

Political Ideologies Contexts, Ideas, and Practices
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Lecture 06
Politics in a Conservative Society

So we have completed quite a lot of the theory of conservatism, with examples. We're going to go on and do three things today. We'll have a short recapitulation on conservatism and the free market, and that will recur as we go along in other topics in the course or is likely to recur. We'll then look at politics in a conservative society, and we'll do an analysis of contemporary India with recent survey findings, contrasted with slightly earlier survey findings, and we'll try and reach a conclusion.

So, what about a short recap, conservatism and the free market. This is important because for conservatism, people are self-seeking beings; for conservatism, people are fundamentally self-seeking. They seek their own advantage and that of their families and therefore, according to conservatism, any attempt to restrict or control the free market goes against the grain of human nature; people simply are not like that, according to conservatives, and therefore, any such attempt to control or restrict the market would be bound to fail.

But if the operation of market requires that we changed or abolished established traditions or institutions or practices? Well, we then face a problem in conservative thought; conservatism requires an unrestricted market.

But any reasoning about whether or not to alter or abandon a tradition, because of a market challenge, or because the market requires it, would mean we would have to reason about restrictions on the market and about traditions in a way which conservatism rejects; we have to argue about which traditions to keep, how to modify them, and so on.

And that would mean quite detailed, potentially historical, analysis, certainly conceptual analysis about traditions; it could mean restricting the market in order to preserve a traditional part of one and so on. And conservatism broadly rejects close theorising about society. And the effect when challenged by the market? Conservatism has no conceptual resources with which to address a serious challenge from the market.

The upshot, the result, is that conservatism presents itself as, conservatives think of themselves as, as having a rather pragmatic and practical outlook on life. But they are

thinking, we need to note that conservatism faces other conceptual problems, not just the one of how to respond to the market challenge or challenge of the market.

For example, conservatives are suspicious of grand theories of society or human nature, and we saw that they are very, very disturbed by the evils that have followed when grand theories of society have been imposed, or societies been reorganised in accordance with some grand theory of human nature. But conservatives' own thinking faces other conceptual problems.

Let's have a look at some of those. Well, conservatism itself denies this or tries to deny this, but it is itself based on a very substantial theory of human nature, which is the idea that humans are naturally self-seeking beings, and that they are inherently flawed. We are not perfect; according to conservatives, we cannot be made perfect. We have weaknesses, we fall for temptations, we fall victim to addictions, we behave very badly to each other, even though we might like to think we behave well.

Sometimes we calculate how to undermine other people or advance our own interests by breaking the rules, breaking the law, or getting around systems - for conservatives, well, that is human nature. That is itself a very substantial theory of human nature. Now the very fact that conservatives can speak of such imperfections implies an assumption that somewhere in conservatism, there is an idea of what human perfection might look, or could look, like. Well, we could not describe imperfections unless we had some idea of what perfection or perfect conduct might be.

So that is one major problem; there is a substantial theory of human nature in conservatism and it is conceptually impossible to hold such a theory without a concept of perfection; a theory of imperfection, only makes sense in the light of even an implicit sense of perfection. The second problem here, conservatism relies on piecemeal change, gradual change in response to particular situations.

Now that implies that human knowledge is inherently limited, we can only know what we know here and now. This knowledge is provisional, it is what we happen to know for the time being, we might have to change it later and it is temporary again, because we might have to change what we know in the light of new discoveries, or things we had forgotten about, need to be reminded about, and so on.

This is itself a theory of knowledge, an epistemology. It may sound very persuasive, we only know what we know now, we can act only on what we know now, we make the best

judgement we can. We respond cautiously to change because our knowledge is provisional and temporary. That is itself an epistemology, and it can look very persuasive.

But, it cannot accommodate the possibility that, for example, new discoveries, say about very harmful foods, dangerous foods, refined sugar might be one example, or our discovery that certain global practices are very destructive, for example, our dependence on and use of fossil fuels.

While conservatism has great difficulty accommodating the recognition of these kinds of things, the global consumption of very harmful foods, or the global continuation of practices which could destroy life on earth, would require wholesale – enormous - changes to entire ways of life and to whole societies, and that means that conservatism would have to respond by replanning or participating in replanning entire ways of life, perhaps even our global ways of life.

Conservatism may reject substantial theories, but it is founded on at least two very substantial theories of human nature, two that is two very substantial theories. We are imperfect, were flawed beings, and we're are naturally self-seeking, and it cannot accommodate the recognition of a need - often the very well-grounded recognition of a need - for very radical, very substantial change in our entire way of life or ways of life. That is one set of major problems with conservatism.

Now, it is of course very significant that conservatism as an outlook has not the resources to acknowledge that it is itself founded on such things as substantive theories. It makes a claim yes, it does make a claim to be concerned with the actual, that is, how things are, how they stand today. But this claim itself shows problems for conservatism. First of all, conservatism could be a disposition and outlook to preserve what we have, a tendency to preserve what we, it could be institutions traditions anything else.

But, that makes it a general outlook and an abstraction; therefore, it becomes an abstraction which we apply or act on in concrete in specific situations. So becomes a general tendency or outlook, just the kind of thing conservatism cautions us about. Secondly there is another problem here; in the world as it is, conservatism does face and it has to deal with or respond to the challenges of explicit ideologies, or ideological theories and the systems created in the application of those theories or under those theories.

Liberalism, our next topic, a classic example, a very highly articulated body of theory, which poses significant challenges to conservatism - that is one. Socialism has also posed such challenges by being a highly articulated body of theory. And by being applied, it has posed

immense challenges to conservatism, whether practical or conceptual. This is quite independent of problems in liberalism or applied socialism as we shall see, the point is that they both pose articulated challenges to conservatism.

Now conservatism's opposition to such theories and to such systems, is because they are articulated, because they are fully worked out. Well, conservatism's opposition makes it reactive to those theories and those ideologies, even reactionary, and in order to respond to those, it has to be specific in its opposition. It has to provide detailed, articulated opposition.

And that is something that conservatism itself as a doctrine, even as an outlook, rejects. Detailed ideological discussion is not something that comes, that sits comfortably, with a conservative outlook. For conservatism knowledge is largely implicit, something we learn; it has been called the accumulated wisdom of the past.

And engaging in detail with other ideologies requires conservatives to do something that they themselves broadly reject. Because that is not a conservative thing to do. So, where does that leave us? Well, if ideologies, whether intentionally or not, have created new systems or have had results which were unintended and which conservatism finds very repugnant, and not just conservatism.

So if other, other ideologies have created new systems, then conservatism in effect, if it opposes those systems, becomes a claim that some old previous order must be restored - even though if a new order exists, then its continued existence is itself a kind of proof that conservatism has already accepted the new state of affairs and has done, done so even if conservatives could not or would not have approved of the new order. Restoring an old order would then require as we have seen, serious and detailed argument for the old system.

But conservatism resists such detailed social and political analysis. And if such analysis is rejected, then the only way to restore the old order would seem to be a violent revolution. That, in turn, is anathema to conservatives. We have seen how Edmund Burke, for example, hated the instability, the terror, the chaos generated by the French Revolution. Conservatives in general hate revolution precisely because, according to them, revolutions are based on abstractions, and on the imposition of major theories of society.

But the upshot is the exposure of contradictions within conservatism itself despite its longevity, and apparently adaptability, it is fundamentally internally contradictory. I have cited a paper here by James Alexander, who goes into this issue in detail. Now we have completed our recap or recapitulation of conservatism by looking in more detail at some of

the major problems in it. These are largely conceptual problems and indicate, they show, they expose an internal incoherence within conservatism.

We'll now move on, to a kind of worked example looking at more recent evidence of conservative attitudes in society. We are going to look at two sets of published papers in relation to India. I'll summarise those because we cannot show you those directly on screen. We can give you the links and I'll show them in a moment. We have also got links evaluating conservatism in political and social life in India.

So, let us look at these links first. We shall, of course, include them in this broadcast for you. We can send you links and titles, but we cannot send you the texts themselves. Here we are, well, these are the documents we're going to discuss today. Two published papers, one is an academic paper by Pradeep Chhibber and his colleagues. There's the link, the title is 'The state as guardian of the social order: conservatism in India and its political implications'. There's a link to it, you may be able to get it freely. I think you can.

Here is another one. The second one we'll look at, recent research evidence on social and conservative attitudes in India. I shall repeat that: Social and Political Conservative attitudes in India. This is a research project conducted by the Centre for the study of developing societies and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung; in German Stiftung means 'foundation'.

This is a research foundation named after the former German Chancellor, the first one after the Second World War, called Konrad Adenauer. So CSDS and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung published this survey in 2017 - a follow-up to a previous one which they conducted in 2007. This is key highlights - we'll look only at the key highlights, and here's the link together with this item. We'll send you that of course, it'll be in this broadcast.

Now we'll also go on to evaluate these two main items by looking at other published work around the same topics. So we have two main texts to start with and then three texts which we'll use to evaluate the themes in the main texts. Well, let us go back to the main texts themselves.

This is our analysed example: contemporary India, conservatism, maybe contradictory, but there is no doubting its endurance. It has lasted a very long time and will probably do so, there may be no better place to see the endurance of conservatism than India. The analysis provided by Howard Erdman, whom I mentioned in the last lecture, in a paper written in 1978, published in 1978, is mainly about what might be called the official political system in India. That is the space constituted by political parties, as well as policy and law.

Now Erdman, you'll remember, recognises the effect the traditional nature and deep conservatism of Indian society have on that kind of political space. I'll summarise again briefly to refresh all our memories. Erdman argues that, shows with evidence that there is no explicitly political conservative party in India. But all political parties have strong conservative tendencies within them, in what he recognises is a very traditional and deeply conservative society.

But there has been a more recent analysis, carried out over 40 years later, and after what can look like many social transformations, and this complements and confirms many of Erdman's insights. This work locates Indian conservatism in ancient texts and it goes on to show, with survey evidence, just how deep conservative attitudes run in India and the kind of impact those attitudes have and could have on policy, law and institutions.

Let's have a look. Well, Chhibber and his colleagues start with the *Manusmriti*, the *Arthashastra*, the *Mahabharata*, and the *Ramayana*. And they point out that in these the concept of rulership, specifically kingship, is unquestioned; and the main instrument of kingship is the power of punishment, which only the king possesses.

Therefore, being a good or a bad king would be using this power; and the ruler's quality would be evaluated in what we today would consider a largely administrative sense. That is a sense of effectiveness or ineffectuality, how effective is the king in using that power, particularly the power to punish.

Well, in the ancient texts however, the main task of the king is, and the texts bluntly state this, the main task of the king is to preserve the existing social order. That is the system of spiritual authority as vested in the Brahminical caste. Now, their loyalty to the king in turn is conditional upon his - the king's - maintaining the existing social order, namely the caste system.

This does not automatically mean that power is used arbitrarily or brutally. Much has been made of the ancient texts' requirement that the king must also protect and provide for the less fortunate. This could even include support for the economy and the provision of public goods and we see this perfectly well in the *Arthashastra*.

But the role of the state is limited, limited to protecting and preserving the state, providing for the less fortunate were possible, including support for the economy and the provision of public goods. But it does mean that the state must preserve society, and its role must not extend to transforming society. This is a very limited role for the state. It means that

economic provision must not threaten the social order, and that other kinds of legislation or institutions furthermore, must not threaten the social order.

Now, that kind of theme is paralleled in early Buddhist thought, and in Islamic thought of the Mughal period. The clear implication here - one of the major implications - is that the state must preserve the existing order of society. Well, Chhibber and his colleagues go on to show that those themes find strong agreement in a range of modern and contemporary thinkers including Gandhi, even though Gandhi considered conceived of the state more in terms of stewardship, and even though he wanted an end to the caste system.

Now, Chhibber and his colleagues contrast those arguments in favour of a limited state, whose task is to provide, within the limits of the caste system, to preserve the state, provide for the public and so on - within the caste system. Well, Chhibber and his colleagues contrast those arguments with a very different set of arguments. That is the arguments put forward by, for example, Ambedkar and Nehru, both of them, Ambedkar and Nehru. So the state itself is a central agent, perhaps the central agent of social transformation.

Today, we were very familiar with the laws and policies and institutions which the Indian Republic has therefore created. Many of those laws, policies, and institutions, affect or can affect our lives in very many ways, from education and employment, through to family life and even our obligations to our children. Now it hardly needs saying that in a society such as that of India, ancient conceptions of society, shape and inform almost all the ways today's Indian state works. For example, social transformation is predominantly characterised as a matter of individual transformation and individual or perhaps local action.

Another consequence is that engagement with authority involves, I quote, a cultural or even ritualistic expectation of patronage. That is a very familiar theme in Indian social science; my specific quotation here is from Chhibber. Therefore, it need not be a surprise that conservative attitudes in India are very widespread, so much so that they are almost overwhelmingly predominant. Several surveys confirm this in respect of many areas of life.

For example, in 2004 Lokniti and the Centre for the Study of Developing societies - CSDS - conducted a national election survey. This in 2004 showed 43 percent of respondents irrespective of age or caste, all respondents, 43 percent of all respondents supported the idea that every community be allowed to have its own marriage and property rights.

The 2004 survey also showed, for example, 45 percent in favour of a ban on inter religious marriage, and 43 percent in favour of a ban on intercaste marriage. That 43 percent came down to 31 percent in a corresponding study conducted by the same organisations in 2009,

43 to 31. But it is still the case that in 2009, 31 percent of the population favoured a ban on intercaste marriage.

Well, in 2017, the CSDS, the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, the KAS, published findings on attitudes among people aged between 15 and 34 in 19 states of India; there's the link, it's in the list that you will have with this broadcast as well.

Now, in this 2017 study, no fewer than 51 percent generally agreed with the idea that wives should always listen to their husbands; 40 percent disagree. So the margin was 11 percent; still over one half agreed, wives should always listen to their husbands. One half of the survey - by implication, one half of the population.

The researchers do express concern over the further fact that, a fairly high proportion - that is their own phrase - a fairly high proportion of young women respondents were against the idea that women could work after getting married. As for sexual relationships, 61 percent were equally against a love affair between two men or women or two men.

Intercaste marriages were totally opposed by 45 percent, live in relationships were totally opposed by 67 percent. Among those who were married, 84 percent had had an arranged marriage. Religion played a very strong part in the respondents' attitudes; 78 percent said they prayed quite often, 68 percent went to a place of religious worship frequently, 39 percent read a religious book quite often; though that 'quite often' is actually the phrase used in the study in the published study.

Now these figures indicate, certainly indicate very widespread and often very strongly conservative attitudes, but Chhibber and his colleagues quite correctly note that Indian society has been exposed to a very wide range of global influences in the last few decades. We all know that and they recognise that therefore, attitudes may well change over time.

The 2017 survey by CSDS and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung shows some evidence of this, or what may be some evidence of this. It shows substantial approval of reservations, affirmative action quotas in public sector posts, 48 percent favoured reservations for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes; 45 percent favoured reservations for Other Backward Classes.

There was also general support, to the tune of 41 percent, for such quotas in the private sector, but opposition here in the private sector was also 38 percent. So, the margin was not very great, but 41 percent favoured reservations in the private sector. Now, we need to look a little bit further, for possible reasons for the figures here.

The 2017 study shows deep conservatism in social attitudes, and the perhaps surprising extent of support for reservations for quotas in employment, may result, may well result from the kind of paternalism which figures so much in older Indian writings on the state. That is, we owe it as a society to do something for the less fortunate and that is paternalist. This attitude may be partly responsible for the strength of support for reservations in employment, whether in the private sector or the public sector.

Interestingly enough, there was strong support of over 40 percent, if I am not mistaken, for people wanting government jobs, I have to check the exact figure, but it was remarkably high. People may be suspicious of the government, may distrust it, may favour the privatisation of large economies of areas of the economy, but substantial numbers in the surveys wanted government jobs or would have liked to have one.

Well, how does that enable us to evaluate conservatism around the world? In its many forms, it remains a difficult ideology to evaluate in simple terms. The conservative reluctance to articulate specific theories, or detailed political or economic plans, does mean that its central themes as we have seen, often conflict with one another. Sometimes they create total contradictions within conservatism. It is also the case that conservatism by its own, on its own terms, recognises the locality, the significance of tradition and culture, as something worth preserving.

No conservative would claim or seriously claim that all cultures should be the same. And that then means that conservatism will take very different forms in different cultures. A conservative can live perfectly happily with that. But it does mean that there may be no one form of conservatism around the world, even if they share significant conceptual problems in all their different forms.

But as an outlook, conservatism endures; it adores in several forms. It continues to be a powerful political force. And that seems to be, it seems to be, stronger when societies face great uncertainty or very rapid change. Now, what we have done is recap on conservatism, we have reminded ourselves that it has severe internal incoherences. It is fundamentally contradictory as a doctrine, as a body of theory. But it is nevertheless, very long, very, well, enduring, very far reaching and, and lasts a very long time. It is not going to go away in a hurry.

But it seems to gain greater strength, particularly in politics, when societies face very great uncertainty, or very rapid change, so we have done that. We are now going to look at evaluations of conservatism and this is where we'll move on to the themes here. These are the things we have looked at - we summarised – in the Chhibber paper, Chhibber and his

colleagues. We have summarised the CSDS and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung report of 2017. We are going to look at these two items.