

Situating Sarkar

*Tantra
Macrohistory &
Alternative Futures*



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VII

Locating Sarkar in Indian Political Philosophy

While Western political theory has been framed as the struggle between the State and the individual, between formal power in the hands of Kings, Church leaders and State bureaucrats and informal civil power in the hands of individuals and voluntary communities, Indian political philosophy has been more concerned with issues of self-liberation, morality, and leadership. Until recently with the advent of institutionalized or syndicated Hinduism, Indian society had made a softer distinction between State and religion.¹

Classical Indian political theory, as with Kautilya, centred on axioms on how to maintain and expand power.² Kautilya argued that reason, the edicts of the King, and his own rules of governance, Arthashastras, were as important for decision making as the ancient religious *shastras*, which defined social structure and one's duty to family, caste and God. With the exception of the Arthashastras, politics was expressed through the ability not so much to govern but to define social and moral responsibility, what one could or could not do – *yama* and *niyama* – and who could oversee these rules.³

Like all civilizations, India had periods of rule by accumulators of capital and traders; warriors and kings, Brahmins and monks; and revolts by peasants; still, philosophy was in the hands of the Brahmins, the priestly class. This philosophy was primarily not about *artha* (economic gain) or about *kama* (pleasure) but about dharma (virtue) and *moksa* (liberation from the material world). The attainment of salvation, of release from the bonds of karma, was far more important than the relationship between the individual and the sovereign, as was the case in Western political philosophy.⁴

While the European enlightenment was considered the end of Church power and the beginning of secular power, of humanism and liberalism, there was no similar enlightenment in India. This is not to say that there was no tension between the King and the Brahmin, between State and religious authorities; indeed Nicholas Dirks writes that the central conundrum in Indian history has been who should rule: the Brahmin or the *ksatriya*?⁵ Kautilya focused more on coercive power and less on interpretive power. In contrast, the Buddha, committed to interpretive power, remained silent when questioned whether the atman (the individual soul) and Brahman (Cosmic Consciousness) existed. Understanding that a positive response would reify the self, returning its control to the Brahmin class, he opened up the self and consciousness to more liminal spaces. Furthermore, recognizing that official State power was largely circumscribed by priestly power, he focused less on royal power and more on the spiritual community, the Sangha, and on right livelihood as a way of social transformation.

Thus, instead of the search for a perfect society, of the linear march and inevitable victory of democracy and progress, the regulation and liberation of the self has been far more important. It is this self and its emancipation from personal and social history that has

been the centre of Indian philosophy. Indian political thought however should not be seen in Orientalist eyes – of the study of the non-West through the textual gaze of the West – as fundamentally despotic with authoritarianism the rule.⁶ Indeed, Sarkar makes the controversial claim that democracy first originated with the Licchivis of Vaeshali in India over 2500 years ago. They developed a written constitution, abolished the monarchy, and through elections, formed an executive body. However, while in Western political theory, the assumption of man as evil led to the system of federalism, to checks and balances of power; in India, neither evil nor good were assumed. *Vidya* (introversion, leading to enlightenment or good) and *avidya* (extroversion, leading to degeneration, evil) remain in constant struggle, both simultaneously present. Evil was explained as ignorance, as maya, not as an embodied force. The ideal leader is the one who can lift the veil of untruth, transcend (or at least minimize *avidya*) this duality and thus become the moral and spiritual leader. In contrast, Islamic political theory has been saddled with the problem of reattaining the perfect State achieved during the time of the Prophet.⁷ India did not have such a historical event, only Rama Rajya, the mythical kingdom of Rama, where food was abundant and all lived in peace, had utopian connotations. But it is only in this century that this imagined polity has become a political platform, largely in response to the utopias of Marxism, Liberalism and Islam. Still, for Indians it is not so much a secular State that is desired (one that is amoral, efficient and fair) but a pluralistic State that does not take sides with religions, thereby enabling authentic cultural plurality.

Temporal dimensions

Whereas Western political philosophy creates a division between the religious and the secular, between Church and State, Indian philosophy (and Chinese) based less on monotheistic, highly structured religions, and more on direct intuitive experiences of the mysterious has found this to be unnecessary.

A different temporal orientation is also taken. Instead of a linear movement of ancient, classical or feudal, and modern (scientific, rational, nation-state oriented) or religious, philosophical and scientific as with Auguste Comte, there is a complex historical cycle with different temporal levels. At one level, this is the cosmic time of the stars and Gods; at another level, it is the four-fold structure of student, householder, social service, and renunciate; at the societal level, it is the rise and fall of society. The process is the degeneration of righteousness from the golden, to the silver, to the copper and then to the iron. At the iron age, the avatar or redeemer brings all back to dharma and the golden era, *satya yuga*, begins again, but with the silver around the corner. This was the promise of Krishna, to be reborn whenever virtue declined. At the level of the individual, Indian philosophy is the story of karma, of endless births, with escape only possible through enlightenment. Instead of utopia pulling society forward, *eusychias* – ideal places of the mind – have been more prevalent. However, even as the self has been central, history has been dynastic, of epics and myths, of ages and episodes, not of the battle of workers, as recent Marxist Indian philosophers have argued: structure has been far more important than agency.

Traditional Indian historiography has framed the past as Hindu (Vedic), Muslim and Modern (British and then Independence). However unlike the Western scheme there is no

pretense that prior eras are stepping stones to the present, there is no over-arching theory of scientific progress.

This is not to deny the reformist urges throughout Indian history, and particularly through the efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Aurobindo, but rather to argue that moral philosophy has been more central than the massive social engineering of Marxism or the amoral market mechanisms of liberal capitalism. Even when utopia has been imagined, such as Rama Rajya, it is done with the past in mind, not with the pull of the future.

The Indian episteme

Indian political theory should not and cannot be divorced from the Indian episteme or boundaries of knowledge that contextualise what is knowable.

The liberation of the self is the center piece of this project. Doing so frees one from karma and helps one live in dharma and achieve *moksa*. Truth is considered not so much as accuracy or fidelity to the empirical but as therapy, as that which reduces suffering. In this sense classical Indian philosophy is postmodern with reality consisting of many levels, with different traditions and philosophies touching these levels – true epistemological pluralism. Truth is thus both/and instead of true and false. This means that contradictions are tolerated. Moreover, there are many ways of know the world: devotion, reason, sense-inference, authority and intuition. The physical universe and the mental universe are considered symmetrical: as above, as below; as inside, as outside. Individual/cosmos, body and mind, self and society are linked together. Politics and religion are thus not separated but linked. There is a holistic unity of discourse with truth ultimately residing in the individual even though Brahmin and State power have attempted to have authority vested in caste and State. Philosophical systems are also grand, touching every level of existence, from bathing to political-economy, to world order, and cosmic meaning. Order and elegance are as important as accuracy in the Indian episteme. This episteme itself is not questioned, it is the given in Indian philosophy.

Unlike other epistemes that undergo dramatic shifts, the Indian episteme is additive. New discourses are added on, changing the episteme and Indianizing the new discourse.

Modernity, of course, has forced the classical pluralism of Tantra, Vedanta, Buddhism, and Islam to fit into the straitjacket of nationalism, of one people, one guru or god. This has led to a politics of structured religion, of the creation of a ‘Hinduism’: a religion linked to national identity. In this realist model, it is the State and its functionaries that are most important. Reality is not moral or spiritual but about capturing power so as to ensure that identity and material gains for one's community or nation are maximized. The self then is no longer devoted to *seva*, selfless service, but to maximizing wealth and power. In this self, the Other is to be feared, the Other is the enemy; not to be embraced, as Gandhi argued, but used for personal gain.

Varna

The ‘Other’ has generally been more those of a different class than those from a different religion, since Indian religious and philosophical traditions are syncretic and universal. It is *varna* that both orders society and creates structural problems for social justice and transformation. While *varna* for Orientalists is an all-encompassing social structure, others

have argued that Indian society is no different than other historical societies where agency has existed at times with individuals, at times with religious authorities, at times with traders and at times with the military. Caste is one category but not the final category of analysis.

Defenders of caste have argued that it is one among many ways of ordering the world; in engaging in politics. Politics is about the negotiation of power and meanings. While the modernizers want to rid India of caste, they forget its relationship to order, with caste basically, as in other societies, creating a permanent underclass. For political theorist Rajni Kothari, more important than *varna* is *jhat*, the myriad associations, relationships, and lineages that are perceived as caste.⁸

For Gandhi,⁹ the task was to make everyone into *shudras* – peasants – to create a society with equal distribution. His was a devastating critique of modernity, of instrumental rationality, and not of technology, as commonly thought. For Gandhi, self-reliance was the road and the goal. One could not distinguish between ends and means. This counters the classical position of the Gita, where in certain situations, violence was allowed, especially since at the level of the Absolute, victim and victor are united in a unity of destiny.

The legacies of Gandhi are many: two are critical: self-reliance rather than instrumental rationality, that is, humans should work together to build small scale communities, and non-violence. In conflicts, it is non-violence that is victorious since by touching the heart of the oppressor he or she is transformed. Indeed for Gandhi, history itself was the march from violence to non-violence, from barbarism to civilization.

Structure, history and the cycle

Equally important is Sarkar in developing an alternative to the critical traditionalism of Gandhi and the reform efforts of Aurobindo. Sarkar attempts to develop a political theory that has both structure (historical patterns) and agency (the role of individuals and leadership) and superagency (the role of divine intervention). As discussed in Chapter One, for Sarkar there are four types of power: the economic or *vaeshyan*, the coercive/protective or *ksattriyan*, the normative/ideological or Brahmin or *Vipran* and the chaotic/disruptive or *shudra*. Sarkar derives these from the classical Indian social system of *varna* but reinterprets them not as biological caste categories but as evolutionary, psycho-social paradigms.

These four types of power are related to four ages in history: the age of the workers, the age of the warriors, the age of intellectuals and the age of capitalists. At the end of the capitalist era, there is a workers' revolution or evolution which then leads to a centralization of power and the next age of warriors, a centralized polity. Each age has its own contradictions and by denying the other forms of power, each era naturally leads to the next era. These are not ideal types nor is Sarkar's cycle a defense of current modernity, as with historian Buddha Prakash,¹⁰ who argues that the current age is the Golden era. Instead of an avatar, it is independence and industrialism that has awakened India after centuries of oppressive sleep, argues Prakash.

Sarkar does not intend to end the cycle of history but hopes to minimize the exploitation in each era through the development of a new type of leadership, the *sadvipra*: one with a complete and pure mind. The *sadvipra* exists in a context of not State or individual but *samaj* or family; a selfless family on a collective journey through life.

Through leadership, he envisages a new society committed to gender coordination, self-reliant cooperative economies, and prama, a dynamic balance between physical, mental and spiritual potentials.

However, in Sarkar's model, unlike classical political philosophy, where the sage existed outside of traditional constructs of power, neither Brahmin nor *ksattriya*, Sarkar places this new type of power – protective, service-based, innovative and interpretive-at the center of the wheel. This then further develops the ideal of the modernized yogi. But he is not alone, Aurobindo's Yogocracy and Gandhi's satyagarhi continue the replacement of the shaman.¹¹ But this is not the religionisation of politics but its spiritualisation, much as Aurobindo and Gandhi struggled for.

But for Aurobindo, history is not structural but idealistic, wherein the Godhead enters individuals and communities. Thus, following Hegel, nationalism becomes part of the manifestation of the soul, of the divine drama. It becomes an extraordinary event that represents the will of Consciousness in creating a better human condition. Thus for Aurobindo, God not only works through avatars such as Krishna, but works through nationalistic movements and other associations as well.

Post-colonial discourses

More recent Indian political theory has been more concerned with creating a post-colonial self, with ridding India of the intimate enemy of the British history. This is not a history of dynasties or of large meta-narratives, but a history of the subaltern, of women, of the epistemologically oppressed, as developed by writers such as Ashis Nandy, Ranajit Guha, Vandana Shiva and Gayatri Spivak.¹² This rewriting of India has been a search for a historically grounded India not overlaid with spiritual essences, but a politics of individuals and communities struggling to create a new self, an often localized identity, that has meaning in its own mythological, cultural and economic context. Development, science and instrumental rationality are critiqued as violent and disempowering of communities, as well as dangerous to the environment.

Borrowing from postmodernism critiques of the construction of identity, the categories of Hinduism, caste, Mother India, and nation are questioned. The politics of how these discourses are used by State power to further regulate, militarize and homogenize society are deconstructed with the intent of rescuing the plurality of truth that has been Indian philosophy.

Notes

1. Anthony Copley, 'Indian Secularism Reconsidered: from Gandhi to Ayodhya, *Contemporary South Asia* (Vol. 2, No. 1, 1993), 47-65.
2. Kautilya, *The Arthashastra*. Edited and translated by L.N. Rangarajan. Delhi, Penguin, 1992.
3. See, Vishwanath Prasad Varma, *Studies in Hindu Political Thought and its Metaphysical Foundations*. Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1974.

4. K. Satchidananda Murty, ed., *Readings in Indian History, Philosophy and Politics*, London. George Allen and Unwin, 1967.
5. Nicholas Dirks, *The Hollow Crown*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987.
6. Ronald Inden, 'Orientalist Constructions of India,' *Modern Asian Studies*, (Vol. 20, No. 3, 1986), 401-446.
7. Abdelwahab El-Affendi, Abdelwahab, *Who Needs An Islamic State?*. London, Grey Seal Books, 1991.
8. Rajni Kothari, *Caste In Indian Politics*. New Delhi, Orient Longman, 1970.
9. Gopinath Dhawan, *The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi*. Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 1957.
10. Buddha Prakash, 'The Hindu Philosophy of History,' *Journal of the History of Ideas*, (Vol. 16, No. 4, 1958), 494-505.
11. Vishwanath Prasad Varma, *The Political Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*. New York, Asia Publishing House, 1960.
12. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds., *Selected Subaltern Studies*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1988; See, Ashis Nandy, *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias*. New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1967; and, Vandana Shiva, 'Reductionist Science as Epistemological Violence,' in Ashis Nandy, ed., *Science, Hegemony and Violence: A Requiem for Modernity*. Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1988, 232-257.

