

The history of liberal thought in India

Daniella Singh

Jnanapravaha, CTAP

**Alisha Sett
June 20th 2019**

The history of liberal thought in India can be charted through the lens of concepts such as political interest, nationalism, humanity and secularism. How did colonial thinkers differ in their understanding of these concepts from figures such as Gandhi, Savarkar, Jinnah and Iqbal (you do not have to discuss all four)? Explicitly argue how one or more of these concepts affects (or has transformed) contemporary liberal discourse in India today.

Introduction:

The concept and definition of liberal thought in India has always been problematic¹. Typically, liberal thought is defined as a set of social and political values that strike a harmony between self-interest and social good, limited government interference, private property, free competition and voluntary social interactions; a distinguished mode of thought that focuses on the “individual”² and his well-being as the standard to assess the suitability of norms, customs, policies and institutions³.

Liberalism in India can be largely defined as an attempt towards achieving social liberty and freedom in a largely denominational and multicultural society⁴. Liberal thought in India thus, represents a broadly contested mode of thought and practice directed towards the pursuit of political and social liberty.

Through this paper I will attempt to sketch the historical evolution and phases of liberal thought in India and its transformation in modern India through the effect of concepts such as nationalism and secularism. Furthermore, we will look at the many factors as well reformatory thinkers that influenced liberal thought in India.

¹ Bayly C.A., *Recovering Liberties; Indian thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire*, Cambridge.

² Shah Parth J., *Evolution of Liberalism in India*, Centre for Civil Society, 2002.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Lal Sanjay, *Gandhi's Synthesis of Liberal and Communitarian Values: Basis and Insights*, ICPR, 2016.

Modern liberal thought in India, found its roots in the social reform movements of the British Raj during the 18th and 19th century⁵. Thinkers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Gopal Krishna Gokhle and others launched systemic reforms against many of the anti-life social practices of that period, of the likes of sati, child marriage and the ban on widow remarriage⁶.

These movements gained momentum among large sections of the population particularly in Eastern and Western India⁷. With the rising demand for independence from the British, the social reform movements paved the way for liberal thought across India and in turn gave way to the liberalism associated with political independence.

If we are to look at the early onset of liberal thought in India, it can be traced back to the 1800's where after the consolidation of Bengal by Robert Clive⁸, and the expansion of the British Raj in India, many Indians began to learn English in order to gain employment in the East India Company⁹. English was introduced through colonial education by the British to create and maintain cultural and ideological hegemony to ensure the continuation of an alien rule¹⁰. However, through this, Indians were introduced to Western ideas and literature. This led to the expanse and spread of rational thought across India. It was the beginning of an awareness for freedom and the demand for self-governance in India; a critique of the current state of Indian society and the colonial state¹¹. [1]This period is often termed by historians as the Bengali Renaissance.¹²

⁵ Bayly, pg. 2

⁶ ibid. pg 24

⁷ Das Dr. Prafulla Kumar, Raja Rammohan Roy: A harbinger of Indian Liberalism.

⁸ Bayly, pg. 4

⁹ Ibid. pg.3

¹⁰ Shah, Evolution of Liberalism in India, Centre for Civil Society, 2002.

¹¹ Bayly, pg. 4

¹² Shah, Evolution of Liberalism in India, Centre for Civil Society, 2002

During this time colonial thinkers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy were primarily responsible for articulating political thought on freedom. This would become the roots of Mahatma Gandhi's fight for freedom and independence in the future.

Liberal thought in India took a form that manifested at particular occasions and represented an amalgam of historically continent fragments of this wider sensibility that are not always coherent or complete. The relationship between liberalism and public debate, democracy and the state was always conflicted and uncertain in a multi ethnic empire constrained by colonialism.¹³ Its features were a desire to re-empower India's people with personal freedom in the face of a despotic government embodied traditional authority and supposedly corrupt domestic or religious practices, including the demand for free press, freedom of assembly and public comment¹⁴.

Many Indians during this time rejected the label of being a liberal as it was viewed to having a stance that would appease the colonizers¹⁵. Indian intellectuals believed that they could 'rewrite'¹⁶ liberal discourse so as to strip it of its coercive colonial features and re-empower it as an indigenous ideology but one still pointing towards universal progress.¹⁷ During this period (1840's), it is important to note, Indian thinkers distanced themselves from the utilitarianism and rationalism of the British variety and were promoting spiritualism radical and nationalist doctrine closer to the liberalism of France, Spain, or Italy. Liberalism in India came to be widely appropriated as the language of colonial domination and of elite command within the subcontinent. but Indians constantly subverted these colonial ideas of liberalism. In turn untouchable, low caste and women movements appropriated and transformed controlling versions of liberal discourse.¹⁸

¹³ Bayly, pg. 27

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid. pg. 11

¹⁶ Ibid. pg. 7

¹⁷ Ibid, pg.3

¹⁸ Ibid. pg. 6

The civil society which liberal ideas ought to generate was often complicit with caste privilege, regional chauvinism, or religious communalism.¹⁹ Some liberals hypocritically proclaimed their modernity while easily capitulating to archaic social practices such as child marriage. Others indeed were closely approximated to the stereotypes of both the old Cambridge school of Indian history and some post-colonial writers who have led them to be mere mendicant office seekers of unauthentic mimic men.²⁰ In his book *Recovering Liberties*, C.A Bayly points out that Liberal thought in India could have achieved hegemonic status had it not been for staunch imprint of national traditions and earlier ideologies:

“Indian constitutional liberals began to articulate a notion of individual and national rights for the subjects of the English East India Company and foreign governments from the Ottoman Empire to the states of the American South. There were nevertheless, some immediate precursors for the Indian and anti - colonial ideas. Liberal thought might well have achieved hegemony across the world in the nineteenth century, but local and national traditions and the imprint of earlier ideologies continued to have purchase.”

Even today it may be observed that liberal thought is an amalgamation of a political sensibility towards social freedom, the need for toleration of various traditions deeply rooted in the idea of the unity of God.

Liberal thought in the early 19th century aimed not to directly achieve a democracy but to naturalise power through Indian representation. This was achieved through various social reform movements the establishment of institutions as symbols of rational and radical liberal thought as

¹⁹ *ibid.* pg. 7

²⁰ *ibid* pg. 10

well as through the circulation of various texts and literature. The Lucknow lawyer Bhishan Narayan Dhar wrote in 1895:

“The radical views of the educated are gradually filtering down to the lowest strata of the nation through the vernacular literature. There is more of the revolutionary spirit in our vernacular novels and fugitive political and social tracts than in all the reports of the Indian National Congress put together. (Reference 20, Bishan Narayan Dhar [sic] Signs of the times (Lucknow 1895), pg 8, of the introduction)”²¹

And although Indian liberals struggled with ideas not only about good government, social development, economic change and global society, Indian liberal discourse created a powerful and unique set of sensibilities. India’s liberal republicanism²² and its tradition of voluntary association proved to be valuable and resolute forces underpinning and empowering future governments and democracy. To further articulate this, the example of the longevity of India’s liberal English, Bengali, Marathi and Hindi Newspapers hardly finds a parallel anywhere else, not only in the developing world but over much of Europe. The earliest radical vernacular press journal appeared as early as 1818²³, the nature of such newspapers only flourished in the next few decades.

To more closely analyse the evolution of liberal thought through the course of India’s history, let us look at Raja Ram Mohan Roy’s role as one of the earliest and well known colonial reformers and as he is widely known as ‘the harbinger of liberal thought’ in India.

Roy’s impact on modern Indian philosophy was a revival of the pure and ethical principles of the Vedanta school of philosophy as found in the Upanishads.²⁴ He preached the unity of God or a monotheistic religion where god was an omnipresent entity that did not require idol worship. He

²¹ *ibid.* pg. 4

²² *ibid.* pg. 9

²³ *ibid.* pg. 21

²⁴ Das, Raja Ram Mohan Roy: A harbinger of Indian Liberalism.

was also the founder of reformatory institution known as the *Brahmo Samaj*²⁵ as well as the co-founder of the Calcutta Unitarian Society.

As a crusader against social evils and unscientific and unhealthy practices prevalent in the traditional caste ridden Hindu society, Mohan Roy formed a number of social organisations in North India. In 1816, he started a spiritual society known as '*Atmiya Sabha*' for religious and social purposes which was later extended to other fields of activity. *Atmiya Sabha* was a discussion club for scholars of religion and philosophy at other fields of activity.²⁶ In 1818, he began his celebrated crusade for the abolition of sati, and on December 4, 1829, Lord William Bentinck, the then Governor General of India made *sati* illegal through Regulation XVII. Thus the year 1829 may be taken as an important landmark in the social history of India. Ram Mohan Roy certainly was greatly renowned by his crusade to free Hindu women from the unjust practices of *sati*. It must however be noted that along with the European thinker, H.H Wilson, Ram Mohan was opposed to any legal enactment for the immediate suppression of sati. He preferred that the practice 'might be suppressed quietly and unobserved by increasing the difficulties and by the indirect agency of the police. The most important event which brought recognition to Ram Mohan Roy was the establishment of the *Brahma Sabha* on 20th August 1928, which became well known as the Brahmo Samaj in 1830. After the failure of the British India Unitarian Association (1827), the followers of Ram Mohan felt the necessity of establishing an institution solely devoted to Unitarian and monotheistic worship. Ram Mohan did not contemplate the Brahma Samaj as an institution of a new religious sect. He wanted the monotheists of all religions to use the premises of the Sabah as their own. He also wished this institution to be a meeting ground the people of all religious denominations who believed in one

²⁵ Ibid. pg. 1

²⁶ ibid pg.3

God, who is formless, eternal unsearchable and immutable. He told one of his friends that after his death the Hindus would claim as their own, the Muslims would do the same, and as also the Christians, but he belonged to no sect as he was the devotee of universal religion. The Samaj stood for the 'worship and adoration of the eternal unsearchable and Immutable Being- who is the author and preserver of the universe but not under or by any other designation or title peculiarly used for and applied to any particular Being or Beings by any man or set of men whatsoever'. It admitted 'no graven image, statue or sculpture, carving, painting, picture, portrait or the likeness of everything'. It further stood for the promotion of charity, morality, piety, benevolence, virtue and the strengthening of the bonds of union between men of all religious persuasions and creeds. Thus, Mohan Roy began the first great religious movement of the 19th century, and since religion was the dominating force in Indian society, reform of religion meant reform of society. The Brahma Samaj was thus a socio-religious reform movement. Ram Mohan raised his voice against the social abuses which rendered in calculable harm to Indian society. The caste system appeared to him as the greatest obstacle to national unity. Ram Mohan proceeded even beyond the frontiers of caste. He adopted a Muslim boy and gave the most daring example of human equality. Besides caste, the traditional Hindu society suffered from other social evils, such as, polygamy, degradation of women, untouchability, and, above all, the horrible sati system. Mohan Roy's endeavour to rouse opinion against these customs marked the beginning of an era of social change. If ultimately the evil practice of sati system was abolished, it was as much due to Mohan Roy as to the Governor General William Bentick in whose time it was effected.²⁷

²⁷ *ibid.*

The principles and ideas of Brahma Samaj gradually spread far beyond Bengal and created an atmosphere of liberalism, rationalism and modernity which greatly influenced Indian thought. As Max Muller pointed out, 'If there is ever to be a new religion in India, it will, I believe, owe its very life-blood to the large heart of Ram Mohan Roy and his disciples Debendranath Tagore and Keshab Chandra Sen.' But Max Muller's prophecy could not be fulfilled, because the condition attached to it - the emergence of a new religion in India was impossible of realisation. Hinduism proved strong enough to counteract the growing influence of Brahmanism as it had done in the case of Buddhism. The philosophy of Brahma Samaj left its decisive influence on the Indian thought. The death of Ram Mohan (1833) was no doubt a great tragedy for the Brahmo Samaj since he was the center of the entire movement. But the mission of the master was taken up by other daring souls. From the beginning, the movement was confined to the intellectually advanced and educationally enlightened minds who believed in reforms. It was not their aim to make it a mass movement, though the purpose was to educate the masses.[2] It is beyond dispute that the legacies of Ram Mohan could not die after him as they were in consonance with the requirements of the time.

Thus, the whole Indian tradition of historicism from the early efforts of Ram Raz, Dadhabhai Naroji and Ram Mohan Roy in the 1820's and 1830's to envisage an ancient Indian constitution through to R.S. Bhandarkar's Ancient Indian polity and Radhakamal Mukerjee's Democracies East and West were directed at repositioning India at the apex of human civilisation.²⁸

This mode of thought was carried forward into the future by M.K Gandhi.²⁹

²⁸ Shah, Evolution of Liberalism in India, Centre for Civil Society, 2002.

²⁹ Lal Sanjay, Gandhi's Synthesis of Liberal and Communitarian Values: Basis and Insights, ICPR, 2016

In this section of the essay I will illustrate, from the standpoint of Gandhian philosophy the contrast between the mode of liberal thought in the early colonial era of India and in its later more modern period where pioneers of freedom like Gandhi, disagreed with certain aspects of the pre-existing liberal movements.³⁰ Gandhi undoubtedly was an avid believer in self-rule, as he famously quoted, ‘The peoples of Europe have no doubt political power but no Swaraj (self-rule)’.³¹ He thus carried forwards the ideas of past reformers and liberals towards self-governance and mode of democracy. While many historians argue that Gandhi cannot be classified as pure political and social liberal, it is inherent to observe that Gandhian philosophy at its core is deeply rooted in the liberal ideals of equality, social freedom and the abolishment of the untouchable caste. However, what separates Gandhi from his predecessors is as N.K. Bose wrote, ‘Gandhi believes that the root of the problem does not lie in the authority of the State, but in the character of the individual which has made the existence of the State possible.’³² This contrast in thought, is what separates Gandhi from his predecessors, as well as advocates of liberal thought in today’s day and age. Before Gandhi, liberal thought was focused on instituting systemic reform to better social and political conditions for individuals in society, Gandhi emphasised on the betterment of the individual’s character above all else.³³ Gandhi’s argument for this course of thought was that liberal reformers of the past focused on the structural aspects of political machinery³⁴ to bring about a liberal democratic system, however they did not derive any techniques or course of action to achieve this liberal form of governance and way of life. Furthermore, the Gandhian way and method of achieving a liberal democracy and its goals also

³⁰ Bayly, pg. 26

³¹ Lal, *Gandhi’s Synthesis of Liberal*, pg 1-3

³² *ibid.*

³³ *ibid*, pg. 4-8

³⁴ *ibid.*

differed characteristically from others; Gandhi believed that while the popular technique of discussion and debate might be successful in adapting some form of machinery of the state it does not go far enough.³⁵ He maintained that even the best democratic systems could fall apart if “perpetual restraint”³⁶ was not exercised by a “widely awakened society”³⁷. This could only be made possible if there existed a strong group of selfless, even self-effacing people who would challenge the democratic government whenever it went wrong. He termed this as putting in place institutions that awaken the masses to a sense of their capacity to regulate and control authority.³⁸ To put it simply this would provide a space for dissenters in the face of the abuse of authority. Thus, Gandhian liberal thought rejected any interpretation of sovereignty as a theory of power or the capacity of enforcement. This further affirmed by Gandhi’s statement that ‘Swaraj (self-rule) is to be attained by educating the masses into a sense of their capacity to regulate and control authority.’

Ramashray Roy explicates the contrast between dominant liberal tendencies today and then in the early 18th and 19th century, and Gandhian thought:

“The foundation of modern civilization was laid on the supposedly unparalleled efficacy of reason to effectively curb the excesses of human passions. Reason (in the modern sense) as the basis of order has proved quite unreliable. It is therefore to look for some other basis of order. But the basis for a durable, benign order is not something objectively given which can be possessed like an object and then used to design the structure of order. Also, the basis of order does not inhere in anything outside man himself, for example, in social institutions. Thus a continued process of changing social institutions to find an institutional arrangement appropriate for man’s purposes proves unavailing because the source of disorder does not, in Gandhi’s view, lie in social institutional arrangements; it lies in the disorder of the soul itself which then manifests itself in the disorder of society which, in turn, afflicts the soul of the individual.

³⁵ Lal Sanjay, *Gandhi’s Thought and Liberal Democracy*, Lexington Books, March 2019.

³⁶ Ibid. pg. 12

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Lal, *Gandhi’s Thought and Liberal Democracy*, (A research paper on the book), pg. 12

The search for order therefore must begin at the level of the soul itself. The ordering of the soul as the basis of social order must begin with the attunement of the soul to the ground of divine being which, for Gandhi, is nothing else than Truth as God....”³⁹

Gandhi was insistent that such an understanding was impossible without moral development. For him this fact alone was reason enough for social institutions to centrally emphasize moral development. More controversially, it thus follows, given both the aforementioned liberal emphasis on public justification as well as Gandhi’s particular metaphysical understanding of truth, that for Gandhi the State must play an active role in promoting certain religious understandings for the liberal thought and liberalism to be realised.

This is starkly in contrast with what Ram Mohan Roy and other reformers of his time propagated. While Roy believed in a monolithic form of religion and later, a neutralised view of religion where it should not and would, not interfere with matters of the state, in order to ensure secularism and tolerance in its purest form. Gandhi stated that, ‘For me there is no politics without religion—not the religion of the superstitious and the blind, religion that hates and fights, but the universal Religion of Toleration. Politics without morality is a thing to be avoided.’⁴⁰ For Gandhi it was reasonable to think that religious conflicts ultimately stem from the insistence of adherents that their cherished stories be understood as literal historical occurrences. Gandhi held that at their core all the great religious systems uniquely emphasize universal principles whose truths are not contingent on specific historical findings and that do not clash with one another. Political liberals, it should be noted, are typically characterized by their call for privileging

³⁹ Roy, Ramahray. “Modernity, Violence and Gandhi” in *Gandhi Marg*, Vol. 14, no. 1 April-June 1992. Republished in *Non-Violence and Saytagraha*. Mukherjee, Ramaswamy (eds.) New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications. (1998) p. 292.

⁴⁰ M.K. *In Search of the Supreme*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Trust. Vol. II (2002) p. 308.

science to the status of social arbitrator among diverse populations that have accepted conflicting truth claims. Thus, Gandhi's points regarding how religious teachings should be understood had implications for how the liberal thought persisted in post independent India. For Gandhi, modern day liberals demand that religious truth claims necessarily conform to the methods of science and when they don't they should be kept separate from the public sphere. According to him this would hinder attempts to give reverence for truth a central place in society.⁴¹ Gandhi believed that the concept of truth, was much broader than prevailing scientific notions of the concept. Sanjay Lal in his paper on Gandhi and Liberal thought points out that, 'Indeed it can be said that the liberal emphasis on secularism has paradoxically led to an undermining of pluralism insofar as this emphasis has perpetuated a narrow understanding of how religion should conform to truth.' Lal further suggests that it is worth noting that for Gandhi a non-violent approach towards religion on the state's part is conducive to religious communities existing in a way that is in line with the core principles of liberal thought. He goes on to further suggest that if Gandhian religious understanding were adopted as a kind of official and procedural "background" position that comprises a broader context the state can refer to when doing things like educating children and adjudicating between conflicting religious claims realization of an ideal liberal society can be more realistically pursued.

Such is also implied in *Hind Swaraj*:

"Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path to duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms. To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions. So doing, we know ourselves. The Gujarati equivalent for civilization means 'good conduct'."⁴²

⁴¹ Ramakrishnan, Niranjan. *Reading Gandhi in the 21st Century*. USA: Palgrave-Macmillan. (2013) p. 105.

⁴² Republished in *The Gandhi Reader*. Homer, Jack (ed.). Indianapolis: Indiana University Press (1956) p. 108.

Gandhi thus incorporated religious language in the above passage given his advocacy of mastering mind and passions (common themes in Indian religion). Of course to Gandhi it was also imperative that the religious ideas advanced by the state do not themselves perpetuate mentalities of violence. Given that when ethical teachings are couched in religious terminology they inspire our greatest devotion we can see why for Gandhi the active promotion of religion is necessary for realization of the ideal state. Thus, it would not be incidental, from Gandhi's standpoint, that so many of the great reform movements our world has seen (like the American civil rights movement and Dorothy Day's Catholic worker)⁴³ have been characterized by the devout adherence of their members to cherished religious principles.

As liberalism encounters threats not seen since those times, Gandhi's insights are worthy of consideration, the contemporary Indian liberal would point out that even in today it would be impossible for one to demarcate religious considerations from public life in India, given its vast cultural diversity. A centralised political or social system has not only constrained public freedom, but can only be maintained by violence or force.⁴⁴ Critics such as Amartya Sen, illustrate that such a system has further increased the gap in social equality and have perpetuated the unequal concentration of resources and opportunity. The principles of 'liberalism of the past' have also failed to maintain a secular society in its true form.⁴⁵ Gandhi's blunt critique in the above passages seems no less relevant today than when he offered it over 7 decades ago, it is also hence understandable why historians refer to him as a reformed liberal and not a liberal in

⁴³ Gier, Nicholas F. "Nonviolence as a Civic Virtue" in *The Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi for the 21st Century*. Allen, Douglas (ed.) Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing (2008) p. 124.

⁴⁴ Gandhi, M.K. *My Non-Violence*. Bandopadhyaya, Sailesh (ed.) Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House. (1966) p. 115.

⁴⁵ Sen Amartya, *The Argumentative India*, Penguin Books, 2005. pg. 294

its truest form, steeping towards its European founding thinkers, and followers much like Ram Mohan Roy.

In post Independent India, liberal thought was now carried forward by reformers like Ambedkar and V. D. Savarkar.^[3] Liberal discourse during this period was greatly influenced by Gandhian ideology but also comprised a range of themes derived from classical Indian traditions paired and modified by 19th century liberal ideas from the rest of the world. These ideas were further transformed by the impact of transnational welfare, Marxism and to a small extent fascism itself.⁴⁶ Both Savarkar and Ambedkar have been often termed as communitarian liberals, both men wished to induct women into active citizenship. Ambedkar's reform was focused on the inclusion of the still persisting untouchable classes into civil society, he sought social inclusion for the *dalits* as citizens of a free India.⁴⁷ Whereas Savarkar wanted to unify Hindus to compete in a 'social Darwinian struggle for existence'.⁴⁸

Thus, as a contemporary historical sociologist, Dipankar Gupta points out that both men exhibited ideas and political tendencies of how later political groupings such as the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), and now the ruling government could at the same time be broadly democratic but also broadly communist and still maintains residual ideas of liberal thought, the main aspect of them being secularism.⁴⁹ Liberalism as an intellectual project continued to influence a whole generation of thinkers, such as Nirad Chaudhuri, Chandan Sengoopta and even Satyajit Ray, who is often termed as an un-doctrinaire liberal.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Bayly, pg. 346

⁴⁷ Ibid. pg. 347

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ ibid. pg. 349

⁵⁰ Ibid pg. 329

In reflection of India's vast history and evolution of liberal thought, the political philosophies of radical reformers, Congress socialists and maverick Indian communists — notably Ram Mohan Roy there emerge interesting patterns that with contemporary developments in today's liberal thought. Despite numerous differences, and India's reputation as a 'hierarchical society',⁵¹ theorists point out that even today, there is an irreducible significance of the individual's search for personal freedom, in relation to valued social ties.

⁵¹ *ibid* pg. 357