

THE ROLE OF BHARATIYA IDENTITY IN DECOLONIZING THE INDIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

"Bharat" is a name that reflects the civilizational continuity of the land and its people. Bharat is rooted in a distinct cultural, spiritual, and philosophical tradition that predates colonialism by thousands of years. This paper examines the profound necessity of reasserting Bharatiya identity as a means of dismantling the deep-rooted colonial frameworks that continue to influence India's political system. Despite gaining political independence in 1947, India's governance systems, legal frameworks, and political thought remain significantly shaped by colonial legacies. These legacies have created a disconnection between India's political structures and the civilizational ethos of Bharat. While the Constitution has been hailed for its progressive values and democratic principles, it is argued that it does not fully reflect the civilizational ethos of Bharat. This paper advocates for a reassertion of Bharatiya values, systems, and practices in all spheres of life, including governance, law, education, and culture. This study seeks to contribute to the discourse on cultural and political sovereignty, emphasizing that reclaiming Bharatiya identity is crucial for creating a political system that truly reflects the values and aspirations of the people of Bharat.

Introduction

The history of India is marked by centuries of cultural richness, diversity, and a deep philosophical tradition that has shaped its civilization for millennia. However, this history also bears the indelible marks of colonial domination, most notably during the British Empire's rule from the 18th to mid-20th century. The legacy of colonialism did not simply end with India's independence in 1947; it permeated the political, social, and cultural institutions of the country, leaving behind a political system and governance structure shaped by foreign ideals. In post-colonial India, the question of decolonizing the Indian political system—of reclaiming and reinvigorating indigenous political, cultural, and philosophical traditions—has become a key challenge. Central to this process is the idea of "Bharatiya" identity, a concept that invokes India's pre-colonial cultural heritage and seeks to redefine the political system in alignment with this identity.

The concept of "Bharatiya" identity goes beyond mere nationalism; it represents an effort to return to India's civilizational roots. It draws on ancient philosophies such as "Dharma," which has historically governed social and political behavior in India, and emphasizes values like justice, duty, and the collective good. This identity is also grounded in India's pluralistic traditions, accommodating a wide range of beliefs, practices, and social systems. As India grapples with the vestiges of colonialism, reclaiming a Bharatiya identity seeks to reorient the political system toward these indigenous values, promoting a model of governance that is deeply interconnected with India's cultural heritage.

The Indian political system, as it stands today, is a product of colonial influence. While the Indian Constitution and its democratic institutions are celebrated as monumental achievements of self-governance, they are also deeply rooted in Western ideals of governance, such as parliamentary democracy, federalism, and the rule of law, which were inherited from British political traditions. These structures, although providing stability, have also often been at odds with India's diverse cultural, spiritual, and philosophical traditions. The disconnect between indigenous values and the governance system has given rise to a growing discourse on the need to decolonize the political system and reclaim a distinctly Bharatiya identity that is reflective of the Indian ethos.

This paper deals with the colonial mindset and legacy in the current political system of India. How far the roots of colonialism are rooted in the current Indian model has been discussed. This paper is more of forward-looking research which provides the prospective role the identity of Bharat can play in decolonising Indian Minds and Indian political system.

Research Methodology

This research involves a multi-disciplinary and qualitative approach. Given the nature of the research, which aims to explore the historical, philosophical, and cultural aspects of decolonization and Bharatiya identity, the methodology includes a combination of historical analysis, literature review, and qualitative content analysis of primary and secondary sources. This study adopts a qualitative research design, with a focus on the exploration of concepts related to Bharatiya identity, decolonization, and Indian political thought. The qualitative nature of the study allows for in-depth examination of theoretical constructs and cultural paradigms that underlie the idea of Bharat as a civilizational identity and its role in transforming the Indian political system.

Colonial Mindset in Indian Political system

The colonial mindset in India's political system refers to the lingering influence of British colonial governance structures, practices, and ideologies, which continue to shape India's political landscape long after gaining independence in 1947. Despite the establishment of democratic institutions and frameworks, the political system retains certain characteristics of colonial rule, manifesting in centralized power, bureaucratic elitism, hierarchical governance, and the marginalization of indigenous political traditions.

One of the most significant legacies of British colonialism is the centralization of power. The British Raj relied on a highly centralized administrative system to control a diverse and vast population. This top-down approach allowed the British to exert control efficiently, but it also alienated local governance systems, which had traditionally been more decentralized and community-oriented. The post-independence Indian state inherited this structure, with the central government holding significant power over states and local bodies.

While the Indian Constitution provides for a federal system of governance, in practice, there is a strong concentration of power in the central government, a reflection of the colonial mindset that prioritizes control from the top. This has often led to tensions between the central and state governments, especially in regions with distinct cultural and political identities. The tendency to prioritize central authority over local autonomy hinders the development of a truly decentralized, participatory political system, which would be more in line with India's pre-colonial political traditions.

The Indian bureaucracy, a direct descendant of the British Indian Civil Service, continues to exhibit traits of elitism and hierarchy that were characteristic of colonial rule. During the British era, the bureaucracy was designed to serve the interests of the colonial administration, operating as an instrument of control rather than as a facilitator of public service. British bureaucrats were often seen as aloof, powerful, and detached from the needs of the common people, a perception that persists in modern-day India.

Despite reforms and attempts to make the bureaucracy more transparent and accountable, the colonial legacy of bureaucratic elitism remains. Civil servants in India still enjoy significant power and privileges, and the relationship between the government and the governed can often feel distant and impersonal. The rigid hierarchical structure within the bureaucracy mirrors the colonial system, where senior officials wield considerable authority, while lower-level officials and ordinary citizens have limited access to decision-making processes. This centralization of authority creates inefficiency, delays, and corruption, further alienating the public from governance.

The colonial mindset has also contributed to the marginalization of indigenous political traditions in favour of Western models of governance. British rule introduced Western political ideologies, such as liberal democracy, parliamentary governance, and codified legal systems, which have remained dominant in post-colonial India. While these systems have contributed to India's democratic development, they often overlook India's rich political heritage, including systems like the Panchayati Raj, which were based on decentralized, community-driven governance.

Indigenous political systems, which emphasized local self-governance, consensus-building, and the idea of Dharma (righteousness) as a guiding principle, were largely replaced by Western legal and political frameworks. Reclaiming Bharat requires a re-evaluation of these indigenous traditions and

integrating them into contemporary political discourse to create a more contextually relevant and inclusive governance system.

The colonial legacy in the legal system is another crucial aspect that Sudipta Kaviraj examines. During British rule, the legal system was designed to serve the interests of the colonial administration, ensuring that laws were enforced to maintain control over the population rather than deliver justice to the people. Kaviraj argues that the colonial legal system, with its emphasis on punishment, control, and the suppression of dissent, remains largely intact in post-independence India. This legal framework was not designed to address the socio-cultural realities of Indian society but was instead focused on imposing order from above. The postcolonial Indian state has inherited these laws and legal structures, which often remain disconnected from the lived experiences and aspirations of ordinary citizens¹.

The adversarial nature of the colonial legal system, where the state is pitted against the citizen, continues to dominate the Indian judiciary. Kaviraj critiques how the colonial legal framework often prioritizes procedural correctness over substantive justice, leading to a system that is slow, formalistic, and inaccessible to the average citizen. This legal system, designed to serve a colonial power, is often ill-suited to address the complexities of a democratic society, where justice should be more inclusive and participatory.

The Indian legal system, according to Christine Keating, is another area where colonial legacies are deeply entrenched. During British rule, the legal system was designed to serve the interests of the colonial administration, with laws that prioritized order and control over justice. Keating argues that the colonial legal system was fundamentally authoritarian, with laws that were used to suppress dissent and maintain the power of the colonial state². This legacy continues in postcolonial India, where the legal system often operates in ways that are disconnected from the lived realities of ordinary citizens. The judiciary remains slow, formalistic, and inaccessible to large sections of the population, particularly marginalized groups.

Keating also addresses the issue of the "passive citizen" in the Indian political system, a legacy of the colonial social contract. Under British rule, the Indian population was governed as subjects, not citizens. They were expected to obey the law and pay taxes, but had little say in how they were governed. The colonial state did not see itself as accountable to the people, and political participation was limited to a small elite.

After independence, India adopted a democratic constitution that enshrined the rights of citizens to participate in the political process. However, Keating argues that the colonial social contract, which treated the citizen as passive and subordinate to the state, has not been fully dismantled. Many citizens, particularly in rural areas and among marginalized communities, continue to experience the state as an authoritarian force that imposes its will from above, rather than as a democratic entity that is accountable to the people.

Keating critiques how the Indian political system often limits meaningful political participation to elections, which occur every few years. In between elections, citizens have little influence over policy decisions and are often treated as passive recipients of state policies rather than active participants in governance. This limited form of democracy, she argues, reflects the colonial mindset that views political participation as something that should be controlled and restricted, rather than encouraged and expanded.

Role of Bharat in Decolonising Indian Political system

The ideology of Bharat, rooted in India's ancient cultural, spiritual, and philosophical traditions, offers a profound framework for decolonizing the Indian political system. By invoking Bharat, as opposed to the colonial conception of "India," proponents of this ideological shift aim to recover and revitalize the indigenous knowledge systems, values, and governance models that existed long before colonial rule. Bharat is not just a geographical entity but also a cultural and civilizational identity that reflects the rich diversity and unity of the Indian subcontinent. Decolonizing the Indian political system

¹ Kaviraj (n 3).

² Keating (n 5).

through the lens of Bharat involves reimagining governance, law, policy, and societal relationships in ways that reflect this ancient heritage, while also addressing modern aspirations for justice, democracy, and inclusivity.

One of the fundamental aspects of decolonizing the Indian political system through the ideology of Bharat is reclaiming indigenous political philosophies. Ancient India had its own traditions of governance, as evidenced by the Arthashastra, Manusmriti, and the texts of the Vedas and Upanishads. These texts not only provided a blueprint for governance but also promoted values such as dharma (righteousness), artha (prosperity), and loka-sangraha (welfare of the people).

This decolonization of political thought also involves moving away from Western political frameworks that were imposed during colonial rule. The colonial British administration introduced European ideas of sovereignty, bureaucracy, and nation-states, which were often in direct conflict with India's indigenous traditions. Reclaiming Bharat as a political ideology entails recognizing that India's governance systems should be informed by its own intellectual and cultural heritage rather than models imported from the West.

Koenraad Elst suggests that decolonizing the Indian political system involves questioning the dominance of Western liberal thought and exploring alternative models rooted in Indian traditions³. For example, the varna system, while often misunderstood and misrepresented, was originally a framework for organizing society based on duties and responsibilities rather than rigid hierarchies. Elst contends that the principles underlying the varna system could offer insights into how to create a more balanced and equitable political system in India, one that is not based on the Western notion of class struggle but on a more holistic understanding of social responsibilities. Even the language of political discourse—terms like "nation-state," "citizenship," and "secularism"—was imported from the West. Hindu revivalism, as Elst describes it, is an attempt to recover an indigenous political identity that is rooted in India's cultural and spiritual heritage⁴.

This involves a revaluation of India's political history, recognizing that the colonial period was not the beginning of Indian political thought but a disruption of a much older tradition. Elst highlights the importance of figures like Shivaji, who is often celebrated for his military achievements but also offers a model of governance that is deeply rooted in Hindu values. Shivaji's kingdom was not based on Western models of statecraft but on a dharmic understanding of rule, where the king was a servant of the people and of dharma.

For Elst, figures like Shivaji provide an alternative model for Indian political identity, one that is not based on the colonial state but on indigenous principles of governance. Decolonizing the political system, therefore, involves not only rejecting the colonial state but also reasserting the legitimacy of pre-colonial forms of governance that were more in tune with India's cultural and spiritual traditions. Decolonizing India's political system would involve reviving dharmic concepts of governance and justice. Dharma, often translated as "righteousness" or "duty," was a central organizing principle in ancient Indian society. In governance, dharma implies that rulers should act in the best interest of the people, upholding justice and fairness, and ensuring the well-being of all citizens. Bharatiya tradition is always relied on the principles of King's duty, that is Dharma. It is the British who overhaul the dharma with Raj (rule). Rule is more of the authoritarian rigid type of system while dharma is more of the welfare type of system. Meghnad Desai draws parallels between the Emergency and the colonial government's use of draconian laws to suppress dissent⁵. During British rule, especially in the aftermath of World War I, colonial authorities implemented restrictive laws such as the Rowlatt Act of 1919, which allowed the government to imprison individuals without trial and severely restricted civil rights. Desai points out that during the Emergency, similar tactics were employed by the Indian government. Thousands of political opponents were arrested under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA), a law that allowed for indefinite detention without formal charges, mirroring colonial methods of repression.

³ Elst (n 2).

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Desai (n 1).

By invoking the Emergency provisions of the Indian Constitution, Indira Gandhi was able to bypass democratic checks and balances, effectively ruling by decree. Desai interprets this as a continuation of the colonial mindset, where the state prioritized control and suppression over democratic governance and citizen rights. The Emergency, in this sense, was a revival of colonial authoritarianism that the Indian leadership had inherited but had not fully discarded.

Pre-colonial India was marked by diverse forms of local governance, including the panchayati system, where villages managed their own affairs through councils made up of local representatives. This system not only allowed for greater participation by ordinary citizens but also ensured that decisions were made in a manner that was sensitive to local needs and conditions. This system was community-oriented governance system. This model was society based which was replaced by British State based model.

While India has a constitutional provision for panchayats, they often lack the resources, autonomy, and authority needed to function effectively. A true decolonization effort would empower local communities, giving them more control over decision-making processes and enabling them to address local issues in ways that align with their cultural and social realities. This would also be in line with the Gandhian vision of "Gram Swaraj" or village self-rule, which emphasized local autonomy as the foundation of true democracy. Another aspect of the colonial mindset can be seen in the constitutional ideas.

The Constitution, as per Sai Deepak, is rooted in Enlightenment ideas of individualism, secularism, and rationalism—concepts that do not fully align with India's ancient traditions, which emphasized the collective, the spiritual, and the ethical dimensions of governance. At the heart of Sai Deepak's argument for decolonizing the Indian political system is the revival of dharmic traditions of governance. In pre-colonial Bharat, governance was informed by dharma, a concept that encompasses not just law and order but righteousness, justice, and the well-being of society as a whole. Sai Deepak contrasts this indigenous model of governance with the centralized, bureaucratic state introduced by the British⁶. Under colonial rule, the Indian state became highly centralized, with power concentrated in the hands of a small elite, and governance became disconnected from the people. This centralization persisted after independence, with the Indian government adopting a top-down approach to policy-making and administration.

Sai Deepak argues the legal system India adopted, while functional, is alien to the cultural and ethical traditions of Bharat. It prioritizes procedural justice and individual rights in a way that often disregards the collective and spiritual dimensions of justice that are central to dharmic traditions. Recent changes by Narendra Modi Government where three new acts Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita and the Bharatiya Sakshaya Sanhita will replace colonial era laws Indian Penal Code, Code of Criminal Procedure and Evidence Act. These new acts are testament to development of new spirit of the country to decolonise the Indian legal system. However there are number of acts which needs to be changed and defined in line with the aspiration of Bharat⁷.

Sai Deepak critiques the Indian judiciary for continuing to interpret laws through a Western liberal lens, often ignoring the cultural and civilizational context of Bharat. He points out that many colonial-era laws, such as sedition laws, continue to be used in postcolonial India, reflecting the colonial state's emphasis on control and suppression of dissent. Moreover, the judiciary's secular approach often leads to decisions that are disconnected from the religious and cultural beliefs of the people, especially in matters related to family law, temple administration, and cultural practices. He discussed the Sabarimala judgment by the Supreme Court of India in 2018⁸ which highlights the tension between colonial-era legal frameworks and Indian cultural values. The decision, which allowed women of all ages to enter the Sabarimala temple in Kerala, raised important questions about the judiciary's prioritization of Western legal principles such as individual rights, gender equality, and non-

⁶ Deepak (n 4).

⁷ 'Curtains on Old IPC, CrPC, Evidence Law, New Criminal Codes Come into Effect from Today' (*The Indian Express*, 1 July 2024) <<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/curtains-on-old-ipc-crpc-evidence-law-new-criminal-codes-come-into-effect-from-today-9425034/>> accessed 10 September 2024.

⁸ *Indian Young Lawyers Assn (Sabarimala Temple-5J) v State of Kerala*, (2019) 11 SCC 1.

discrimination over traditional Indian values like religious customs, dharma, and the sanctity of faith-based practices. This case provides a crucial perspective for the larger discussion on reclaiming Bharatiya identity and decolonizing India's political and legal systems. Decolonising Indian judiciary would involve reforming the judiciary to be more responsive to the cultural and religious contexts in which it operates, as well as revisiting colonial-era laws that are out of step with the ethical and spiritual values of Bharat.

Another contentious aspect of India's political system, according to Sai Deepak, is its secularism. The secular state in India, as defined by the Constitution, is based on a Western notion of secularism that seeks to separate religion from politics. However, in the context of Bharat, where spirituality and religion are deeply intertwined with social and political life, this Western model of secularism is problematic. Sai Deepak argues that Indian secularism has often been used to suppress the religious and cultural rights of the Hindu majority while privileging minority communities.

Decolonizing Indian secularism would involve reimagining it in a way that reflects the cultural and spiritual realities of Bharat. Sai Deepak suggests that India should adopt a model of "positive secularism," which does not deny the role of religion in public life but rather ensures that all religious communities are treated equally and fairly⁹. This would require a shift away from the Western liberal framework of secularism and towards a model that is rooted in India's own traditions of religious pluralism and tolerance.

Conclusion

India, seven decades after gaining independence, continues to grapple with the colonial vestiges embedded within its political, legal, and administrative systems. Reclaiming Bharat in its fullest sense means not merely seeking political freedom, but embarking on a larger project of decolonization where indigenous values, philosophies, and governance models are placed at the center of political life. As Mahatma Gandhi once articulated, "India will never be truly free unless it embraces its soul – its dharma, its swaraj, its panchayat." This vision of decolonizing India is what this research seeks to explore through the role of Bharatiya identity. The process of decolonizing the Indian political system requires both institutional and ideological transformations. The continued reliance on colonial-era laws, bureaucratic hierarchies, and governance practices has entrenched an authoritarian, top-down approach to governance. A focus on restoring indigenous dispute resolution mechanisms, such as the panchayat justice system, where community-driven conflict resolution was central, can offer a more inclusive and accessible form of justice. Justice should not be an esoteric, distant process but one rooted in local communities and values.

Indian democracy, inspired by Western liberal models, operates on a social contract that is largely alien to the Indian psyche. The Western notion of democracy, predicated on individual rights, often conflicts with India's communitarian traditions. Bharatiya identity, on the other hand, offers a model of constitutionalism that emphasizes both individual freedoms and collective responsibilities. The concept of dharma could serve as a foundational ethical framework for public service, where governance is not just about administering laws but upholding justice, fairness, and communal welfare. Reclaiming Bharat is not a regressive project but a forward-looking vision of decolonizing India's political system. It seeks to replace the remnants of colonial rule with a governance model that reflects the richness of India's cultural, ethical, and philosophical traditions. As India moves forward into the 21st century, reclaiming Bharatiya identity offers the potential to create a political system that is more participatory, ethical, and rooted in the values that have sustained the nation for millennia.

In the words of Swami Vivekananda, "Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached." Reclaiming Bharat is the goal, and in doing so, India can truly fulfill the promise of its civilizational greatness while building a democratic system that is both modern and deeply connected to its own roots.

⁹ Deepak (n 4).

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