

## Relevance of pre British ancient Indian political thought

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### Abstract

Our tradition and common culture bind us together and give us a separate identity as a nation-state and recognition in the global world. We cannot disassociate ourselves from this commonality. We need not forget our pre-British political thought because they have immense treasure for the posterity to come.

**Keywords:** politics, kingship, monarchy, political thought, equality, dharmasashtas, arthasashta, secularism, manusmriti, pragmatism

### Introduction

It was after almost 200 years of British rule in India we got independence. But at this 21<sup>st</sup> century, in the present day world of globalisation we have again completely relied ourselves on to the dependency of western world. We are dictated to understand our society according to the privileges provided by scientific advancements because they have eased our lives. We tend to ignore the other aspects of looking at the world from the point of view of political understanding like democracy, liberty, equality, social justice etc. We have standardised civilization according to the western and modern world. We have much to look at the richness of our own culture and tradition because we are one of the earliest civilizations of the world. Ancient Indian political thought is an area where we can understand our country and its richness; it's not merely talking about mythology but rediscovering the genesis of our political understanding. In this paper I have aimed to highlight our embeddedness into the political understanding which is relevant even today at present political set up.

According to various scholars and researchers ancient India does not have any written text on political thought. Hence, our political understanding has been derived from the Vedas, Dharmasastras like Manusmriti, epics Ramayana, Mahabharata, Kautilya's Arthasashtra, Shramanic tradition of Buddhism and Jainism. During Muslim rule of Delhi sultanate we had Ziauddin Barani and Abul Fazal during Mughal rule of Akbar. According to K. Sreeranjani Subba Rao the study of ancient Vedic, classical Sanskrit, Prakriti and Pali literatures and languages by western Indologists and philosophers has also deeply contributed to the growth of a spirit of self-confidence in India. The first printed editions of the four Vedas were brought out for the first time in the world by German scholars. The Rig Veda by Max Muller in 1849-74, the Vajasaneyi Samhita by Webber in 1852, the Atharvana veda by Roth in 1856 brought out the deep intellectual wealth of ancient India. Raja Rammohan Roy, the initiator of modern Indian political thought was the first person to maintain that Upanishadic teachings rightly interpreted, contain eternal truths relevant to all ages. Raja Rammohan Roy was responsible for making Vedanta a dominant philosophy in India which was later on followed by Swami Vivekananda and

others. One of the most important features of Indian political thought is its relation to Vedic ideals. The King in Indian political thought was assigned with most important functions based on Vedic ideals to rule the people. Based on Vedic dharma Yagnavalkya, Manu, Kautilya and others developed a healthy political tradition for the progress and welfare of the people. She has also discussed the political ideas of vedas saying "that the ancient Indians, even in those early days of the Vedas, the Samhitas and the Brahmans, we are aware of important concepts relating to their socio-political life is proved by the existence of such terms like Rajya, Svaraya, Samrajya, Bahujya, Varajya, Maharaya and Adhipaty which are referred to in ancient texts like Atharvaveda, Taittiriya Samhita, the Aitareya Brahman and the Jaiminiya Upanishad Brahman. Based on the Vedic ideals Indian political thought made significant contribution to the theory of state and its organisation."

Kautilya's Arthasashtra marks the breakthrough into the ancient Indian political thought with his pragmatism and realistic approach into the administration. Thought kautilya too shares ideas from the Dharmasastras as far as political obligation is concerns. He too acknowledges monarchy rule. He too favours Varna system which meet various criticisms. But Kautilya separates politics with religion leaving social order untouched. Probably society had not visualised or experience liberalism. Hence there was no alternative to a different social construct and functional specialisation was considered as the best way to understand political obligation. Subsequently the terms 'Dharma' and 'Danda' became important.

Bhikhu Parekh discusses the contribution of Buddhism in the development of political theory as compared to Hindu political thought. For him Hindu tradition is basically inegalitarian. It did develop the moral equality but it did not develop social, political and legal equality. He says "Buddhism attracted the loyalty and support of the economically powerful but socially inferior class of traders, cultivators, artisans, merchants and skilled craftsmen. It also welcomed and assimilated such foreign settlers as the Greeks, Shakas, Kushans and Huns whom the caste – based Hindu society had kept out of its fold.

Buddhism also attracted the sudhras, who could shed their low caste status by joining a caste – free religion and improve their material circumstances by escaping the expensive religious rituals required by the Brahmins.”

Ain-e- Akbari of Akbarnama written by Abul Fazal gives a detailed account of Akbar’s rule. It gives the picture of equal society during emperor Akbar. His secular ideas is represented through the discussion on Din-e- illahi, a new religion started by Akbar for all section of society where Hindu- Muslim especially share a sense of brotherhood under the umbrella of common religion. Barani’s Hidayats or instruction to the ruler represent the political order.

However these traditions have stood tests of the time and met several criticisms too. But we cannot do away with the fact that ancient India was predominantly a religiously influenced society and religion was considered as the supreme order because man had himself given supreme position to supernatural power that was above him “a superhuman”. In the absence of democracy we had an idea of kingship as a rule to look after the subject one who had power and virtue. Our tradition and common culture bind us together and give us a separate identity as a nation-state and recognition in the global world. We cannot disassociate ourselves from this commonality. We need not forget our pre-British political thought because they have immense treasure for the posterity to come. We will have to seek cultural accommodation from others into our own country in this era of globalisation if we fail to understand our Indian political culture and thought.

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