

# Origin and Meaning of Liberalism

## Introduction

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Liberalism is the most sustained ideology in contemporary democratic world. It has become sine qua non of a democratic political system and social order. Its emergence as a distinctive political position in the early nineteenth century is often taken to mark the birth of the age of ideologies. However, liberalism has wide connotations. It is not merely an ideology but also stands as a doctrine, a principle, a school, a movement, an idea and an attitude. As a political philosophy, liberalism stands for individual rights, autonomy and freedom of choice.

If liberalism is defined as fundamentally committed to individual liberty as the highest political value, this opens up a range of controversies about liberty as a final value. Is liberty positive or negative? What is its limit? What are its social preconditions? Is a person's liberty constrained only by physical

restraints, by threats, by social disapproval, or by some other means? What do we mean by liberalism? How has it originated? What are the basic principles of liberalism? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to define what we mean by 'liberalism'.

## **What Liberalism Is**

The word 'liberal' can be used both as an adjective and as a noun. The adjective 'liberal' denotes an attitude of mind rather than a political creed. In our society, to be 'liberal' is the hallmark of a civilized person - open minded, generous, tolerant and concerned to approach every issue from an impartial and rational standpoint unclouded by prejudice and superstition. This is why, many people describe themselves as 'liberal' minded even though they do not subscribe to 'liberalism' as an ideology. Such people tend to dislike authoritarian laws, as well as oppose practices which disadvantage particular social groups. The right of free speech, the right to picket and protest, the rights of women and homosexuals, prisoners and ethnic minorities are among the rights likely to be defended by people with a 'liberal' attitude.

The noun 'liberalism' is of more recent origin than the

adjective 'liberal'. It was first used to designate a political creed by Spanish, French and English writers during the early part of the nineteenth century, often as a doctrine with its unwavering faith in liberty of individual. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines liberalism in this spirit only:

**Liberalism, whether a philosophy or an ideology, may be precisely defined as an idea committed to freedom as a method and policy in government, as an organizing principle in society, and a way a life for the individual and community.**

The Oxford English Dictionary indicates that the word liberal has long been in the English language in the sense of 'free noble, generous men and also in the sense of free from restraint in speech and action'. But since the beginning of 1776-88 the term got imbued with a core idea 'free from prejudice and being tolerant.' In general, liberalism believes that it is the aim of politics to preserve individual rights and to maximize freedom of choice.

In the early days of its evolution, liberalism put emphasis on individual rights. It sought a society characterized by freedom of thought for individuals, limitation of power (especially of government and religion), rule of law, free exchange of ideas,

market economy that supports free private enterprise, and a transparent system of government in which the rights of citizens are protected. Liberals favor a 'liberal' democracy with open and fair elections, where citizens have equal rights by law and an equal opportunity to succeed. These characteristics were found in John Locke's philosophy who can be regarded as the proponent of liberalism.

But, slowly and gradually, this classical liberalism was revised by many thinkers who advocated a greater degree of government interference to protect the worker's interests in a free economy. Some of these thinkers are: John Stuart Mill, T.H. Green, L. T. Hobhouse, Isaiah Berlin and John Rawls.

Classical liberalism is characterised by a belief in a 'minimal' state, whose function is limited to the maintenance of domestic order and personal security. Modern liberalism, in contrast, accepts that the state should help people to help themselves.

## **Origin of Liberalism**

The origins of liberalism can perhaps be traced back as far as to agricultural societies, when people started living in settled

communities and were forced for the first time, to find ways trading and living with strangers. When one goes to the history of liberalism, one discovers that liberalism emerged on the historical scene with the breakup of European feudal societies, which were organic, centralized and run by powerful lords and kings with strict divisions based on caste and class. The spirit of liberalism was further reinforced with the happening of certain revolutions. The English Revolution, which began with the civil war in 1640 and ended in the political settlement of 1688, produced the first modern state based on liberal principles. The earliest liberals were the Protestant reformers who challenged religious hierarchy and orthodoxy in the church during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Protestant reformers repudiated the authority of the clergy in interpreting a 'true' religion that sought to establish a direct communion between human being and God. In creatively interpreting this true religion freed from the grip of the priests and resting instead on the volition of the believers, the reformation produced grounds for discovering the autonomy of the individual - a fundamental moral resource for later developments in liberal theory. The objectives for which this liberal revolution stood are: liberal constitutionalism:

the right of opposition, the rule of law and the separation of powers. The settlement also included recognition of important civil liberties by acts in 1688, and liberty of the press in 1695. Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, the *American Declaration of Independence in 1776* and *French Declaration of the Rights of Man* in 1789 reinforced the ideas of liberalism.

But the political label "liberal" first appeared in the Spanish 'Cortes' (parliament) in 1810. The 'liberals' were those Members of Parliament rebelling against absolutism. Spain was in the midst of war against the invading armies of Napoleon; King Ferdinand seventh remained in exile in France. The central junta and its successor, the regency, recalled the Cortes in Cadiz to legitimize the conduct of the war in Ferdinand's absence. This required creating ministers and Parliament though in a system of provinces and municipalities without special representation from the church or nobility.

