

# LIBERALISM

Prepared by,  
Mr. Thomas G.M.,  
Associate Professor,  
Pompei College, Aikala DK.

# Introduction:

- Liberalism is a group of political, social and economic theories that centres on the value of individual liberty, equality, economic freedom, limited and democratic government and the rule of law.
- Individual liberty is the very essence of this doctrine.
- According to Laski, liberalism implies a passion for liberty.
- Liberalism includes all kinds of thinkers ranging from the economists to politicians .
- The word liberalism come into use only after the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

# Meaning of Liberalism:

- Liberalism is difficult to be defined as it is continuously changing.
- According to Richard Wellheim “Liberalism is the belief in the value of the liberty of the individual”
- Liberalism has a narrow and a broad perspective.
- At a narrow level, it is seen from political and economic points of view whereas at the broader level it attempts to analyze and integrate varied intellectual, moral, religious, social economic and political relationships of human beings.

# Meaning of Liberalism...

- At the social level it stands for secularism i.e. freedom in relation to religion and morality.
- At the economic level, it implies the ideal of free trade and freedom of production.
- At the political level, it stands for political liberty and the right to property, constitutional limited government, protection of the rights of the individual, etc.

# Meaning of Liberalism...

- Liberalism is an organizing principle in society and a way of life for the individual and the community.
- Maximum individual freedom is the essence of this doctrine.
- Liberalism is thus, understood as an idea, ideology, theory, philosophy, doctrine or even as an approach to freedom as a method and policy in government.

# Negative and Positive liberalism:

- Liberalism as an ideology is undergoing changes from negative to positive liberalism.
- The early or classical liberalism which has been regarded as negative liberalism (the 19<sup>th</sup> century liberalism).
- The negative liberalism stood for anti-authoritarianism of the state in political sphere.
- Under the economic sphere it advocated free trade or enterprise.
- Negative liberalism considered the state as a necessary evil and stood for private property rights.

# Positive liberalism:

- In the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to the influence of socialism, the liberal ideology also underwent a transformation within itself from negative to positive liberalism.
- Positive liberalism is also known as enlightened liberalism.
- Jeremy Bentham, J. S. Mill, T.H. Green were the leading advocates of Positive liberalism.
- Positive liberalism supported the state to undertake positive actions in the name of greatest good of the greatest number.
- It even justified the nationalization of the key industries in the name of the well being of the people.

# Neo-liberalism:

- Neo-liberalism is the total rejection of the ideas of positive liberalism and a welfare state notions.
- Neo-liberalism emerged as an updated version of laissez faire economics(After 1980s).
- It believes in free markets and liberal reforms.
- It claims that free markets maximize human welfare.
- The state in the neo-liberal scheme of things has to be a minimal state.



# Features of Liberalism:

- Following are the features of liberalism –
  1. Value human personality and equality of the individual,
  2. A belief in the autonomy of the individual will,
  3. Promotion of rights of life, liberty and property,
  4. Belief in the rationality and goodness of man,
  5. Belief in contract theory,
  6. Law as superior to command,
  7. The government that governs the least is the best,
  8. State as a means not an end, etc.

# 1. Value human personality and equality of the individual:

- Liberalism as a philosophy is mainly concerned with the maintenance of human dignity and equality among the individuals.
- Irrespective of positive or negative liberalism both ultimately aims at the promotion of individual freedom or dignity.

## 2. A belief in the autonomy of the individual will:

- According to liberalism everyone is the best judge of himself to decide what is best for himself.
- Such a belief makes him confident to have his own life on his own terms.

### 3. Promotion of rights of life, liberty and property:

- Liberalism stands for the promotion of the rights of life, liberty and property.
- These rights are inalienable rights which are essential for every human being.
- Possession of these rights enables the individual to lead a life of dignity and happiness.

## 4. Belief in the rationality and goodness of man:

- Liberalism is a rational thing which considers the goodness of man as leading to rationalism
- The theory is a practical theory leading to the promotion of happiness of men with the enjoyment of liberty.

## 5. Belief in contract theory:

- Liberalism considers the creation of the state by mutual consent for the protection and preservation of the natural rights of the individuals.
- If the contract is violated, the individuals have the right to revolt and establish a new government.

## 6. Law as superior to command:

- Liberalism believes that social control can best be secured by law rather than command.
- Thus, the law being superior to command is an instrument of social control..

## 7. The government that governs the least is the best:

- Classical liberalism considered the state as a necessary evil as it hinders the real freedom of the individual.
- Hence, to them that government is the best which governs the least.
- Later on the positive liberalism regarded the state as necessary to provide this freedom to the individual.



## 8. State as a means not an end:

- Liberalism considered the state as a means to realize the individual freedom and equality and not the state as an end in itself.
- Liberalism stands for democracy and state needs to promote it through the maintenance of freedom of press and free enterprises.

# Criticisms against the theory:

- Following are some of the criticisms raised against the theory –
  1. Too flexible,
  2. Absence of clarity,
  3. Too individualistic,
  4. Deceptive and reactionary, etc