

LIBERALISM: THE MOST RELEVANT THEORY OF THE PRESENT AGE

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Abstract

This research paper examines the features of liberalism and how liberties can be enjoyed by all. It discusses the need for ideologies and explains why liberalism is the most relevant ideology. This paper also explains how ideologies can have an impact on society. It emphasizes the need for redefining liberalism in this changing world. Challenges to liberalism are also highlighted in this paper. This paper says, in this scenario the political scientists have the duty to redefine liberalism for a positive impact on the society. This paper also studies Indian liberalism and the principles of liberalism incorporated in the Indian constitution.

Keywords: Freedom, equality, liberty, diversity, rights. Limited government.

Introduction:

Liberalism is an ideology that stands for liberty and equality. This research paper elucidates why liberalism is the most relevant ideology that can be followed by the states in the present age and why it should be redefined. For many scholars liberalism stands for non- intervention of the government in people's lives. This kind of police state itself created inequalities by increasing the gap between rich and poor. Hence the need for state intervention only to the extent of providing basic facilities to all. At the same time it should not infringe on the rights of the people as it is the duty of the state to protect and promote the liberties of the people. Therefore, it is very necessary to redefine liberalism.

Review of Literature:

McGowan John(2007) discusses American liberal democracy and its basic principles, values, and commitments like liberty and equality, rule of law and diversity.

Helena Rosenblatt(2018) gives an insight into the history of liberalism. It describes how the French revolution gave birth to liberalism. It says that only during the cold war American liberalism focused so strongly on individual freedoms.

Rudrangshu Mukherjee (2018) looks at the history and evolution of liberalism. It discusses how liberalism is in crisis in many countries. It shows how liberalism in the west thrived while the liberal values like freedom, democracy and citizenship were denied to the people of colonies.

The present paper deals with how liberalism should be redefined and reinterpreted with changing times.

Methodology:

This study is analytical and descriptive based on secondary sources. Published books and articles are consulted for this paper.

The word, “liberalism” is associated with concepts like freedom, openness, equality, rationality, tolerance etc. Liberalism is a notion that is against superstition and stands for changes in the laws and traditions with changing needs of the people. This research paper explains why liberalism is the most relevant ideology. This paper also explains how ideologies can have an impact on society. It emphasizes the need for redefining liberalism in this changing world..

What are these ideologies for :

The goal of Political Science is to see that the individuals have a peaceful, comfortable and fulfilling life. For this purpose, what kind of State and government do we need? What kind of rights people should have? These ideologies come out with different aspects or dimensions to answer these questions and tell us how to organize our economic and political affairs. Ideologies determine what facts are important and relevant and what actions are acceptable.

One such ideology is Totalitarianism. As the name suggests, it stands for total control of the State, as a consequence individual becomes insignificant. Another theory is Socialism which talks about social ownership of means of production. Social ownership is not practically possible as it needs a regulating or controlling authority. Therefore, it becomes State ownership of means of production and was often called by some scholars as ‘state capitalism’. Here again, the individual becomes secondary as the economic and political power is vested with the State and individuals have no Right to property and no political choices. In short, they are completely deprived of economic and political power.

Liberalism is the only theory which keeps individuals on a high pedestal and makes the State servant of the individuals. Here lies the relevance of liberalism.

Features of Liberalism:

Liberalism respects the freedom and dignity of all individuals. According to Liberalism State emerged out of contract for the sake of individuals. Liberalism believes that these economic, political and civil liberties are inherent to the individual and he cannot be deprived of them. The individuals are born with some natural rights and they cannot be taken away by anybody including the State.

Liberalism preserves its faith in the rationality of the individuals, therefore believes that individual should be given the right to choose government, right to property, right to freedom of speech, freedom of movement, freedom of residence and other personal liberties. Since an individual is rational and knows what is right and wrong, he can make proper use of his rights.

During the mediaeval era, when Liberalism germinated against existing social structure of European society, it was a very revolutionary idea in Europe. Liberalism believes in limited government. Government has power and authority delegated to them by the people. People

decide what kind of a government they want and can revolt against the government if it does not serve the purpose. This leads to accountability of government. Limited government, separation of powers, diversity, secularism and constitutional government are some of the important features of Liberalism.

Theory of Natural Rights:

Liberalism believes in the theory of natural rights. Rights are intrinsic part of the individual and cannot be separated from him even by himself. The individual cannot be enslaved. The State is created by the individuals for their own convenience and they obey the state for their own safety and comfort.¹

Rule of law:

Liberals believe that people should be treated equally regardless of their race, gender etc.

Tolerance:

Individuals should be given freedom of speech and to realize this a tolerant society is needed.

Liberty:

Individual liberty is the most important political goal of liberalism. Individuals must have complete freedom in their vital personal matters like their religious faith without interference from public authority. Individual as a rational being has the authority to decide his own personal matters as long as it is not incompatible with the freedoms of others. State or religious heads should not decide matters relating to individual's social and personal lives. He can eat and drink according to his desire and give his children a better education and take part in the intellectual and cultural life of his nation. Even traditions should not be imposed on individuals as they do not carry any intrinsic value unless they are constantly attuned for the greater benefit of people.

For liberals, democracy is a natural choice. John Locke in his 'Two Treatises of Government' (1689), gave the individuals the right to revolt if the government fails to protect the rights of the individuals or does not function according to their interests. This theory of John Locke influenced American Revolution. During American Revolution(1765-83), thirteen British colonies used this right to revolt against Britain. Thomas Paine, in his pamphlet 'Common Sense'(1776) reiterated the views of John Locke on right to revolt.

Right to Property:

liberalism favors the preservation of the institution of private property as a natural right. The liberals maintain that it is the only ideology that can provide a workable system of human cooperation in a society based on the division of labor with private ownership of the means of production. History proves that Private property increases prosperity and creates employment. Socialist experiments in various countries resulted in oppression of freedoms, decline in the productivity of labor and consequently diminishing of wealth, increase in poverty and hunger. Socialism is in favor of all the means of production to be owned by the people as a whole.

¹ Patric Daniel: What is John Locke's theory of natural rights and justification for a limited government?; <https://medium.com/patrickdaniel/what-is-john-locke-s-theory-of-natural-rights-and-justification-for-a-limited-government-80fecdaaa27>

Since the government is the decision maker and implementer of all important things like economy, education etc in the society, production would be completely in the hands of the government. Unlike liberal countries, it is the government in socialist countries that would decide what is to be produced and how much quantity and how it should be distributed for consumption. Efficiency of his own labor is inconsequential to an individual because in any case a fixed portion of the total output is given to him. It is impossible to ascertain the output of the labor of every individual with precision in accordance with his work.

According to liberalism an individual can raise his social and economic position using his talent and energy. It is not compulsory to stick to the financial status you are born with or social status ascribed by the society. This ascribed status was challenged in America (1765 – 1783), English(1688-89) and French(1789) revolutions.

Freedom and peace are the fundamental principle of liberalism, Unique features of mankind that distinguishes man from the animals are peace and social cooperation.

Social Responsibilities of individuals:

Liberalism sees individual, not society or family as the basic social unit. Individuals are born free, and must remain free. They deserve Equal freedom and rights and legal status.

What Liberalism should be?

Classical liberalism was critical of the welfare state, as it interferes with the functioning of free market. This kind of liberalism that supports freedom, private property and legal equality is not sufficient for the present society. Human society has evolved over a period of time. The known history of mankind is filled with stories of wars, slavery, untouchability, superstition and many other social evils. Mill and John Locke wanted liberty but made exceptions for people of European colonies to justify violence against some. Locke reasoned that land could become property if it was mixed with labor, thus justified the “absolute power of man over man” and as a consequence justified the policy of colonialism by European countries.²In 4 July 1776 the American Declaration of Independence affirmed that all men are created equal and they are born with certain inalienable Rights such as right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But it did not include Poor white men, women, and blacks. After these French, American and English revolutions, slavery was not abolished in America and Europe because it helped the economy grow. (Corcoran, 2018) Some rich people enjoying luxuries and countries achieving economic development at the cost of denying freedom to some continued in these so called liberal countries until nearly the first half of 19th century. When the price of labor went up in those countries, the people of colonies like Indians were forced to migrate to other countries to provide cheap labour as they were considered unfit to understand and embrace the ideals of liberty.

²Paul Corcoran (2018) John Locke on Native Right, Colonial Possession, and the Concept of *Vacuum domicilium*, The European Legacy, 23:3, 225-250, DOI: [10.1080/10848770.2017.1416766](https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2017.1416766),m P.5

But now with the evolution of human society, evils like colonialism and inequalities are not justified and supported any more. We have achieved legal equality and it is not sufficient. Equality in the real sense of the term is to achieve freedom for all. Freedom also include freedom from wants and freedom from hunger. Right to medical facilities and education are very significant to enjoy liberty. To achieve these freedoms, the state has to provide facilities that will enable him to fulfil his needs and desires. We need to device a system that fulfils basic needs, food, clothing and shelter and at the same time respects freedom of the individuals, their talents and abilities. It is the duty of the political scientists to redefine liberalism and produce more literature on liberalism to promote liberalism that enables every one enjoy liberties.

In the present society the notion of equality includes equality of all the humans irrespective of economic and social differences. To achieve this , individuals have to fulfil certain social responsibilities. Responsibilities are derived from needs like the need for peace and co-operation. Without fulfilling these needs, rights cannot be enjoyed and economic development cannot take place. Right to education, freedom of speech cannot be enjoyed in chaotic conditions. Unless basic need are fulfilled freedoms cannot be enjoyed and they only remain on paper. Hence the need for social responsibility of the individuals and corporations. Responsibilities promote the freedoms of the individuals. Responsibilities make the individual accountable for their actions. Using this argument, individuals cannot be given unlimited freedom. Unlimited freedom amounts to survival of the fittest and becomes equivalent to no freedom to many . The starving man does not think of laws. He has no choice but to get food by any means. It is not justified that the children of a poor man forego higher education just because he cannot afford to pay for it. Right balance between freedom and social responsibility is crucial to protect the freedom and dignity of all the individuals. Social responsibility is necessary for an individual to protect his own freedom as he is a social being. Government is necessary to protect rights. It is not possible that the state has no role in individuals' lives. The state has limited role.³No social contract can persist without a credible threat of enforcement. Here lies the importance of 'freedom under the law'. Government is necessary to make laws and to implement them. Though laws, judges, and police are needed to protect the individuals' life and liberty, but if misused their coercive power may also be turned against him. We need to create a political system that gives government the power that is essential to protect individual liberty but also prevents it from misusing that power. Equilibrium between individual rights and social responsibility and between powers of the government and limitations is necessary for smooth running of economic, political and social lives of the individuals. Equality of opportunity, freedom of thought and freedom of speech, limitations on the power of governments, the application of the rule of law, a market economy and transparent and democratic system of government are essential for a liberal democratic setup.

³ Edwin van de Haar : The Meaning of "Liberalism"; APR 22, 2015,
<https://www.libertarianism.org/publications/essays/lets-clear-liberl-mess>

Liberalism advocates freedom and protection of individuals against tyranny. To make equality and liberty a reality, people should be politically and socially assertive and vigilant. To stimulate these qualities, education and good health of citizens are essential. Citizens should be empowered for political and economic participation in the society. Therefore free education and medical facilities should be provided to all the people by the state. Though capabilities of the people are different, these basic facilities help them to use their talents and become aware of their right to equality, justice and other rights and to use them in a constructive manner that will promote their own welfare.

Inequality destroys the very spirit of liberalism. Free and quality education is very significant to all because child's freedom, or rather, capacity to exercise freedom will be enhanced through education. Illiteracy adversely restricts social, political and economic choices of the individuals. The problem of poverty arises because of many reasons like lack of education, unemployment, medical facilities etc. Poverty is an indicator of lack of ability to enjoy liberty to the fullest possible extent. At the same time no one will give up liberty for food and shelter. Cattle is given food, but tied with a rope the whole day. Humans cannot live in such conditions. In most communist countries oppression of individual freedom took place because of the concepts like dictatorship of the proletariat, individual is for the sake of society, etc. Absolute economic equality is not possible as it amounts to inequality. If a person has the capacity to become a billionaire and create employment for a large number of people, he should not be expected to work for a salary. This may lead to backwardness as it happened in many communist countries. Entrepreneurs and wealth creators should be given freedom to use their talents not only for their own economic progress and personality development but also for the economic development of the state and society.

Do ideologies make a difference?

Ideologies give certain values to the society. Like liberalism stands for respect and dignity of the individual. It can work against violation of human rights, domestic violence, subordination of a gender etc. These values influence individuals and their behaviors.

Liberalism in India:

Liberalism is indigenous to India. Indian society by nature has always been diverse and liberal. 'Charvaka' a philosophical Indian school of materialists challenged the traditional authority of the Vedas and the hegemony of the priests. Buddhism and Jainism also challenged the evils of the existing traditions in the society. Social reformers like fought against social evils like sati and child marriage.

Indian constitution consists of many liberal ideas. The Preamble of the Constitution declares India to be a "Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic". The term 'sovereign' denotes that India is independent and not subject to any external authority and the state has power to legislate on any subject in conformity with constitutional limitations. Without national liberty and self-determination, liberalism cannot exist.

Constitution has adopted a democratic form of governance. Democracy is an essential element of liberalism. The fundamental freedoms which Part III confers attempt to create a society that upholds liberty and equality and dignity of the individuals. Fundamental Rights provide for equality before law and equal protection of laws. They guarantee the citizens of India equality of opportunity. No citizen can be discriminated against, or be ineligible for any employment of office under the state, on the grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth or residence or any of them. Article 17 abolishes untouchability and forbids its practice in any form. Untouchability is offence punishable in accordance with the law. Article 18 abolishes titles, other than a military or academic distinction..

Fundamental rights secure liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship for all its citizens. They also provide for freedom of association and assembly, freedom of religion and freedom of movement and right to settle and acquire property in any part thereof for every citizen of India. Though article 19 (1) (f) right to property is removed from the part of the Fundamental Rights by the 44th Constitution Amendment in 1978. But, Art. 300 A ensures that “no person shall be deprived of his property save by authority of law”. These provisions protect the individuals against the arbitrariness of the state and enable the individuals enjoy the freedoms they are born with. Article 21 lays down that no person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to ‘procedure established by law’. India also provides for secularism where minorities enjoy protection and enjoy the right to religion.

Our constitution makers succeeded in making a fine balance between social justice and individual freedom by providing Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles(DPSP). Fundamental rights provided for individual freedoms and equality which are important elements of liberalism and on the other hand DPSPs provided for social welfare which is essential to provide equal opportunities for all to enjoy these freedoms. Though our political system accepts the market economy, but at the same time it recognizes the significance of role of government in reducing social inequalities. DPSPs like adult Suffrage, free compulsory primary education, Proper standard of life for industrial workers and protection against old age, sickness are in accordance with Universal declaration of human rights. While our 40A to expressly require a full separation of the three organs of government: legislative, executive, and judicial.

Liberalism faced challenges when Indira Gandhi became the PM. Her tenure was marked by a concentration of powers by the national government. Her tenure also saw emergency which was called dark period of democracy after independence. This period saw the weakening of the judiciary, and suspension of Fundamental Rights which undermined the nature of liberalism in practice.

Another major challenge to liberalism is lack of education. The governments also instead of providing education and employment to citizens, provide schemes like free rice etc and make people dependent on the government which ultimately lead to misuse of votes and the purpose of election and essence of democracy is lost in this process,

For the liberal principles of equality and liberty to be enjoyed by all, the govt has to play a role in giving medical and educational facilities to all. If left fully in the private hands they may not be

accessible to all classes of people. Recently, during the first wave of COVID we saw that medical facilities to corona patients are provided by government hospitals while many private hospitals and clinics were closed.

In spite of these challenges, India is able to maintain a stable democracy. Though the word 'liberalism' is not mentioned in the constitution, secularism and the principles of justice, equality and liberty in social economic and political aspects form the basic structure of our constitution.

Conclusion:

Every ideology needs to be redefined and reinterpreted with changing times, To achieve liberal principles of equality everywhere in the world particularly in third world countries where a section of the society do not enjoy basic needs liberalism need to be redefined, The government must see that every one should get equal medical and educational facilities.

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