

Q: Do states need a new social contract in the rapidly changing modern world? If the theories of "Social Contract" as defined by Locke, Hobbes and Rousseau are still valid today. Discuss.

## Explicating the Concept of "Social Contract"

The concept of social contract is a cornerstone in political philosophy. It suggests that "the state's legitimacy and political authority are based on agreement between citizens and the ruling government." Different philosophers have different concept of social contract. Hobbes believed in complete surrender of freedom before Leviathan (ruler). John Locke gave the concept of representative form of government stating that "people are actual source of power who brought government into power." Rousseau gave the concept of General



- will in his social contract. The theories of Locke and Rousseau still resonate today perhaps in ways that require adaptation to complexities of 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Need for a New Social Contract

There is need of a new social contract because of clash between the theories of Hobbes, John Locke and Rousseau with the contemporary era that is the age of globalization and populism.

### a. Conflict between Modern Populism and Pluralism advocated by Locke's theory :

Locke's social contract is based on tolerance and protecting rights of all whereas the current era of populism advocates the interests of specific group of people at the expense of minorities.

Its clear example is of Hindutva policy of Narendra Modi that is accepted by majority of India at the expense of Muslims of India.



## b. Clash between Locke's classical Liberalism and contemporary distrust in Representative Government

Locke's theory of social contract that gave the concept of representative form of government and the idea that people elect their legislature so they should have trust in their representatives fail in states like Pakistan. Because when the government that is brought into power by consent of public fails to provide basic needs like education, food and health, then it is impossible for public to have trust in government. For instance, in Pakistan there is 5.6 million young population that is unemployed (World Bank, Unemployment in Pakistan, 2023). So, the public lacks trust in representative government.

## c. Clash between Locke's concept of right of revolution and offensive tactics used by contemporary leaders to suppress uprisings

There is a need for new social contract because Locke's theory fail



in this modern world as Locke had given right of revolt against government if it fails to protect the basic rights of public but in states like India these revolts are suppressed by use of force. Its one of the best examples is of Farmers' protests in India that erupted for demanding their rights from ruling government of BJP but these protests were suppressed violently by the police with 600 people dead (Al-Jazeera, Farmer's protests in Dehli, Feb 2022).



#### d. Contention between Locke's idea of 'free and fair elections' and involvement of established institutions in elections

Locke gave an idea of free and fair elections for ensuring wider participation of public in political affairs and for ensuring their representation in legislation of state. But this idea do<sup>not</sup> uphold in states like Israel where citizens want to overthrow Netanyahu's government but his government is backed by his intelligence agencies. Its another example is of **Pakistan** where elections of 8<sup>th</sup> February, 2024 are accused of rigging by its citizens.

#### e. Tensions between Locke's ideals of social justice and contemporary challenges to Rule of Law

Locke had given the concept of social justice because he believed in the concept of popular sovereignty so people can overthrow the ruling



government if it violates rule of law. On the other hand, in modern situations where rule of law is threatened by the established institutions, this theory of Locke becomes invalid. For instance, in Pakistan a prime Minister that was fined with \$10.6 million in PANAMA escapes the state under the guise of his medical illness and is returned back to power in Punjab against the consent of public by rigging the elections of 8<sup>th</sup> February, 2024.

#### f. Tensions between laissez-faire economic system supported by Locke's classical liberalism and Modern interventionist economic policies

There is need for new social contract because of the tensions between laissez-faire economic system supported by Locke's classical liberalism and modern interventionist economic policies adopted by the state. Populist leaders of this era often promote protectionist policies to shield domestic industries from foreign



competition. This includes tariffs on imports, subsidies for local producers and restrictions on foreign investments. Its clear example is of Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan's interventionist economic policies due to which Turkish foreign investment has fallen to **\$10.6 billion** in **2023** from **\$22 billion** investment of **2007** (The Guardian, Turkey's inflation, March 2024).

## g. Clash between Rousseau's concept of 'General Will' with Modern exclusionary politics

There is a need for new social contract due to clash between Rousseau's concept of 'General Will' with modern exclusionary politics that is fostered by populism. Rousseau envisioned direct democracy while populism revolves round concentration of powers in the hands of popular leaders who divide public by "us versus them" narrative. Its one of the best examples is of



Viktor Orban in Hungary who promoted exclusionary politics by promoting nationalism at the expense of Roma people, migrants and other minority groups.

## h. Clash between Rousseau's concept of sovereignty of state and concept of Extreme Nationalism promoted by populist leaders

This modern era demands a new social contract because of clash between Rousseau's concept of sovereignty of state and extreme nationalism that is promoted by populist leaders. These leaders reject international organizations like WHO, IMF due to their distrust in international elites. Its clear example is of Donald Trump who had adopted skeptical stance towards WHO accusing it of being China-centric.



## i. Divide between Hobbesian concept of Absolute Sovereignty of Ruler and Successful Democracies of the World

In states where absolute monarchy is followed in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Hobbesian concept of social contract is implemented there. But this is unsuccessful against successful democracies of the world due to concentration of powers in the hands of monarch. Its best example is of Arab Spring against dictatorships of Middle East. The protests erupted because of the demand for better opportunities for themselves. They were demanding for a new social contract.

## Validity of Theories of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau in Modern Era

a- Incompatibility of Hobbesian concept with Modern Era: Hobbesian concept of absolute sovereignty of



ruler, concentration of powers in the hands of monarch and limited right to revolution fail to be successfully implemented in this modern era where **167 countries** have democratic set up. Hobbesian concept:

“Convenants, without the sword, are but words and of no strength to secure a man at all.”

(Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, 1651)

lack validity today because of successful democratic systems of US, UK and Scandinavian countries.

## **b. Compatibility of Locke's theory of religious tolerance WITH pluralism and diversity of modern era**

Locke's theory is still valid today because he had given the concept of religious tolerance in social contract that leads towards social harmony.

Its best example is of Switzerland where each canton out of 26 cantons are given equal religious rights, thus making it a plural society.



### c. Validity of democratic foundations laid by Rousseau in Modern democratic states

Rousseau gave the concept of 'General will' thus introducing the concept of 'direct democracy' where sovereignty lies in the hands of people. For instance, Scandinavian countries follow Rousseau's concept of general will in their democratic system. They believe in theory that "Variety is the spice of governance. The beauty of political system lies in its ability to adapt, with each canton as a unique brushstroke on the canvas of national governance" (Friedrich Hayek, The Road of Serfdom, 1944).

### d. Strict Accountability: A Tenet of Rousseau's theory essential in Modern Society

Rousseau's theory of General will is still valid today because of the main tenet of <sup>its</sup> social contract i.e. strict accountability. Its best example



is of US where any bill passed by parliament can be abolished by supreme court if it is against human rights. Recently anti-abortion law is passed by supreme court for protection of human rights.

### e. Strong local Government System of democratic states ensuring Rousseau's concept of General will

Rousseau's concept is still valid today and it can be seen from strong local government system of democratic states that ensure the devolution of powers till grass root levels. A report of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions indicates that :

“60% of decisions taken by their towns and regions are influenced by European legislation and almost 70% of public sector investments in Europe come from local and regional governments.”



## Concluding Thoughts

Most of the successful democratic systems of the world show that the theory of Rousseau and Locke for social contract is still valid today. Despite the growing populism in this contemporary era, these theories can be implemented strongly through efficient strategies because there is no doubt that with rapidly changing modern world conflicts have been raised with these theories but these theories do not lose their significance as they have laid foundations of modern liberal democratic system.