Review Article

INDIAN POLITICAL CULTURE: A RESEARCHER'S OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

In the history of human knowledge newer answers are always sought which results in the paradigmatic shift. From Aristotle, who evolved the deductive method and Francis Bacon,who invoked the inductive method, till the present day researchers- all are engaged in one task: framing a research object. The world of critical studies is fascinatingly complex and complicated. Hence, identifying a research object is also a tedious task. While formulating a research question the researchers need to employ the principle of a rifle rather than a shot gun. Only then a new subject of study can be traced. This will make all prevalent questions become non-questions and new answers can be sought by either contesting the existing concepts or by complementing their limitations. We will try to elucidate this contention by exploring one of vibrant sites of critical studies namely, Indian Political Culture, with special references to the seminal work of Asish Nandy on the subject.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I shall endevour to arrive at a brief overview of Indian political system by exploring the arena of 'political culture in India'- one of the vibrant sites of critical studies- with specific references to the seminal work of Asish Nandy on this subject in contrast to the earlier paradigms. But before scrutinizing Asish Nandy's essay on Indian political culture it is essential to understand the meaning of the term 'political culture' and trace its history. It was first coined by Gabriel Almond and referred to the pattern of psychological orientations that people in a given society would have towards object within their political system. Social researchers believe that the political culture of a country can be studied by employing a simple research method. We can request a representative sample of the people of a country, question them about the extent of their knowledge about political objects of their country (cognition), their intellectual estimates of the worth of these political objects (evaluation) and the direction of their sentiments or emotion concerning these objects (affect). How the respondents react would provide an idea of the political culture of a nation. Yet it remains one of the elusive concepts in the arena of critical studies. Almond, Sidney Verba and Lucian Pye are important scholars who undertook the mammoth task of defining political culture in the West.

It is however, interesting to note that most of the critical studies revolving around the concept of political culture in India have not followed the Western conceptual framework of Pye, Almond and Verba. This can be simply explained by the fact that Myron Weiner or Morris- Jones whose seminal writings threw important light on the concept of Indian political culture, were writing at a time when the Westerners had not even initiated any discussion on political culture. But this explanation becomes redundant when we pursue the works on political culture by Rajni Kothari- who despite being fully aware of the writings of the Western scholars avoided Western analytical tools. This can be explained by the fact that most of the analysts of political culture in India, faced with its immense diversities found the research methodological tools of the West inadequate and wanting and developed their own frameworks of analysis.

This brings us to the first major attempt to explore the nuances of this much complex category of Indian political culture. In 1963 Myron Weiner published an article, which is perhaps one of the most important short pieces on Indian political culture corresponding roughly to the urban-rural divide of her population. Weiner posited the existence of two 'political cultures', one that manifested itself in the districts and localities, both urban and rural, and the other that inhabited the

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national capital. Weiner carefully avoided naming the two cultures as simply traditional and modern. Such simple binary cannot describe the much complicated concept of Indian political culture which is fraught with curious amalgamation of elements of both tradition and modernity. He said: 'there are aspects of both modernity and traditionalism penetrating both views', thereby anticipating by few years Rudolph's book, *The Modernity of Tradition*. Weiner rather termed the two flows distinctively visible in Indian political culture as 'mass political culture' and 'elite political culture'. The mass political culture was 'permeated with traditional elements' but' not wholly traditional'. Its inhabitants occupied the lower rungs of India and were in close touch with Indian masses. The elite culture however, did not derive its name just from the social background but also from the outlook of the bearer of this strand of culture. However, Weiner did not fail to observe that the traditional components ran through the veins of the elite political culture too. Though, it was the forte of the developmentalist elites determined to develop and modernize India, its economy, political institutions and some aspects of the social customs as well.

Both cultures were expanding: the elite culture was radiating out from its political centre in New Delhi, while the mass culture was expanding from the localities up to the 'state legislative assemblies, state governments and state administration. Weiner apprehended that a clash between the two sets of cultures was inevitable as they were expanding in opposite direction. According to Weiner the gap must be bridged. Otherwise a more direct conflict between the two cultures will be inevitable.

In spite of these elements of conflicts existing between the two strands of political culture in India there are also 'some general patterns of political culture', 'some shared attitudes and behavioural patterns', distinguishing Indians from other people. Weiner was not alone in his awareness of this kind of tension in Indian society and politics. Morris-Jones also formulated a similar conundrum for India in his trichotomous conceptualization of the simultaneous three idioms in Indian political culture, when he characterized it as the modern, the traditional and his own original contribution to the discussion, the saintly. Morris- Jones was also careful to assert that these terms did not necessarily reflect the existence of sharply differentiated ideologies, worldviews, or culture by his very choice of terms to describe them. The interaction between the three idioms illuminates both general and particular aspects of Indian political life. The 'meeting, mixing and the confrontation' of these three political idioms provide Indian political culture with its distinctive tone.

Just like Weiner and Morris –Jones many other scholars have attempted to scrutinize the concept of Indian political culture from the classifier's perspectives and decipher that Indian political culture manifests in a distinct binary. In fact, long before Weiner Redford and Singer spoke of 'Great tradition' and 'Little tradition'. Rudolph articulated a gap between a traditional culture and modern culture. Even Sudipta Kaviraj has used Foucauldian term 'discourse' to illuminate 'two cultures' existing in a political arena. Kaviraj terms them as 'upper discourse and lower discourse'.

The classifier's perspective marked the first organized attempt to study the political culture of India. They discovered the binaries existing in the cultural strands of politics in India. However, critics pointed out certain lacuna of this perspective. Weiner, the principal protagonist of the classifier school wrote about two cultures of Indian polity, but he never attempted to show how the architects of the new and emerging mass culture culled elements from the society's traditional culture and the new nation's elite culture to shape and create its emerging mass culture. Moreover, the tyranny of time has made Weiner's perspective deficient. Having written in the early 1960s he could not foresee how the later generation of national political elites not only became 'bilingual' but also tried to steal the thunder from the architects of emerging mass culture.

It is here that Morris –Jones has tried to expand the arena of political culture by deciphering a third idiom. But he does not delve deep into how and by whom the modern idioms were modified to suit the demands of democratic politics. Nor did he elaborate how the saintly idiom was modernized.

The classifiers have time and again used the concepts of traditional and mass culture, sometimes adding a new dimension called the saintly political idiom. But none of the concepts have pristine purity. Moreover, though many apprehended that modern idiom was basically premised on Western modernity, Partha Chatterjee has illustrated how our nationalism launched outside the political domain 'its most powerful, creative and historically significant project to fashion a modern national culture that is nevertheless not Western'.

The lacuna of the classifiers brought into existence a new paradigm. This second line of analyzing political culture is mainly initiated by scholars like Rajni Kothari. Kothari made themes the main thrust of his analysis in his first book *Politics in India*. The themes of Indian political culture that he identifies are really 'analytical generalization' that are 'unproved' and are bound to be 'gross' and are not applicable to all times of India's history and to all sections of Indian society. He enumerates the politically significant orientations namely, a) tolerance of ambiguity, b) fragmented, dispersed and intermittent authority, c) a close relationship between ideology and politics emerging from the elites self image of 'morality inducer', 'exhorter' and interpreter of the moral dimension of this worldly existence and d) patterns of trust and distrust in collective undertaking. Stanley A. Kochanek belonging to this school of thematizers identified another theme of Indian political culture 'a hyper rationality which leads to a form of optimism based on logical sequences'.

The thematizers undoubtedly raised some new questions, explored some new arena of Indian political culture but a careful scrutiny will reveal that this new paradigm suffered from some startling shortcomings. The thematizers point out some seamier, darker, non-rational but universal and timeless aspect of human nature and tried to depict them as peculiarly Indian. For instance, Kothari ignores the fact that the tolerance of ambiguity is not a peculiarly Indian trait but is true of mankind in general. Even the post-structural idea of the 'plural' text legitimizes the need for ambiguity. Similarly when he conceptualizes Indian view of authority as 'fragmented dispersed and intermittent' he perhaps has ignored the existence of patrimonial authority since classical times.

Moreover, conceptualizing authority as arbitral can also by no stretch of imagination be termed as exclusively integral part of the Indian view of life. In the *Dictionary of Political Thought* Roger Scruton points out that arbitration has been significant since ancient times and Senate in ancient Rome bears testimony to this fact. However, to my mind the greatest mistake committed by them is that they consider distrust to be an important constituent element of Indian political culture alone. Lack of trust is almost congenital to mankind. So it is futile to think that the Indians are specifically distrustful in their venture for public good. Moreover, both the thematizers have portrayed Indians to be prone to ideological discourse alone. All over the world people's consciousness is coloured, shaped or swayed by one ideology or the other and any prediction of 'end of ideology' is destined to fail.

It is at this juncture that scholars like Asish Nandy sought a new discursive framework for analyzing Indian society and politics. Nandy in his seminal essay on "The making and Unmaking of Political Cultures in India" in his book, *At the Age of Psychology*, identified the major tenets of Indian political culture leaving aside the classifiers' and as well as the thematizers' perspectives. He depicted political culture as a function of choice. Nandy realizes that by portraying political culture as an 'act of choice' it is subjected to multiple interpretations. Hence no straightjacket classification can help us understand the evolution of the concept. He thus traced various phases through which Indian political culture has evolved. It is to be noted that Nandy did not use the word 'phase' in historical, chronological sense but rather as an act of choice being made at a particular time by a particular community of people. This phase is essentially momentary but it unleashes certain forces which have a certain impact over a spread of time before it fades out and inaugurates another phase. However, it is also interesting to note that a phase may not be succeeded by an altogether new phase. Many a times a particular phase may be repeated.

This process of selection or act of choice is shaped by society's unique orientation to politicization and political participation. In India Nandy observes, this orientation includes four interrelated features, 1) the traditional view of politics as 'an amoral, ruthless statecraft or a dispassionate pursuit of self interest', where many of the norms of nonpolitical sphere are thoroughly out of place; 2) the concept of Dharma or piety which prescribes different systems of ethics for different spheres of life,; 3) Indian civilization like the Sinic and Islamic civilization considers other cultures inferior but unlike latter civilizations, this attitude does not extend to the political sphere; 4) finally, though Indian society is organized around its culture, the locus of its centre is difficult to find.

Not only have these cultural features reversed the relationship between society and politics and accounted for the preeminence of politics but have brought into foreground a particular view of politics. Such a view modifies the nature of power, authority and dissent. The uniqueness of Indian concept of power lays in the strong 'private' connotation. The concept of authority is even more problematic. Although rulers were recognized as legitimate wielder of authority yet the 'the concept of this authority was ill defined'. Issues such as, limits to political power, its role in society and duties and functions of those engaged in politics have seldom been subjected to philosophical debates. This resulted in a dialectical unity between authority and dissent.

The primacy of politics in politics-society relationship has after independence accounted for first a new intellectualism and subsequently for newer anti-intellectualism. The wave of intellectualism was initiated by the Brahminic urban centered and pro-British literati who evoked a new concept of Indianness consistent with the modern notion of citizenship. Their chosen method was borrowing from the West which they tried to pass off as 'resurrection of India's past'. Naturally with the beginning of participatory politics there was an aggressive anti-intellectualist backlash. This new trend of anti-intellectualism which found its purest expression in Gandhi's effort to shun earlier 'liberal universalism' and re-interpretation of Sanskritic texts', was not fully mitigated even by Nehru's efforts to secure for intellectuals a place in politics. 'A more populist political culture, a growing faith in *realpolitik* and the persistence of the old belief in the separability of statecraft from intellectual activity continue to sustain this anti-intellectualism'.

Nandy observes that in post-independence era politics not only involves the occupation of hierarchical status, but includes also the extent to which theme of 'hierarchy' permeates a political culture. Indian culture traditionally applied the concept of hierarchy to more aspects of life than did many other cultures. However, the Indian bureaucracy represents the society's urge to 'hierarchise away' the new, the disruptive and the noxious. A new hierarchy which can subsume all contradictions and fragmentations and which is compatible with old order was sought to be created. Nandy realizes, in this way Indian politics has lost its autonomy only to the bureaucracy.

The primacy of politics is also proved by the fact that India's political culture gets its distinctiveness not from any shared set of norms but from continuous efforts to create them. The search for a common system of ethics may have originated from the existence of politics outside the sphere of traditional lifestyle of Indians. 'Public norms' were scarce and morality was 'situation and time specific' in India. Consequently, the first task of 19th century reform movements was to evolve a new ethics for public life and interpersonal relationship on the basis of neglected aspects of hitherto neglected sacred texts.

Asish Nandy has identified four phases through which Indian political culture made and unmade itself. In the first phase, which began in the 18th century, he has designated politics as 'self definition'. During this time the cosmopolitanist, pro-British, reformist, higher caste Brahminic literati sought, with the help of the British rulers to infuse Western cultural elements into Indian culture on the plea that these were essentially not Western but immutable notions of goodness. Westernity masqueraded as modernity in India and through it Nandy observed Indians acquired a beyondist vision. As a result of which changes swept the arena of political culture. However, together with this an acceptance of textual Brahminism as a political force was noticed. This can be explained by the fact that Brahminism unlike other religious systems was more open to new ideas and less fettered by primordial allegiances and still less fragmented by the myriad folk culture of India.

In the second phase politics manifested itself as a process of 'self affirmation'. During the second half of 19th century and first two decades of the 20th century a sizable section of the new growing urban middle classes reacted to the loss of self esteem caused by borrowing of Western norms and due to the racial chauvinism of British colonial rulers. They realized that the British rulers and their loyalists were not only projecting themselves as industrially and technologically and scientifically advanced nation, but also tried to portray India as economically, politically and worst even morally a backward nation, the white man's burden. The necessity of 'self-affirmation' was thus felt by this 'Brahminic counter elite group' who tried to do so by discovering Hinduism as an organized religion. They drew inspiration from the writings of Bankimchandra Chattopaddhyay as also from the activities of Arya Samaj and Ramkrishna Mission. The new revivalist re-interpreted the sacred texts and our past to show that many traits of Western culture were in their rarified forms, legacies of India's forgotten past. Nandy realized that in the second phase Indians were 'seeking parity without breaking way from their own historical roots and without accepting utilitarian theory of progress'.

Nandy believes that while the first two phases were 'clearly elitist,' the third phase brought a new style into the dominant language of Indian politics. It was Gandhi in 1920s who heralded this new era of 'seeking autonomy' and breaking away from the elitism of the earlier phase. It is undeniable that the earlier phases were essentially reactive to alien culture but not autonomous. Nandy perceives, in the third phase politics was seeking autonomy not only from Westernity but also from Brahminic culture or Indian traditionalism.

The significance of the three pre-independence cultures of politics is that they set the stage for the post independent anti-intellectual backlash to create a pervading political culture of 'banality'. National freedom could not free politics from its colonially derived characteristics. Nandy observed, one feature of the colonial political culture that has survived even after independence is 'the conscious use of politics as a channel of group mobility and economic gain'. It is this remnant of colonial culture that made politics a banal affair in the fourth phase.

Nandy admits that 'even though the four phases in the relationship between the politics and culture have not produced exclusive culture, they do survive as four identifiable emphases in the culture of Indian politics'. It is amazing that those very forces which once determined the sequence of phases also seemed to regulate the political culture of present day. Nandy adds a timely caution to the immensely attractive analysis by pointing out that these four alternative styles of politics are not cumulative but additive and may exist side by side in contemporary India.

Nandy's started his analysis of Indian political culture by realizing that mere insights into various classification of political culture or the reflections of various idioms or themes running through the veins of political culture cannot give us complete picture of this much discussed but little understood concept of political culture. Nandy entered the platform of critical studies with a new vision. It is essential to understand why Nandy's reflections were considered to be a paradigmatic shift. A close scrutiny of Nandy's work reveals that unlike the classifiers and thematizers Nandy has not accepted political culture as a given cognitive category rather he perceives it as a conscious act of selection. While doing so he has employed the age old concepts of power, authority and dissent but has explored newer horizons of these concepts too. The private connotation of power, the lack of specificity in the concept of authority and a strange relationship between authority and dissent were his areas of interests. The role of intellectuals in political arena is an area on which scholars much before him have engaged themselves into prolific discussion. But Nandy's uniqueness perhaps lies in the fact that he has delved deep into the issue of anti-intellectualism also. Not that issue of anti-intellectualism was unknown to the earlier scholars but they were uncomfortable to speak about it as that might actually mean a complete rupture from the traditional way of looking at political culture. Nandy at this critical juncture broke the silence when 'silence…was the order of the day'.

Louis Dumont once said 'to think is to hierarchise'. It is only but natural that hierarchy will play a pivotal role in shaping the political culture. But what Nandy has wonderfully illustrated is not how the bureaucracy has replaced the Brahminical cogniscenti in the social hierarchy after independence but how political culture has lost its autonomy to the bureaucratic machinery . Like Kothari and Kochanek, Nandy also believes that 'distrust and cynicism' dominated the public sphere but unlike them he has also shown how Gandhi has destroyed the barriers of mistrust by simply mingling the Sanskritic and folk tradition. The paradigmatic shift initiated by Nandy also becomes evident when he traces the 'changes in Indian political culture' through four phases but not using 'phase' as simple chronological order rather as dimensions which shaped and reshaped the political culture in India. Judged from these angles it becomes clear even to an obtuse mind that Nandy's academic venture marked not only the beginning of a new paradigm but also the end of earlier ways of looking at the prevalent concepts.

But Nandy himself observed that 'the death warrant' of every political culture, is written on its birth certificate'. So also every new paradigm developed centering round this concept of political culture is destined to become redundant at one point of time. What is more intriguing is to explore whether Nandy's above mentioned essay really demarcated a paradigmatic shift or he just served the old wine in new bottle. Nandy's analysis of political culture has not been able to grasp all its aspects. The very concepts of perceiving political culture as an act of choice which constituted the novelty of Nandy's contention was perceived long back by Mckim Marriott, the famous anthropologist-indologist. He has clearly shown in his essay, "Cultural Policy in the New States" how at critical moments of history one section of society remembers the triumphant phase and forgets another simply because they perceive it as humiliating. Nandy himself aptly remarked that 'unmaking of political culture in response to changes …is of course another story'. Thus he could not do justice even to the title of his essay because the other side of the story i.e, the unmaking of political culture has remained almost untold in his writings. Another pertinent question that arises is whether newer ways of perceiving political culture apart from the four fold analysis as offered by Nandy is possible or not.

Nandy observed Indian political culture in the post independent period has become banal or a dull everyday affair but in reality Nandy's writing has not been able to reach the root cause of such banality. From the very beginning the Indian political culture has been usually studied in terms of simple binaries. The most general notion that dominated the discourse on political culture was that there existed two strands of culture – national and political. Scholars opined that in ancient India both the strands were governed by moral values like honesty and truthfulness but the Mughal India witnessed a sharp degeneration of the political culture though, the national culture still remained honest to a large extent. In spite of the political subjection and economic retrogressions during the British rule the apparent faith on the rule of law restored a degree of honesty in political culture during this era. But the political independence sowed the seeds of hope that political culture would now be free from all elements of vices and banality.

What Nandy failed to observe that the last 60 years saw the return of the Mughal era. A new 'culture of illegality' has flourished. Though Nandy himself in one of his article on "Indira Gandhi and the Culture of Indian Politics", remarked that Mrs. Gandhi had perverted and distorted Indian political culture, yet what most of the scholars including him failed to realize is that together with the political culture the national culture at large was getting corrupt and polluted. In fact, many opined that Mrs.Gandhi's successor, Rajiv Gandhi went a step ahead by attempting to mix political culture with communalization, criminalization, technicization and managerialization. The corruption of political culture was further garnished with utter criminalization of the national culture.

Banality thus loomed large in the entire cultural scenario in the beginning of the new millennium. The reason for such unprecedented rise in the level of banality which manifested in the worst form of corruption can be attributed to many reasons- a corrupt bureaucracy, a biased media, lack of checks and balances in the society, lack of role model in the political platform, the criminalization of political leadership, the dishonesty of the entrepreneurship, a degraded religious system and crooked godmen and a biased judiciary. Even the much aspired process of democratization has sadly resulted in more corruption of the political culture in India. In fact, we have reached that critical juncture where corruption has almost received social sanction. It seems that corruption has now become one of the most prosperous businesses, which involves the lowest risk. To uproot this, genuine political will and complete mental revolution was required but the *Corruption Perception Index, 2009* reveals that India has gone up in the corruption index rank and is now 84th most corrupt nation in the world. However, the 1990s witnessed some unprecedented changes in entire life pattern of the Indians with the dawn of globalization and liberalization. Since mental revolution was not in the offing, an external shock treatment came from twin forces of globalization and liberalization. A globalized India will be induced to meet the global ethical norms as a result of which the level of corruption is destined come down.

Nandy however, fears that this might suffocate our national culture but if a nation is vigilant then it can curve out a breathing space for itself in this global world.

With this we return to the original question whether in critical studies a research object should amount to taking issues with existing concepts. While exploring the research object 'political culture in India' by Asish Nandy we have seen him repudiating the previous traditions and evolving new conceptual frame works and tools of understanding. But it is also noticed that while developing a new paradigm he has not completely abandoned the existing issues. This brings us to an interesting observation by Agnes Heller: "Before someone is buried, they need first to be identified. Otherwise, the alleged corpse may resume business right after funeral". Hence, before denouncing previous paradigm it was essential to perform autopsy of these lines of thinking. Nandy did not fail to do so. However, no paradigm can quench the thirst for further research in the arena of critical studies. The specter of newer questions, newer objects, and newer methodologies will always haunt the researcher. The end note of Nandy's essay may prove to be the starting point of many new researches. Here in lies the dynamism of critical studies.

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