



# Modern Indian Politics, Colonialism and Cultural Difference: A Review.

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**Abstract :** This paper is a review of several different arguments about the nature of modern Indian politics and its relationship to colonialism within the context of cultural difference. It is a known fact that modern Indian political system is directly related to the preceding colonial state and as such is an import from the West. Even though there have been many modifications to the Indian political system by the Indians, the institutional setup of a nation-state and the underlying concept clusters that guide the setup are something that remain culturally Western. Several political analysts, scholars as well as leaders have raised some significant issues about how the cultural difference between the West and India has to be considered in discussions about Indian politics. This paper provides a summary of the same.

**Keywords –** Colonial State, Modern Indian Political System, Cultural Difference, Nation-State, Political Institutions.

## 1. Introduction –

It is a well-recognized fact that the post-independence modern Indian political system is derived from the earlier colonial state. Even though most of the scholars say that the Indian constitution makers have introduced several important modifications to the colonial political framework so as to make it suitable for the Indian cultural conditions, there is a little doubt that the institutional setup and the major theoretical ideas about the functioning of these institutions are derived from the Western model of nation-states. With the question of cultural differences between India and West at the center of analysis many political leaders, thinkers and analysts have provided several interesting problems and issues for reflecting on the nature of Indian politics, that are presented in what follows.

## 2. Jayaprakash Narayan's Plea for Reconstruction of Indian Polity -

One of the earliest thinkers in the post-independence India to consider the question about Indian politics, its colonial legacy and the issue of cultural difference is none other than Jayaprakash Narayan himself. Inspired by Gandhiji's criticisms of the British political system and his focus on village societies, Jayaprakash Narayan also discussed his own ideas about the question. Narayan (1959), in his foreword itself states that the nature of the polity (rajniti) should be in accordance with that of the larger social entity and should subserve the larger social purpose (lokniti) (p. iii). Next he also states how the Western polity, which the post-independence India has adopted, is based on the assumption of an atomized society (p. iv). Narayan's argument that such a way of thinking about society is very different from that of the natural disposition of man as a social animal. Therefore, he argues that Indian polity should be reconstructed keeping in mind the community life which is at the center of Indian society and of the ancient Indian polity as well. This way the natural order of evolution of Indian polity can be restored and the damage of adopting the unnatural Western political model be undone. He further discusses the problems of partisanship and that of failing standards of public conduct as a warning sign for such reconsideration. Narayan, explicitly states that his criticism of Western democracy, which he calls out as democratic oligarchy, is plainly moral.

### 3. The State-Nation Idea –

While Narayan's idea is to remold the polity so as to make it work with the Indian society, Stepan et al (2011) have argued how the Indian state has itself remolded some of the basic assumptions about the nation-state model so as to make it possible for the cultural diversity to thrive in India. While the European nation-state model is based on the ideas of ethnic, religious, linguistic unities, the Indian state has developed federal model as well as national identity in such a way that ethnic, linguistic or religious unities are not evoked. In contrasting the models, Stepan et al., argue that the Indian model contests the claim that political boundaries should match with the cultural boundaries. The point that Indian state has managed multinational diversity, without creating an imbalance between majority and minorities, the authors argue is model worth replicating in other places. The authors point out that such a vision was shared by the early leaders such as Tagore, Nehru and Gandhi. Thus, the argument points out that unlike Europe where the national communities created their own state, the Indian state has shaped a plural identification with itself and not destroyed the traditional identities.

### 4. Democratic Paradox –

Another important problem where the logic of the Western democratic model is completely reversed is the paradox of political participation in the polity. The Western political theories inform that as the participation in the political system increases, the system and its institutions also become stronger as the consent for the political programs of the systems increase. However, in the case of Indian politics a completely opposite phenomenon is observed. The participation of increasing number of people in the system, has meant that the democratic institutions and their proper functioning is getting disturbed, as Yogendra Yadav (2020) puts it, *“The paradox of political representation understood narrowly involves a tension between the profile, policies, and politics of those who represent and the desires and demands of those who get represented. On the one hand, the practice of representative democracy over half a century has led to a widening of the pool from which the political representatives are recruited, accompanied by a reduction in the mismatch between the social profile of the representatives and those who are represented. This deepening of descriptive representation coexists on the other hand, with a thinning of “substantive representation”. Progress on “who is the representative?” has been accompanied by a step back in “what does the representative do?” and eventually “who gets represented?” This paradox is of course linked to the larger paradox of Indian democracy which takes many forms. It manifests itself in the form of the contrary pulls of the institutional designs and workings of the representative democracy. The institutional designs for authenticating claims to representation, accountability devices for popular control over elected representatives and the mechanisms for linking the policy agenda of representative institutions with the needs and interests of the represented have not kept the pace with the radical upheaval brought about by the democratic upsurge from below (SDSA Team, 2008) ..... For historians of contemporary politics, the paradox takes the form of two contrary narratives, both of which appear simultaneously plausible: the story of the decline and demise of democracy and that of the deepening and strengthening of democracy (Khilnani, 1997; Mehta, 2003) .....” pp. 166-167.*

As the quotation itself shows the possibility of understanding this phenomenon through Western political theory leads us to contradiction. The Western political theory says that as participation increases so does the consent for political programs and in effect lead to a strengthening of the political system. However, in case of India, strangely opposite is the case. As more and more Indians become part of the system, they decrease the quality and efficiency of democratic institutions.

### 5. Democracy against Development –

Witsoe (2013) points out that the democratic paradox discussed above is created by the particular kind of process of state formation that the colonialism initiated in India. The argument is that the colonial state included several dominant caste groups from the local areas into colonial state's organization, leading to an unequal relationship between the social groups. This patronage of the state to the local caste networks means that, *“colonial and then postcolonial strategies of governance resulted in the emergence of caste networks that continue to link state institutions with locally powerful groups, producing a state unable to impartially deliver services or enforce individual rights. This is the crucial context within which the instrumentality and corruption often associated with caste*

politics play out. But I also illustrate the ways in which lower- caste politics challenged this mode of governance, not by attempting to reform a corrupt “system,” but by systematically weakening state institutions and development activities controlled by upper castes and, when possible, by openly and unapologetically using corrupt practices to turn the tables on upper castes that had long done the same more discreetly (disguised with the rhetoric of development). The result was a political movement positioned against development.” p. 10.

Witsoe’s argument is that basically, the impartial state machinery and the autonomy of state infrastructure from the local power structures, which is assumed by the democratic theorists does not exist in the post-colonial India. It is because of this reason that the radical indeterminacy of the post-colonial democracies with that of the liberal political democracy of the West comes into being. Going further he argues that the development discourse that the colonial state argued for its own legitimacy was internalised by the post-colonial Indian state, for the same legitimacy. It is this development discourse that the radical lower caste politics has questioned by arguing for equality rather than development.

## 6. Cultural Difference and Political Institutions:

Even though the arguments of the different authors presented here have different questions, analysis and solutions, all of them seem to point out to the fact that, the Western political institutions that have been implanted into India, do not function in the way that the Western political theories assume. Whether it is the assumption about atomized society, about the requirement of some cultural unifying factor to create a political system, or that the increase in participation means the strengthening of state institutions or that the state machinery is impartial and autonomous of the local power structures. Basically, the Indian society and culture impacts the working of Western political institutions in India. However, even though there is a recognition that there is a radical difference in the way the Indian politics happens, there is no clear idea of how to account for this. To put it in the words of Kaviraj (Kaviraj and Khilnani eds. 2002), “*The historical result has been a strange paradox – which political scientists analysing non-Western societies ignore. Actual political processes in the Third World are mostly very different from political life in the West; yet strangely, the language used to describe, evaluate and express the experiences of politics are the same everywhere. For historical reasons, nearly all societies of the Third World speak, as far as politics is concerned, a Western language. It is a language which identifies states and civil societies... Yet it is common knowledge that these words do not denote objects which behave in the same way as in the West, where this language originated. The existence of bureaucracy does not mean the untroubled operation of Weberian rules of rationalization; operation of democracy does not necessarily mean a secure understanding of inviolable rights of individuals or respect for minorities. Political institutions taken from the West are introduced into societies which have embedded forms of sociability that are very different from the common individualistic forms of the modern West. The actual manner of operation and historical effects of those political institutions are sometimes startlingly different.*” pp. 4-5.

The problem of language to articulate the difference of the non-Western culture with that of the West has to be understood in the context of theorization. Today, when the differences are articulated, they are articulated in terms of deviation from the Western political models. This way of articulation even though recognizes the differences between the West and the non-West, they do not however provide a way of asking the questions about the notion of non-Western politics itself. If non-Western politics is really different from Western politics, it must be theorized so that clear comparison between the two different culture’s notions about politics can be compared. However, as of now only Western theories are available in the domain of political science and when these theories are used to describe the non-Western culture, they lead to several problems of comparing the cultural differences. The most important problem in this regard is the assumption of Western universality.

To quote Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) it is, “*impossible to think of anywhere in the world without invoking certain categories and concepts, the genealogies of which go deep into the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe*” p. 4. However, if the political phenomenon being talked about are clearly different and if it has a direct link with cultural differences between the West and non-West, how does one explain/compare using Western concepts and theories? One has to assume that the historical experience of the West and non-Western cultures is very similar so that, the ideas, concepts and theories used to describe the politics in West are equally useful to describe the non-Western politics. However, such an assumption is clearly not possible, because the non-Western cultures clearly have a completely different conception of politics, which must emerge from their very own and unique

historical experience. Thus, as Kaviraj is pointing out, there is a requirement of a language to articulate the experience of the non-Western cultures and their notion of politics. However, one must also not forget the fact that colonialism has had a large-scale impact on the cultures and their thinking about politics. Colonialism has introduced the non-Western world with the Western political system as well as ideas and have completely altered the imagination of politics in most of the non-Western societies. Therefore, the questions about modern Indian political system have to accompany with the questions of colonialism and that of cultural difference.

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