

Why India Needs a New Political Theory for the Modern World

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1 1. Why India Needs a New Political Theory

My key point is this: India lacks a native political theory, grounded in modern equality and rights. And that reviving older ancient social orders under new names cannot fill gap. This post made me reflect on the difference between Brahmins and Brahminism.

I have been reading extensively on the caste system. Though I still have many gaps in my understanding. I'd like to extend my understanding further.

One conceptual question keeps returning to me:

In modern usage, does Brahminism refer not to Brahmins as people, but to a specific social and political order historically embedded in Hindu society (often loosely called Vedic society)¹

By Brahmin, we usually mean a particular caste group, priests, ritual specialists, scholars, just one community among many.

By Brahmanism, I increasingly understand something different in light of Indian historical reading. It is an older social-political order of Indian society, where birth-based status are morally justified through karma and dharma.

2 2. The Older Indian Social Order

In this older Indian-social order:

Indian society was divided into fixed varnas (theoretical social order).

The Rig Veda is one of the sacred canonical Hindu texts².

This was from Rig Veda's Purusha Sukta (10.90), serving as a cosmic explanation for social structure and divine manifestation:

- Brahmin
- Kshatriya
- Vaishya
- Shudra

with Dalits (avarnas) outside the system entirely.

Privileges were hereditary. Mobility was not merely socially discouraged but morally condemned as a violation of cosmic order.

In this older social order, Indian law was unequal by design. The Manusmriti prescribes drastically different punishments by caste³. In some verses, a Shudra who verbally insults a higher-caste person faces severe bodily punishment, while the reverse is treated lightly [³ 8.270; 8.271; 8.379]

Certain castes were tied to specific landlords and villages for generations.

They were forbidden to own land.

Payment was often in grain, not money.

Leaving could result in confiscation of huts, seizure of cattle, or forced return by violence.

These were pre-democratic economic and legal systems, before the introduction of Enlightenment-influenced political theory ideas into Indian society.

3 3. The Modern Rupture: Enlightenment vs Tradition

Mahatma Gandhi famously argued that one should preserve the best elements of tradition while discarding what is morally unacceptable in the modern world⁴.

That position itself recognizes that this older order is incompatible with modern ethics.

Modern political thought, shaped by Enlightenment ideas, rests on a radically different foundation:

- All individuals are equal by birth
- Rights do not depend on caste, lineage, or ritual status
- Law applies uniformly

India's Constitution reflects this rupture of social order:

- Article 15 prohibits caste discrimination
- Article 17 abolishes untouchability altogether

4 4. A Deep Intellectual Problem in Indian Thought

This raises a deeper, thought-provoking social-political intellectual problem for me.

Majority of Hindu texts prioritize rita (cosmic order), dharma (duty), and karma (moral causation).

Even reformers like Vivekananda or Aurobindo spoke mainly of spiritual unity, not of political equality, individual rights, or constitutional citizenship⁵. While there were reformers from Arya Samaj, Brahmo Samaj trying to answer modern political thought, unfortunately not much came for the modern world.

For example: Dayanand Saraswati, founder of Arya Samaj, rejected untouchability and Brahmin monopoly on Vedas, but retained merit-based varna, not full equality⁶. Merit-based varna says all castes have innate in-born guna (traits), character and intelligence. All these influenced Vinayak Damodar Savarkar⁷

Dayanand Saraswati believed in the infallible authority of the Vedas. He advocated the doctrines of karma and reincarnation.

He emphasized the Vedic ideals of brahmacharya, including celibacy and devotion to God.

5 5. Limitations in Islamic Political Thought

I notice a similar limitation in Islamic thought, rich moral theology, but relatively little systematic political theory compatible with modern pluralistic democracy. For example: *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, by Muhammad Iqbal, speaks of independent reasoning and the Quran as a living, evolving force⁸ However, it advocates a republican theocracy where ulema guide legislation alongside public will. Al-Farabi, founder of Islamic Political Philosophy, envisioned a virtuous city ruled by a philosopher-imam who unites religion and state for human happiness⁹ Unfortunately, this doesn't work, as there's no such thing as an infallible ruler.

6 6. Enlightenment Political Thought

By contrast, Judaism and Christianity, through centuries of reinterpretation, generated extensive political philosophy about law, sovereignty, rights, limits of power, and human dignity. Baruch Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670) reinterpreted the Pentateuch (Torah), promoting democracy, freedom of thought (*libertas philosophandi*), and limiting ecclesiastical interference in governance¹⁰.

John Locke, a physician and philosopher, wrote the *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), reinterpreting the Genesis covenant as consent-based authority¹¹. He justified revolution against tyrants and property rights as human dignity's extension. His work influenced the U.S. Constitution's checks and balances.

Roger Williams, a Christian theologian, published *The Bloody-Tenent of Persecution*. He advocated for freedom of conscience to follow any religion or irreligion. He reinterpreted the New Testament using the Parable of the Tares from Matthew 13¹²

7 7. What India and Muslim Societies Must Do

For India, Muslim societies, the real task is not reviving ancient social hierarchies under new names, but developing serious modern political theory grounded in equality, constitutionalism, and human rights in light of Modern world.

8 8. Why Hindutva Fails

Many might speak of Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, it primarily addresses statecraft, espionage, taxation, and coercive governance (*danda*) to ensure ruler prosperity¹³. This is unlike Locke's

Two Treatises or Rousseau's Social Contract which emphasizes, Individual liberty, Consent of the governed, Equality, Rejection of absolutism.

While some might even be reminded of Amartya Sen's The Argumentative Indian, it was one of the most poorly written books that I have ever read. Hindutva, in my view, does the opposite, it selectively romanticizes an unequal past, while operating inside a modern constitutional state, making it internally contradictory.

Revival attempts for Indian Knowledge Systems, particularly Vastu Shastra (Hindu science of architecture) and Ayurveda, are nascent and misguided. These outdated traditions, long surpassed by modern science, ought to be retired to embrace evidence-based global advancements.

Yet in my view, they are highly unlikely to succeed, as none of the writers seem to value the Enlightenment contributions, absorb or synthesize the ideas, nor follow the Japanese Meiji Era's playbook, who became extremely successful¹⁴.

If anything, the challenge before Hindu and Islamic thinkers today is not civilizational pride as advocated by Hindutva, but intellectual reconstruction to articulate ethical and political frameworks that genuinely belong to the modern world, which requires rigorous efforts.

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