**Indian Political Thought**

**Features&Sources**

**Introduction:** Indian Political Thought can be best understood by taking into considerations the various political traditions that not only shaped the destiny but succeeded to establish a resounding political system in this nation. In a positive sense, political tradition means a description of general process of passing on political ideas, knowledge and doctrines from generation to generation. It should be noted, at the outset, that there is no single Indian political tradition but several such traditions, from the ancient to the modern times.

To begin with, we can broadly divide these influences into two orders: Ancient Political Tradition, Medieval Tradition and Modern Tradition. The Modern period could be further subdivided into British Influence, Gandhian influence and socialist tradition. Each of them had contributed in their own way and left an indelible (lasting) impact on the political tradition of India.

**Ancient Political Tradition :**Ancient India, it is said, had produced an elaborate structure of governance based on the principles of *Dharma*. *Dharma* is a comprehensive term covering four stages of individual life, caste system, duties of kings and rules governing craftsmanship and industrial production. The Government was organized into seven rules under the King. They are: *swami*, i.e. sovereign ruler; *amatya* i.e. the official; *janapad* i.e. the rural area; *durga* i.e. the fortified area;*kosa* i.e. the revenue;*bala* i.e. the army; *mitra* i.e. foreign ally. Kaytilya’s *Arthashastra* describes the rule of political and social conduct. There were two central political concepts, i.e.*danda* and *dharma* which were of critical importance in the ancient political tradition.*Danda* means discipline, force, restraint, constraint or punishment. It was generally used to refer to punitive power of government.

In ancient political tradition, though emphasis was on monarchy as a form of government; nevertheless Indians were not unfamiliar with republican and other non-monarchical forms of govts.The principal duties of the king were:

1. To maintain and strengthen the established social order;
2. Promote the study of the Vedas to encourage the growth of industry and commerce;
3. To establish harmonious relations between different castes; and
4. To defend the kingdom against external invasions and internal decay.

Religion was an inalienable aspect of India’s ancient political tradition. It was also known as Hindu tradition as emphasis was laid on Hindu way of life. The three important qualities of ancient political wisdom, acc. to Prof. Ghoshal[[1]](#footnote-2), were: *spirituality, vitality and intellectuality*. Later on it faced a severe challenge from Buddhist tradition wherein the authority of the *Vedas* was vehemently denied as it questioned the divine origin of the king. Thus Buddhism with its stern and unbending code of ethics stood for the *unqualified supremacy of the moral law* over governmental affairs. The king, says Buddha, should base his daily life upon the single principle of **watchfulness** in order to keep himself active, wakeful and guarded along with his family members. It is the pristine duty of the king to guard and protect his people and treasury. Buddhism rejected the caste system, allowed women to the religious order and had a semi-democratic orientation. Buddhism, in fact, gave India the first experience of organized religion. However Buddhist challenge did not lead to a radical reformulation of the Vedic political tradition.

Thus we can say that political system practiced in ancient India had a both positive as well as negative attributes. These features are best illustrated by India’s well known Political thinker Lord Bhikhu Parekh[[2]](#footnote-3) in following ways:

*First*, the Indian political tradition is basically inegalitarian i.e. it did not develop the idea of social, legal and political equality.

*Second*, the Indian Political tradition is pluralist in thrust, i.e. autonomy of different types of social groups, such as castes, guilds and sanghas was recognized and accepted.

*Third*, the Indian political tradition is largely uncritical of the established social order.

*Fourth*, the Indian political tradition almost completely left out the whole subject of social conflict.

*Fifth*, the ancient Indian political tradition is largely didactic and practical.

These features notwithstanding, ***it would not be inaccurate to say that ancient Indian did not develop a tradition of systematic political philosophy****.*

In medieval times India had first brush with Islam. We see the wave upon wave of foreigners pouring in India as peaceful traders or proud conquerers.The process of *assimilation* of native Hindus into their own religion constituted the mainstay of political activity as it would not only prolonged their stay here but would provide legitimacy to their rule. This period is marked by the evolution of *Bhakti* and *sufi* tradition, that implicitly stressed on syncretic tradition of composite culture. The cosmetic unity between the Hindus and Muslims finally faltered due to inherent contradiction between these two irreconcilable ideologies and more particularly the Hindus were never accustomed to such type of partisan rule. Thus, we can say that medieval system had not contributed anything having great impact on political process.

**Modern Indian Political Tradition:** The ideas, influence and currents felt in the wake of British subjugation of India produced two divergent tendencies having different priorities, orientation and outlook. They were: Reformist and Revivalist.

**Reformist Tradition:** This tradition emphasized upon the need to undertake major reforms in Hinduism to secure a just social order. They were convinced that without reform no genuine changed could be ushered into society. As an admirer of western political ideas and science, they argued that adaptation did not mean rejection of Hinduism, but rather its reform. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, M.G.Ranade, Gokhale, Naoroji were the proud representatives of this tradition. They all advocated reform of Indian social institutions along liberal line, economic development through industrialization and the extension of liberal representative political institutions.

**Revivalist Tradition:** Contrary to the reformist belief and desire for a radical reorientation of Hinduism, the revivalists wanted a change in the Hinduism to be solely determined by following the ancient tradition of Hinduism. In other words, they agreed that Hinduism needed reform, but believed that this could be achieved through the revival of virtues of Hinduism itself; not through the blind imitation of west.Dayanand Saraswati, Bankim Chandra Chatterji, Vivekanand, Aurobindo and Tilak were the most illustrious figures of this school of thought. They contributed in providing a concrete and living identity to an Indian nationalism rooted in the past.

**British Tradition:** In the political sphere the impact of British colonialism as follows–

1. British colonialism provided political unity to the country through a highly centralized system of government with a uniform political, administrative and legal structure; development of a modern means of transport and communication system and by introducing the English language which served a common lingua franca which made contact amongst peoples of different parts of the country possible.
2. The Britishers considered Indian unfit for self-rule and excluded them from all important positions.
3. The British policy of divide and rule resulted in promotion of communalism in India. It has become a permanent factor of Indian life even after the country was divided in 1947 into India and Pakistan.
4. The British provided the country with a sound and efficient judicial system. They codified a large number of laws with the aim of checking the discretion of judiciary and provided a number of courts to give justice to the people.
5. Another notable contribution of British colonialism was an efficient system of civil services described as the “steel frame” of the Indian administration. This was a well organized which contributed to the administrative unification of the country. After independence, the steel frame of an All-India service has greatly contributed to the maintenance of the country’s unity.

Thus, British colonialism exercised both a destructive and a destabilizing influence and also contributed to the integration and cohesion of the country. India’s new identity as a nation has been determined by the values and heritage cherished by our national liberation movement. It was essentially a movement for the comprehensive freedom from all type of bondage, traditional and contemporary. Its purpose was not only to liberate India from foreign rule, but also to emancipate its people from the tribal and feudal practice, and dismantle the elaborate indigenous system of inequality and oppression. In this context we need to discuss two important strands that left an incredible impact on the course of national movement, i.e. Gandhian and socialist tradition.

**Gandhian Political Tradition:** While acknowledging the role of Gandhi as an undisputed nationalist leader, it would be a travesty of reason to overlook the imprint of Gandhian ideology on political system. He played a unique political role and attempted a grand reconciliation between his spiritual concerns and his political action. He reinterpreted the ethos and values of Indian politico-philosophical tradition prevalent during ancient period.Gandhian philosophy have become one of the most significant parts of India’s political tradition. Gandhi attacked the utilitarian doctrine of greatest good of all and instead emphasized upon the participatory model of social and economic progress. The concept of *Purna swaraj*, i.e. a complete and integral democracy became a guiding principle to liberate our nation from foreign despotic yoke and transformed it with a new vision, which he chose to describe as ***Ram Rajya***, i.e. the sovereignty of the people based on pure moral authority. His concept of *Purna swaraj*, his linking politics with ethics, and concept of *Satyagraha* gave the Indian national movement a quality unique in the history of mankind. However it posed a special kind of problem in the field of economic and social development and its contemporary relevance.

**Socialist Political Tradition:** Democratic Socialism in India, though a complex ideological formation, played a crucial role in the freedom struggle. It was deeply influenced by the ideas of Marx and Gandhi. Acharya Narendra Deva, J.P.Narayan and Ram Manohar Lohia were some of the leading lights of socialist movement, who played a prominent role in the anti-colonial sturuggle.Nehru, as one of the architects of modern India, has played a most significant role in articulating the secular political tradition. The most important contribution made by the socialist thinkers was in the field of economic development and social welfare. Their plank of social justice holds continuing relevance for unequal and inegalitarian society like India.

**Features of Modern Indian Political System:** While India’s history covers a span of over 5000 years, India’s democratic experiment, the first in its long chequered history, is little more than 40 years old. With the coming of British, the Indian political tradition has undergone major changes, and the massive impact it had, could not be denied. The political and economic institutions of Indian society were greatly influenced by western ideas and institutions. Parliamentary Democracy, which India chose to adopt for its future governance, was, indeed, modelled after British rule. Followings are the most important features:

1. **Democracy:** Democracy means more than a form of government. In its ideal and comprehensive form democracy means, or ought to mean, a way of life, an order of society, a pattern of culture, a model of economic relations, a form of political system, and a type of state. At best Indian democracy can be described a participatory democracy or functioning democracy. The successful holding of elections, devolution of powers to the local bodies and faith of Indian people made Indian democracy, in the words of Paul R. Brass[[3]](#footnote-4), a test case for parliamentary democracy.
2. **Cabinet Form** of Government-In this form of Government, the Prime Minister is the real head of the executive. The Cabinet consists of all important ministers helping the real executive in framing policies as well as their successful implementation. The Prime Minister, being a leader of the Cabinet, presides over its meetings.
3. **Federalism:** the Indian political system is a ***quasi-federal system*** with 28 states and seven Union Territories under the control of the Union Government. Constitution is the main source of power which distributes power to centre and states. India has three-tier structure of governance– Union at the apex, states at middle level and local-self governments below them. The appearance of federalism comes from the three lists of central and state jurisdiction: the Union, the State and the Concurrent lists. However the central government can pre-empt legislation in the concurrent list.
4. **Socialistic Pattern of Society:** The word socialist and secular, inserted through 42nd Amendment, spell out the ideological commitment of the Indian state to strive for the attainment of socialism, in all spheres and to make efforts to create equality of the Indian people by removing disparities in wealth and providing equal opportunity for all.
5. **Competitive Party System:** From the beginning India has adopted the multi-party system as an integral component of electoral democracy. It is a good indicator of participatory democracy where every group in the society partakes in political process through their representatives. It acts like a check in the high handedness of executive as opposition part gets an opportunity to point out the mistake or misdeeds of the ruling party. However, of late, it has become the harbinger of political instability particularly after the emergence of coalition politics and regional parties.
6. **Mixture of Tradition and Modernity:** It is more than confirmed now that India exhibits modernity and traditional values simultaneously and it is reflected at both social and political level. This confirmation had come from many studies attributed to the political culture and socialization. Rudolf and Rudolf[[4]](#footnote-5) characterized the existence and emergence of new political culture in terms of modernization of tradition. For e.g. the politicization of caste and emergence of identity groups symbolize this unique political tradition of India.
7. **Cultural Pluralism:** India was one of the first countries to give constitutional recognition to the rights of minority communities. There are various safeguard adopted such as Art.28-30, that not only secures these rights to the minorities, both cultural and linguistic, but provides these constitutional protections to them. Arts. 29& 30 of the Indian Constitution which stipulate that the minorities shall have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. The state shall not impose upon them any culture other than the community’s own culture
8. **Secularism:** The word ‘secular’ inserted through 42nd Amendment enjoins state and other institutions to promote and promulgate secular ideals in the affairs of nation. State shall not promote nor impose any restriction in their propagation, but will be a mute observer or act like a neutral umpire. In other words, Parliament shall not be competent to impose any particular religion upon the rest of the people. This was an imperative as nation had to face partition and several riots on religious basis.
9. **Unity in Diversity:** A multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-ethnic nation cannot afford to prosper without this belief and there are many Articles which exemplify the importance and continuance of this ideal.

**Determinants of Indian Political System:** There are number of factors that determine the core functioning of the Indian Political system. Indian political system has largely been an outcome of following elements.

1. **British Legacy**: No other factors had as much impact as the British had made on the Indian system. Many of the qualities and attributes, India inherited from its predecessors, has left an indelible impact on the minds of Constitution makers. The Parliamentary form of Government was indeed the best example in this category.
2. **Indian** **Constitution**: On the whole, our Constitution not only prescribes the dos and don’ts through elaborate framework but explains, in elaborate details, the structure, function and working of the various components of political system. For e.g. the Universal Adult Franchise unleash a true democratic revolution and creation of a participatory form of democracy. Similarly the adoption of Fundamental Rights provided a distinct outlook to our political system.
3. **Preamble**: Preamble is an introductory statement in a Constitution which states the reasons and guiding values of the Constitution. Preamble contains the vision for a political system as it outlines the principle and precepts which shall be adhered as far as possible by the state and its numerous agencies. It tells about the nature of polity, economy and society, as visualized by the leaders; find its place in the preamble. Though non-justiciable in nature, nevertheless underlines the guiding principle of the Government.
4. **Regionalism:** Regionalism is a complex socio-political phenomenon. It has played a unique role in the political process of the nation. Regionalism or regional groupings play an important role in government formation. In 1967, the DMK launched a regional party to promote *Dravida* identity among Tamils. The other examples of regional party are, Akali Dal in Punjab, Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh.Earlierly they have no role to play at national level but now they act like a powerful political bloc which make or mar the chances of formation of government at national level.
5. **Caste**: caste is an important determinant that not only decides the future of our polity but influences other structures, too. This is evident the way political parties are being formed, now-a-days, on caste basis. Political party mobilizes the people along caste lines for the fulfillment of their goal.
6. **Language**: Language plays a significant role in generating political consciousness. After independence states in India have been organized on the basis of language. Indeed it is the most important causative factor for any political movement that political party launches or creates.
7. **Religion**: Though religion is considered as a matter of personal belief but it has the potential to affect any political outcome. It is the most potent factor in political mobilization. Even some political party are now being formed to promote one’s religion, and through it, the political aspiration. The formation of Muslim League, which openly championed for the cause of Muslims in undivided India, finally paved the way for division of our nation into two parts. The role of religion has never diminished in political sphere, in fact, now-a-days are being used sanguinely.

***Note***: Students are advised to go carefully through this lecture and then read the ppt representing the brief synopsis of whatever has been said here.Also its useful to read U N Ghosal book if readily available.Please feel free to consult me anytime on my whatsapp no. 7982998873.

**STAY HOME STAY SAFE**

1. Ghoshal, U.N. A History of Indian Political Ideas, UP, 1966, p.3 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Parekh, Bhikhu, cultural Diversity and Liberal Tradition, Polity Press,1994,p. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Brass, P.R.,The Politics of India since Independence, Cambridge University Press,p.35 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Rudolf and Rudolf, The Modernity of Tradition political Development in India,Orient Longman,Delhi,1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)