**UNIT 21 CONSERVATISM**

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21.1 INTRODUCTION

Conservatism, as a philosophy dedicated to the defense of an established order or an attitude with a defensive strategy to maintain the present status quo or in the classical sense of a 'right-wrong ideology', is an important intellectual force today. That it is flourishing in the realm of ideas can be seen in a core of principles recognized in most societies of our times. The philosophers of conservatism are one in highlighting the principles on which conservatism bases itself. These principles, as Clinton Rossiter sums up, are: (i) The existence of a universal moral order sanctioned and supported by organized religion; (ii) The obstinately imperfect nature of men in which unreason and sinfulness lurk always behind the curtain of civilized behavior; (iii) The natural inequality of men in most qualities of mind, body and character; (iv) The necessity of social classes and orders, and the consequent folly of attempts at leveling by force of law; (v) The primary role of private property in the pursuit of personal liberty and the defense of social order; (vi) The uncertainty of progress, and the recognition that prescription is the chief method of such progress as a society may achieve; (vii) The need for a ruling and serving aristocracy; (viii) The limited search of human reason and the consequent importance of traditions, institutions, symbols, rituals and even prejudices; (ix) The fallibility and potential tyranny of majority rule, and the consequent desirability of diffusing, limiting and balancing political power.

Conservatism, as a mood, prefers liberty over equality; tradition over changes; history over politics; past over present or at least the future; prudent over inquisitive man; and ordered society over society demanding changes.
21.2 MEANING ‘OF CONSERVATISM

The term ‘conservative’ has a variety of meanings. It may refer to a person with a moderate or cautious behavior, or a lifestyle that is conventional, even conformist, or a fear of, or refusal to change. Conservatism is an ideology which opposes more than it favours. Andrew Haywood (‘Political Ideologies’) rightly says that: “There is, for example, some truth in the belief that conservatives have a clearer understanding of what they oppose than what they favour”. To that extent, conservatism is a negative philosophy which preaches resistance to or at least wary suspicion of change: it is, therefore, a defence of the status quo. In this sense, conservatism is a political attitude rather than an ideology. People may be considered to be ‘conservative’ when they resist change, without subscribing to a conservative political creed. The Stalinists, in the former Soviet Union, who opposed Gorbachev’s Perestroika and Glasnost were ‘conservative’ in their action, but certainly not conservative in terms of their political ideology. The desire to resist change may be a recurrent theme within conservatism, but what distinguishes a conservative from people of other ideologies is the distinctive arguments and values which a conservative employs in upholding his objectives.

Conservatism is more than an ‘attitude of mind’ or an ‘approach to life’ or what Hugh Cecil said ‘a natural disposition of the human mind’. Conservatives, in fact, prefer to base their arguments on experience and reality rather than abstract principles. Conservatism is neither simple pragmatism, nor mere opportunism. It is based upon a particular set of political beliefs about human beings, the societies they live in, and the importance of a distinctive set of political values. As such, like liberalism and socialism, it can rightfully be described as an ideology (Andrew Haywood).

The essence of conservatism, Russell Kirk (The Conservative Mind) says, “is the preservation of the ancient moral traditions of humanity and that for the conservative, custom, convention, constitution, and prescription are the roots of a tolerable civil order”. He adds that “forces of great power in nations are prescriptions in favour of local rights and private property, of habits of life, prejudices in favour of old decencies, the family, and religious dogmas”.

De Kirk lists six canons of conservative thought:

1) A “belief in a body of natural law which rules society and conscience.”
2) A “love of variety and the mystery of human existence, as opposed to narrowing uniformity, egalitarianism and utilitarianism.”
3) A “conviction that civilized society requires orders and classes as opposed to a ‘classless’ society: equality in the judgement of God and before courts of law. Equality of condition means equality in servitude and boredom.”
4) “Freedom and prosperity are inseparable, or else government becomes the master of all,”
5) A “faith in prescription, for customs, conventions and old prescriptions are checks upon anarchy and man’s lust for power.”
6) “Change may not be good reform, a statesman’s chief virtue is prudence.”

Conservatism is the philosophy of individualism, of an autonomous individual, of an individual with inalienable rights, of an individual rooted in strong moral values, of an individual nurtured in traditions.
21.3 NUMEROUS USES OF THE TERM 'CONSERVATISM'

It is much easier to locate the historical context, i.e., period between 750 and 1850 as a response to the rapid series of changes in which conservatism evolved than to specify what is or what the conservatives believe. Sometimes, conservatism means outright opposition to all and every change; at others, it means an attempt to reconstruct a form of society which existed in an earlier period. Still at other times, it appears to be primarily a political reaction and secondarily, a body of ideas.

Conservatism, as Clinton Rossiter says, "is a word whose usefulness is matched only by its capacity to confuse, distort and irritate." He adds: "Since the patterns of thought and action it denotes are real and enduring, and since no substitute seems likely to be generally accepted, conservatism will doubtless have a long life." Since World War I, the word 'conservatism' is being used in numerous ways.

21.3.1 Temperamental Conservatism

Conservatism, by one definition, denotes a 'natural' and culture-determined disposition to resist dislocating changes in a customary pattern of living and working. According to Rossiter, "It effectively is, a temperament or psychological stance, a cluster of traits that are on daily display by most men in all societies." He lists the important elements of conservative temperament as (a) habit (the enormous fly-wheel of society and its most precious conservative agent), (b) inertia (a force that often seems to be as powerful in the social world as in the physical), (c) fear (especially fear of the unexpected, the irregular and the uncomfortable), and (d) emulation (a product of both fear of alienation from the group and a craving for its approval). So understood, one may speak, with propriety, of the conservatism of the poor, of the aged and of the ignorant. "At the same time," Rossiter writes, "one must assign a high value to the conservative temperament in the pattern of social survival and even of social progress".

21.3.2 Situational Conservatism

Conservatism, by a second definition, related to the first, is an attitude of opposition to disruptive changes in the social, economic, legal, religious, political or cultural order. "It describes", Rossiter clarifies, "somewhat less crudely and somewhat more effectively, a pattern of social behaviour, a cluster of principles and prejudices that are on daily display by many men in all developed societies." The distinguishing feature of this conservatism is the fear of change, which becomes transformed in the political arena, as Rossiter tells, "into the fear of radicalism..." In this instance, "the radicalism of men who propose to make the world order... at the expense of old values, institutions and patterns of living".

Situational conservatism is not confined only to the well-to-do; it extends to all levels of people who lament change in the status quo.

It is unfortunate that both temperamental conservatism and situational conservatism—tend to be equated to authoritarianism, obscurantism, racism, fascism, alienation, maladjustment, and "the closed mind" studies are needed before these elements are linked to either of conservatism.
21.3.3 Political Conservatism

Conservatism, by still another definition, is the aspirations and activities, most of them defensive rather than creative, of parties and movements that celebrate inherited patterns of morality and tested institutions that oppose the reforming plans of the moderate left and the schemes of the extreme left.

Political conservatism is a phenomenon which is universal of organised society, and essentially, the defense of a going society. Reaction is not conservatism. It is the position of men who sigh for past more intensively than they celebrate the present and who feel that a retreat back into it is worth trying. The conservative is a man essentially at rest: generally, well adjusted psychologically as well as programmatically to "a world he never made." The reactionary is a man always in motion, "refuses to". Rossiter points out, "acknowledge that whatever has been settled must henceforth be considered good or at least tolerable, and he seems willing to erasome paws, scrap some institutions, even amend his nation's constitution, so that he can roll back the social process to the time which his countrymen first went foolishly astray".

This should not mean that a restorationist is a conservative always, though there seems a relationship between a restorationist in the sense of conservative and a revolution. In the sense of a restorationist, a conservative is delusionalist and like a revolutionist, he may have outbursts. But it is going too far. A conservative, which a revolutionary is not, is a man of order in whose scheme of things, a shattered society has no place.

Conservatism is restorationism in so far as it comes to holding a brief for traditions, customs, morals, history and the older institutions. It is radical in so far as these all, as mentioned above, are to be protected from attacks of either liberal or socialist-Marxist measures. It is liberal so far as its values are not challenged. It is reactionary in so far as the trace of history remains within the control of tested moral gospels. Rossiter writes: "He (conservative), like the liberal, must reason and discriminate; he, like the radical, may have to plan and gamble. The conservative as reformer, the right-wrong politician who tries to outpromise liberals in the area of welfare legislation, is an uncomfortable man. The conservative as revolutionary, the traditionalist who acts 'radically' to preserve the crumbling values and institutions of his community, is no conservative at all".

21.4 CONSERVATISM: ITS CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES

"The desire to conserve": the words which Edmund Burke used, is the underlying theme of conservative ideology, though it is not the sole objective which conservatives of all shades seek to attain. Authoritarian conservatism has often been reactionary; it either refuses to yield to change or attempts to turn the clock back. Revolutionary conservatism may use the term radical conservatism and tends to regain or reestablish or argue for a conservative fabric of revolutionary character. The characteristic features of conservatism, as evolved in different forms and conveying the fundamentals of conservatism can be identified.

21.4.1 History and Tradition

The role of history and tradition is basic to any type of conservatism. History, reduced to its essentials, is nothing but experience. It is deductive thought in matters of human relationship. Legitimacy is the work of history. "To see things authentically as a conservative". Mannheim
writes, "is to experience events in the past". True history is expressed not in linear and chronological fashion, but in the persistence of structures, communities, habits and prejudices generation after generation. The correctness of history or of experience for that matter is a persistent conservative emphasis. This has been shown by Burke, Rourke, Oakeshott and Voegelin, to mention a few. Social reality can be understood through a historical approach: “We cannot know where we are, much less where we are going, until we know where we have been. That is the bedrock position of the conservative philosophy of history”. ('Conservatism: Dream and Reality')

History is represented in traditions, and traditions constitute an important component of history. As such, a central theme of conservatism is, with regard to history, its defence of traditions, its desire to maintain established customs and institutions. Burke was talking about tradition when he conceived of society as a partnership between "those who are living, those who are dead and those who are to be born". Tradition is, Chesterton says, "a democracy of the dead." In this sense, tradition reflects the accumulated wisdom of the past. The institutions and practices of the past have been tested by time, and should the conservatives demand, be preserved for the benefit of the living and for generations to come.

21.4.2 Human Imperfection, Prejudice and Reason

Conservatism is a philosophy of human imperfection; the roots of man’s basis lay more in prejudice than in reason. As against the liberals, who think of human beings as moral, rational and social, the conservatives regard men, both imperfect and unperfectable. Human beings, the conservatives believe, are dependent creatures, always fearing isolation and instability, and therefore, always seek safety, security and what is familiar, ready always to sacrifice liberty for social order. By their very nature, the people, the conservatives would say, are suspicious of abstract ideas and prefer to ground their ideas in experience and reality: they have usually an already framed view evolved from the past, a prejudice-mad framework. "Prejudice", Nisbet argues for the conservative, "has its own intrinsic wisdom, one that is anterior to intellect. Prejudice is of ready application in the emergency; it previously engages the mind in a steady course of wisdom and virtue and does not leave the man hesitating in the moment of decision, skeptical, puzzled, and unresolved”. Reason stems from knowledge that is learnt than imparted. The conservatives are of the opinion that imparted knowledge leads to abstractions, abstract knowledge, and for human beings, it is too complicated to be fully grasped. Learnt knowledge is rooted in experience and is limited to the doing of something, to the learning of something through committing mistakes. Such a knowledge is not the knowledge of rules and generalizations, but is one that comes from one man’s experience and goes down in the blood of the other. Reason as knowledge of this time is not a cure worse than the disease, but is one that eliminates the disease.

21.4.3 Organic Society, Liberty and Equality

The conservative view of society is an organic view of society: the individuals do not and cannot exist outside society, but they are 'rooted' in society, and 'belong' to it; they are parts of social groups and these groups provide the individuals' lives with security and meaning. The conservative's view of liberty is not 'leaving the individual alone', but is one where there is willing acceptance of social obligations and ties. For the conservatives, liberty is primarily 'doing one's duty'. When the parents, for example, advise their children to behave in a particular way, they do not constrain their liberty, but they are providing a basis for the liberty the
The conservative view of society is one that is a living thing, an organism whose parts are neither equal nor the same, work together and make the human body function properly; each part of the organic society (i.e., family, government, a factory) plays a particular role in sustaining and maintaining the health of society. Heywood explains, "If society is organic, its structure and institutions have been shaped by natural forces and its fabric should therefore be respected and preserved by the individuals who live within it."

The conservative view of organic society is a unity composed of diversities: such a society is always in a hierarchical form where alone liberty works effectively and with a meaning. In such a socially differentiated society, organic as it is, equality has no place. "... most forms of equality ... seem to the conservative to threaten [he liberties of both individual and group] liberties which are inseparable from the built-in differentiation, variety, and variable opportunity..." (Nisbet). Burke's dictum, in this context, is: "Those who attempt to level, never equalise."

21.4.4 Authority and Power

Authority and power, in the sense they are used, have much in common for a conservative. Power is used by one who is authorised to exercise it and it is the legitimate act to get what one wills. In an organic society, order has to be maintained: so power is an essential component of an organic society; in hierarchical system there are different levels; so necessary. Power and authority are the important concepts in conservative philosophy. These, in no sense, constitute an obstacle to what the conservatives think about liberty. "The only liberty", Burke said, "is a liberty connected with order; that exists not only along with order and virtue, but which cannot exist at all without them". The conservatives believe that authority, like society, develops naturally: power emerges from functions. Authority and power, the conservatives strongly feel, develop from natural society. These are natural because they are rooted in the nature of society and all social institutions. Within school, authority or power is, and in fact, should be exercised by the teacher; in the work place, by the employer; and in the society, by the government. The conservatives say that authority is necessary because it is beneficial, as every one needs the guidance, support and security of knowing where the people stand and what is expected of them. That is why all the conservatives emphasise leadership and discipline. "Leadership", Heywood says, "is a vital ingredient in any society because it has the capacity to give direction and provide inspiration for others. Discipline is ... a willing and healthy respect for authority."

No conservative believes in equality, in social equality at that. They think that people are born unequally in the sense that talents and skills are distributed unequally: unequal should not be treated equally. The conservatives believe that inequality is more deep-rooted. Genuine social equality, for the conservatives, is therefore, a myth.

Conservatism adores power in so far as it helps establish order in society. It admires authority because it is authority through which order is established in society. Conservatives favour an authoritarian and all-powerful state. Public order and the moral fabric of society can be maintained through the power and authority of the state. Heywood writes: "Furthermore,
within conservatism there is a strong paternalistic tradition which portrays government as a father-figure within society."

21.4.5 Property and Life

Property, for conservatives, possesses a deep and mystical significance. The conservatives hold the view that property has a range of psychological and social advantages: it provides security; gives people a sense of confidence; promotes social values. As such, the conservatives want that property must be safeguarded from disorder and lawlessness. They say that the property owners have a stake in society. They have an interest in maintaining law and order. Property ownership supports property is that it can be thought of almost an extension of an individual's personality. People 'realise' themselves, even see themselves, in what they own'.

"It is the contempt", Burke wrote, "for property ... that has led to all the other evils which have received France (the French Revolution, 1789) and brought all Europe into the most imminent danger".

Conservatism advocates the sanctity of property. In the heart of every true conservative there is, as Russell Kirk writes, "persuasion that property and freedom are inseparably connected and that economic levelling is not economic progress. Separate property from private possession and liberty is erased". Irving Babbitt added: "Every form of social justice.... tends toward confiscation, and confiscation, when practised on large scale, undermines moral standards, and in so far, substitutes for real justice the law of cunning and the law of force."

21.4.6 Religion and Morality

Conservatism is, indeed, unique among major ideologies in its emphasis on religion and morality. Irrespective of denomination, all the conservatives including Hegel, Haller and Coleridge made religion, and therefore morality, a keynote of state and society.

The conservative support for religion and morality rests on the well-founded belief that human beings, once they get a drift from major orthodoxy, are likely to suffer some measure of derangement, of loss of equilibrium. "Religion", Burke wrote to his son, "is man's fastness in an otherwise incomprehensible and thereby hostile world". Tocqueville, before his deathbed confession, described the value of religion and morality to government and society, and to freedom: "When there is no longer any principle of authority in religion anymore than in politics, men are speedily frightened at the prospect of unbounded independence. ... For my part, I doubt whether man can ever support at the same time complete religious independence and entire political freedom. And I am inclined to think that if faith be wanting in him, he must be subject; and if he be free, he must believe".

Religion is a spiritual phenomenon. But at the same time, it is an essential social cement as well. For the conservatives, there exists a close relationship between religion and conservatism, for religion provides society a moral fabric.

21.5 SOME REPRESENTATIVE CONSERVATIVES

It is only by way of completing an argument for conservatism that an attempt is being made to mention a few, and among them, two major representative conservatives; Burke and Oakeshott.
Burke’s ‘Reflections on the Revolution in France’ has been taken as definitive and
formative of modern conservatism, with its opposition to radical reform based on abstract
principles and its plea for the virtues of established and evolved institutions. Burke’s
faith in the past, his admiration of the present, his opposition to innovations, his small
view of human nature, his belief in the traditional outlook of society and his sympathies
with the property all these go on to make him a conservative thinker. Cobban (‘Edmund
Burke’): remarks: “Disciple of Locke and Whig politicians, though Burke was, the real
man stands quite apart from the eighteenth century and the philosopher. A believer in
antiquity in an age when the Modern had definitely conquered in their struggle with the
Ancients, an adherent of the past in an age that was beginning to look to the future, he was
also a philosopher of reason in the great age of Reason.”

Burke’s conservatism is the basis of all his writings. Conservatism, as a theory, usually
has three varieties: (a) Status Quo: It is one in which things are kept as they are. In every
society, one finds people who are interested to keep things as they stand and who would
not like to bring changes, for in a status quo, they have nothing to lose; (b) Organizational
Conservatism: Such interests of men as favour status quo would find ways and means to
protect them, promote them and defend them. Thus, comes organization which serves
those who want to keep the status quo. What is organizational is conservative in nature.
Yesterday’s idea becomes today’s movement and today’s movement becomes tomorrow’s
organization. (c) Philosophical Conservatism. Once there is interest in the status quo and
an organization to protect it, there is built an ideology, a philosophy around the interest to
be protected. Conservatism, as a philosophy, is the building of a case for the protection
and promotion of such interests.

Burke, in his writings, has passed through the above varieties of conservatism. Having
stood for the admiration of the status quo, he builds the organization (parliamentary system,
the political parties with rational interests, etc., etc.) to support the status quo. But within
the frame-work of conservatism, Burke demonstrates reformism. Until Burke’s arrival,
the Whig party was on the offensive. With Burke, there developed the beginning of a
shift which carried the prevailing social philosophy from attack to defence.

Oakeshott’s plea for traditionalism, as an aspect of his conservatism in politics, morals
and life, in general, proceeds logically from his critique of rationalism. According to
Oakeshott, the ideological style of politics (i.e., the rationalist style) is a confused style,
for ideology in the rationalist scheme, as he thinks, is merely an abridgement, an index.
So, Oakeshott’s answer is that the only style one should adopt and pursue, is the traditional
one. Political activity, Oakeshott affirms, cannot spring but from the existing traditions of
behaviour and the form that it takes is the amendment of existing arrangements by
exploring and pursing what is implied in them. All activity, for him, therefore, is traditional
in nature. Every idea, every ideal, every ideology, even the most revolutionary, as described
by Oakeshott, is traditional, always an index, an abridgement of traditional manner of
attending to the arrangements of society.

Political activity, for Oakeshott, is, as Minogue says, “not succumbing to an impulse, nor
is it drawing an implication: it is the pursuit of an intimation ... intimations appear as a
kind of via media between the extremes of logical implication and inexplicable accident.”
Oakeshott’s solution, Minogue holds, “is to take politics as a traditional activity, the
point of the word ‘traditional’ being to emphasize that it can only be understood in historical
terms.”
Tradition. Oakeshott feels, is not a fixed manner of doing thing, but is flow of sympathy. Every political activity, therefore, is a consequential activity for him, the pursuit of intimation as he fondly calls it. This means that political activity is what political activity actually is and not what it can be or it ought to be. It is what it succeeds actually in doing. All those who indulge; Oakeshott says, in revolutionary or idealistic actions indulge only in self-deception. Oakeshott writes: “In political activity, then, men sail a boundless and bottomless sea: there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel; the sea is both friend and enemy: and the seamanship consists in using the resources of a traditional manner of behaviour in order to make a Friend of every hostile occasion.”

Oakeshott regards the traditional style of politics as the only legitimate style. In this essay on "Being Conservative", he emphasizes that being conservative is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, near to the distant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to the utopian bliss. To be conservative is to be equal to one’s own fortune, to live at the level of one’s means. Stability, Oakeshott says, is any day more profitable than improvement. Oakeshott is suspicious of both change and innovation and, therefore, would like people to look twice at the claims promised by a change. If the change is unavoidable, Oakeshott would then favour only small and slow changes. Only that reform, he insists, be accepted that remedies a defect or that helps disequilibrium to be redressed.

Like Burke, Oakeshott regards society as a conversation rather than an argument. "Oakeshott does not believe", Minogue says, “that the point of the conversation is to elicit truth, though at times it will doubtless do so. Indeed, the whole point of the conversation is that it doesn’t have a point, and therefore many things may find a place in it which would be expelled as irrelevant in a seminar or a debate in a legislative assembly.” As Oakeshott himself says, “It is with conversation as with gambling, its significance lies neither in winning nor in losing, but in wagering.”

Tradition, according to Oakeshott, is described as anything under the sun. It is, he says, continuity; it is steady; though it moves, it never is wholly in motion; though it is never wholly at rest. To know, Oakeshott says, only the gist of traditionalism is to know nothing; knowledge of it is unavoidably knowledge of its detail. Oakeshott’s definition is too broad to mean anything or mean nothing.

21.6 SUMMARY

Conservatism is an ideology of conservation. It developed essentially as a reaction against the growing pace of political and economic changes especially in the West. This is one reason that any use of the word ‘conservatism’ resists change. As a philosophy, it defends the values of hierarchy, tradition and order against pressures generated by industrialization and represented by the political challenges of liberalism and socialism. That is why there is a basic distinction among the leftists and socialists, libertarians and conservatives. The leftists and the socialists are the party of bureaucracy (i.e., hardcore communists); libertarians, of markets; and conservatives, of tradition.

Conservative ideology has its peculiar features; tradition and history, human imperfections with a love for prejudice and against reason, organic society with liberty and inequality,
admiration of authority and power, strong plea for property and life rights, and belief in ethical, moral and religions values.

The future of conservatism is inarred by its own limitations. Its opposition to equality and more than this, its defense of inequality make it unpopular in societies which have a strong democratic tendency. Consequently, conservatism has not succeeded in developing into an ideology of worldwide importance. In itself, conservatism is too broad and has become, to that extent, too vague an ideology: what is radical today may not be so tomorrow.

21.7 EXERCISES

1) Explain the meaning of conservatism. In how many major senses the word 'conservatism' is used?

2) What are, in your view, principles and canons of conservatism?

3) Describe briefly the characteristic features of conservatism.

4) Write a note on Edmund Burke as a conservative thinker.