong sense of a shared self-understanding of citizens about virtue and good life. This self-understanding must be embodied in the institutional arrangements of a pluralist society in which there are a variety of, associations to

satisfy our different needs. It must lead to a politics which enables us to, "know a good in common that" we cannot know alone" in the manner of friendship.

regulated by economic and not by moral laws. People began to realize that if everyone was allowed to conduct his business in his own way, the law of the jungle would prevail.