

Introduction: the meanings of liberalism in colonial India

This book is a study of some central themes of Indian political and social thought from the last critical stages of the British invasion of the subcontinent during the 1810s and 1820s to the time of the nationalist campaigns against colonial rule in the 1930s and 1940s. Its focus is a wide range of arguments and practices which can broadly be called 'liberal', though it necessarily also touches on the ideas of some of those who criticised 'liberalism', or even rejected it outright, in favour of loyalty to the British Raj, mass action and violence against it or, later, Indian versions of communism. Indian liberal ideas, I argue, were foundational to all forms of Indian nationalism and the country's modern politics. Yet Indian liberalism was both wider in scope, and more specific in its remedies, than what is commonly called nationalism.

To put it in its most positive light, Indian liberalism represented a broad and internally contested range of thought and practice directed to the pursuit of political and social liberty. Its common features were a desire to re-empower India's people with personal freedom in the face of the despotic government of foreigners, embodied traditional authority and supposedly corrupt domestic or religious practices. Indian liberals sought representation in government service, on grand juries and, later, on elective bodies. They demanded a free press, freedom of assembly and public comment. Again, liberals broadly accepted the principle of individual property rights, subject, in principle at least, to various degrees of protection for the masses against economic exploitation. Liberals emphasised education, particularly women's education. Educated women would help to abolish domestic tyranny, reinstate the ancient Hindu ideal of companionate marriage and improve the race. But a fine line was to be drawn between instructing women and permitting excessive licence in gender relations, which was seen as a Western corruption.

Liberalism was much more than a discourse masking the exercise of social and political power. Under some circumstances, liberals were indeed motivated by understandings of justice and prudence which went beyond their own interests and which also displayed a degree of internal

coherence.¹ Yet the form of this liberalism, manifested at particular times and in particular places, usually represented an amalgam of historically contingent fragments of this wider sensibility that were not necessarily coherent or complete. In particular, the relationship between liberalism, public debate, democracy and the state was always conflicted and uncertain in a multi-ethnic empire constrained by colonialism.² Many liberals, for instance, were suspicious of both populist democracy and also intrusive state power, but ultimately had to adjust to both of them. This was, in very broad terms, common to liberals across the world, and therefore unsurprising. Yet it was in the particular cultural value put on these projects of political representation, the obligations of the state or the basic meaning of the Good Life that Indian liberals often differed from their British, European and American coevals and the intellectual leaders of other subject peoples.

If the meaning of liberalism has been a source of disagreement and controversy in the history of Western political thought, it is even more problematic when applied to India. Over this long period, Indian writers and journalists often referred to 'liberal sentiments' or 'liberal policies'. In the 1930s, the intellectual historian Bimanbehari Majumdar isolated a continuously evolving 'liberal school' of political thought in India throughout the nineteenth century.³ The western Indian writer Maganlal A. Buch also chronicled the development of Indian liberalism in a 1938 publication. This had begun as a London doctoral thesis supervised by Harold Laski, the theorist of guild socialism and political pluralism.⁴ Buch's scholarship was supported by Raja Sayaji Rao III of Baroda, whom the author described as 'a distinguished Liberal leader and one of our nation builders'. Buch wrote:

The Indian Liberals are a much-neglected and much-abused party today, and are condemned by the average man in India as a body of sycophants and self-seekers. This verdict is primarily passed upon the liberals of today, but then by a convenient fiction extended to the whole School of thinkers and workers from the dawn of the new Indian political consciousness until the present time.⁵

¹ Here I broadly follow Joseph Raz, *The morality of freedom* (Oxford, 1986) and, as far as the history of ideas is concerned, Mark Bevir, 'Narrative as a form of explanation', *Disputatio*, 9 (Nov. 2000), pp. 10–18.

² Here I follow Raymond Geuss, *History and illusion in politics* (Cambridge, 2001).

³ Bimanbehari B. Majumdar, *A history of Indian political thought from Rammohun to Dayananda*, i, *Bengal* (Calcutta, 1934), esp. pp. 233–83. See the short but perceptive essay by Ravinder Kumar, 'Liberalism and reform in India', in Guy S. Métraux and François Crouzet (eds.), *The new Asia* (New York and Toronto, 1965), pp. 177–202.

⁴ For Laski, see David Runciman, *Pluralism and the personality of the state* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 177–219.

⁵ Maganlal A. Buch, *Rise and growth of Indian liberalism [from Ram Mohun Roy to Gokhale]* (Baroda, 1938), p. 302.

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Few Indian public men consistently called themselves liberals before the Indian Liberal Party was established by politicians such as T. B. Sapru and V. Srinivasa Sastri after the First World War.⁶ By the 1950s, most Indians rejected the description 'liberal', associating the word with appeasement of colonialism, as Buch indicated. This book will argue, however, that a wide range of intellectuals and politicians, including Jawaharlal Nehru himself, inherited and continued to articulate aspects of liberal ideology during the Gandhian era and after Independence.

The concept of liberalism as used by British public men of the classic generations of John Stuart Mill and his successors does not translate directly, either linguistically or conceptually, into the South Asian world. The neologisms commonly used in north Indian languages for liberal, variants of *udartavad* or *udarvad*, from the Sanskrit *udara*, 'noble' or 'generous', imply an active generosity, rather than the 'libertarianism' or 'negative liberty' ambiguously suggested by the English word and often emphasised by contemporary intellectual historians from Isaiah Berlin⁷ to John Pocock.⁸ In Urdu, again, the word 'liberal' was, and is still, used without translation, even though there were a number of Persian-derived terms which bore a family likeness to it, especially those describing religious pluralism.⁹

Nevertheless, the power and influence of liberal ideas in India are hard to overestimate and the elective affinity between Indian and Euro-American liberal ideologies is clear. B. B. Majumdar was quite convinced of the authority and creativity of liberalism in South Asia.¹⁰ He anticipated the argument of this book that even if Europeans or Americans set the broad terms of debate Indians did not simply copy Western ideas from the texts they received through metropolitan sources. Instead, they cannibalised, reconstructed and re-authored those ideas, often using them in an intellectual assault on the policies, moral character and culture of their rulers. The term 'colonial modernity' has widely been used in recent historiography to describe a cultural and epistemological form which was both politically enabling but also culturally coercive for Indian subjects. Indian intellectuals, however, believed that they could rewrite the liberal discourse so as to

⁶ For the role of the Liberal Party itself, see D. A. Low, *Britain and Indian nationalism: the imprint of ambiguity, 1929–42* (Cambridge, 1997).

⁷ Classically, Isaiah Berlin, *Two concepts of liberty* (Oxford, 1958).

⁸ J. G. A. Pocock, *Political thought and history: essays on theory and method* (Cambridge, 2009).

⁹ I am grateful to Humeira Iqtidar and Muzaffar Alam for this information. Some of the pre-existing Urdu terms for 'an absence of doctrinal inflexibility' are discussed below. See pp. 36–7.

¹⁰ Majumdar, *Political thought*, p. viii.

strip it of its coercive colonial features and re-empower it as an indigenous ideology, but one still pointing towards universal progress.

As early as the 1840s, thinkers in India had distanced themselves from the utilitarianism and rationalism of the British variety, and were promoting a spiritualised, radical and nationalist doctrine, closer to the liberalism of France, Spain or Italy, or to American republicanism. This is not surprising, since the strong version of constitutional liberalism (*'liberalismo'*), in contrast to British parliamentary 'Whiggism' or American republicanism, was relatively new to the English-speaking world itself in the early nineteenth century. It was appropriated in India more or less contemporaneously with its emergence in Europe. Of course, liberalism came to be widely employed as a language of colonial domination¹¹ and of elite command within the subcontinent. But Indians constantly subverted these colonial and elite interpretations of liberalism. In turn, 'untouchable', low caste and women's movements appropriated and transformed the controlling versions of liberal discourse.¹² If there was any distinct 'subaltern' ideological sphere – and it seems more appropriate to posit multiple and overlapping styles of popular claim-making – then this, too, was also heavily tintured with liberal ideas of rights and justice by the end of the colonial period.

Nor was this simply a question of 'reception and transformation' within India itself. Despite the profound inequalities of foreign rule, Indian understandings of liberalism and modernity were fed in turn back to the West, influencing British, European and American attitudes to the world. Lynn Zastoupil has demonstrated the wide influence of the image of Rammohan Roy, the Bengali reformer, on British religion and politics.¹³ Later, Keshub Chunder Sen and Dadabhai Naoroji achieved a similar status as intellectual celebrities from among colonised people, paving the way for Gandhi himself. Understanding the genesis of liberalism in India, therefore, reveals much about its nature in Europe, America and beyond.

¹¹ E.g., Jennifer Pitts, *A turn to empire: the rise of imperial liberalism in Great Britain and France* (Princeton, NJ, 2006).

¹² For the melding of ideas of rights and justice with popular cosmologies, see William R. Pinch, *Peasants and monks in British India* (Berkeley, Calif., 1996; Anupama Rao, *The caste question: Dalits and the politics of modern India* (Berkeley, Calif., 2009); and below, pp. 287–8. For gender rights, see Rosalind O'Hanlon, *A comparison between women and men: Tarabai Shinde and the critique of gender relations in colonial India* (Madras, 2000); Padma Anagol, *The emergence of feminism in India, 1850–1920* (Aldershot, 2005). As a non-specialist, I broadly take the position of Mikhail Bakhtin and his followers in literary theory and philosophy, since they allow for the existence of dominant power and disciplinarity, yet stress (more than the central works of Foucault or Subaltern Studies) subversion and centripetal forms of dialogic discourse.

¹³ Lynn Zastoupil, *Rammohan Roy and the making of Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010).

Indians used liberal ideas to make sense of a world which was changing with frightening rapidity. The events and movements that forced these conceptual re-evaluations were conjunctural; they operated at a global level. New political ideas were not simply diffused from West to East, from 'North' to 'South'. Nor did these ideological appropriations occur in an apparently placid civil society such as Victorian England. Instead, the situation displayed some similarities to Reinhart Koselleck's vision of a pathological European Enlightenment, where the struggle against absolutism let loose a swarm of political philosophies which could themselves become dangerously utopian, unrealistic or socially divisive.¹⁴ Violent struggles over concepts between Indian spokesmen, and between Indians and their British rulers, paralleled the actual physical violence that scarified nineteenth-century India from Richard Wellesley's invasions of the 1800s, through the massacres of 1857, the terrorist movements of the early twentieth century, to the incredible carnage of Partition in 1947. The concept of force (*danda*; Sanskrit, 'the stick', i.e., coercion) lurked under many of the discussions of sovereignty and justice, even in the neo-Palladian drawing rooms of the Bengal gentry. Not only that: unlike British liberalism throughout much of its history, Indian liberalism was embattled from the beginning by powerful ideologies that largely rejected it: landed conservatism, Islamic purism, subaltern revolt and, latterly, Gandhi's 'soul force', Hindu nationalism and Indian communism. The discourse of liberalism was shadowed and matched throughout by a 'history of violence', as Shruti Kapila terms it.¹⁵

Yet, in reacting to both physical and discursive violence, the general stance of Indian liberals was for an epistemic compromise; to acknowledge the power of Western thought and the violence of imperialism, but to relativise, deflect or hybridise it with modernised Indian themes. So, as Chapter 7 shows, a public intellectual such as Grish Chunder Ghose pondered at length on the brutality of the British suppression of the 1857 Rebellion. But his denunciation of the British military campaign was achieved by comparing it to other world events, such as the English Civil War and French Revolution. At their most effective, then, Indian liberals were not proponents of a comfortable theory of the growth of freedom, let alone simple adherents of the free market. They were motivated by what could truly be called 'the liberalism of fear' – aware of the prominence and

¹⁴ Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and crisis: enlightenment and the pathogenesis of modern society* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988).

¹⁵ See Shruti Kapila, 'A history of violence', *Modern Intellectual History*, 7:2 (2010), pp. 437–57.

pervasiveness of despotism and conscious of the scale of the obstacles in the way of even the smallest progressive change. Judith Shklar used the term 'liberalism of fear' in relation to recent politics in a still-comfortable capitalist West. But it applies with much greater force to earlier liberals in the colonial world.¹⁶

While liberalism is arguably the 'least bad' variety of political thought and practice, there is no intention here of portraying it in India or elsewhere as a nice, cosy doctrine. Liberals were indeed quite often morally or physically coercive towards, and 'disciplining' of, harmless popular practices, women, the poor and minority groups. The civil society which liberal ideas helped to generate was often complicit with caste privilege, regional chauvinism or religious communalism.¹⁷ Some liberals hypocritically proclaimed their modernity, while easily capitulating to archaic social practices such as child marriage. Others, indeed, quite closely approximated to the stereotypes of both the 'old' Cambridge school of Indian history and some post-colonial writers who have held them to be mere mendicant office-seekers or inauthentic 'mimic men'. Of course, there were many collaborators among Indian liberals; some even condemned their more radical countrymen to prison or death at the sittings of courts or government commissions. Yet if 'collaboration' existed in the original French colonial sense of co-working, that work was a powerful ideological and social construct and it is intellectually shallow to reduce it to simple greed, fear or mere imitation.

By the 1860s, this constitutional liberalism shaded into a more radical stance, analogous to European democratic nationalism. Yet from the beginning it was also more 'communitarian', more concerned with the fate of society rather than the individual, and more hospitable to the idea of state intervention in the economy. Indian liberalism did not lead on directly to democratic government: until very late Indian liberals worried about the rapid extension of the franchise. But democracy everywhere in the world has involved making representative government safe for the modern state. Liberals in India could have had no doubt about the coercive power of the colonial state, nor could they sidestep or ignore the conflict between liberal values and political power, as many in the West have done.¹⁸ They had the more limited aim of trying to naturalise power through Indian representation. But since they were the first to try to work out the rules of

¹⁶ See John Dunn, 'Hope over fear: Judith Shklar as political educator', in Bernard Yack (ed.), *Liberalism without illusions: liberal theory and the political vision of Judith Shklar* (Chicago, 1996), pp. 45–55.

¹⁷ Cf. Frank Trentmann, *Paradoxes of civil society: new perspectives on modern German and British history* (New York, 2003), 'Introduction', pp. 3–47.

¹⁸ Geuss, *History and illusion*.

engagement between state and society, their experience and ideologies remained highly significant for the future of Indian democracy.¹⁹

Contemporaries were well aware of the intellectual shock waves unleashed by liberal and radical thought, however internally contested it was. The Lucknow lawyer Bishan Narayan Dhar wrote in 1895:

The radical views of the educated are gradually filtering down to the lowest strata of the nation through the innocent medium of 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.²⁰

The concept of equality was spreading through the Penal Code which made no distinction between ‘Brahmin and Shudra [toiler]’, he argued. The ‘habit of free criticism’ and the doctrines of ‘evolutionism’ were undermining ‘supernaturalism’, the dominance of the old aristocracy and the power of the joint family. Comte,²¹ Spencer, Mill and the oriental scholar Friedrich Max Muller had hastened the tide of ‘secularity or rationalism’ in India. Even before the age of Morley and Gladstone, ‘[f]rom our boyhood we have been brought up on a purely republican diet’ of Burke, Fox and Hallam.²²

This was no naive paean of praise for liberalism, however. Dhar worried about the declining status of religion, the undermining of the ‘ascetic element’ in Hinduism by the ‘new Epicureanism’, and the decline of charity, domestic affection and self-sacrifice.²³ Yet he was clear that this tide of ideas would ultimately overwhelm both indigenous conservatism and also the stubborn reaction of the Anglo-Indian bureaucracy.

The question has been asked whether political thought was possible under colonialism. Could people excluded from power author a theory of power or progress? The most radical response, articulated by Faisal Devji, contends that political thought was, in fact, uniquely possible under colonialism because exclusion from power and office allowed the luxury of reflection.²⁴ Even when excluded from all but subordinate authority during the colonial period, Indians were constantly forced to confront and consider political power. How constrained was their political analysis? Did British censorship seriously impede free discussion? Robert Darnton has detailed the elaborate forms of censorship resorted to in *ancien régime* France and the

¹⁹ John Dunn, ‘Conclusion’, in John Dunn (ed.), *Democracy: the unfinished journey, 500 BC to AD 1993* (Oxford, 2008), p. 248.

²⁰ Bishan Narayan Dar [sic], *Signs of the times* (Lucknow, 1895), p. 8.

²¹ One valuable work which anticipates aspects of the methodology of this book is Geraldine H. Forbes, *Positivism in Bengal: a case study in the transmission and assimilation of an ideology* (Calcutta, 1975).

²² Dar, *Signs*, p. 22. ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

²⁴ Faisal Devji, ‘Apologetic modernity’, *Modern Intellectual History*, 4:1 (2007), pp. 61–76.

Indian Empire.²⁵ Yet in both locales, as he shows, censorship was spasmodic, limited in range and often counterproductive. Political leaders in speeches and newspaper editors in articles could evade prosecution by resorting to parody, innuendo and indirect criticism in their attacks on government, which was often represented as a despotism contrasting with ‘true’ British government in the metropolis.

Subterfuge was not, of course, necessarily a progressive practice. One divisive aspect of this polemic was the implicit analogy often made by Hindu publicists between ‘Mahomedan’ and British despotisms. Yet these modes of argument should be regarded as political ‘masks’ in the sense used by John Pocock.²⁶ Radical criticism of the colonial state could be ‘masked’ by a broad hostility to distant or unnamed despotisms or by an emphasis on progress understood as a vague hybrid of Hindu Vedantism and evolutionism. Sometimes, again, the mask fell off and even liberal statesmen skirted close to imprisonment in their denunciation of India’s impoverishment.

As for the charges of ‘derivativeness’ or ‘in-authenticity’, it would be difficult to find any single global movement of political ideas, whether European civic republicanism, socialism or ecological activism, which could not be characterised in these terms. All modern political languages have mixed together global and local discourses. A further challenge to a study such as this poses the question: did the activities of Indian liberals, as opposed to the ‘mass movements’ of the 1930s and 1940s, actually do anything to redress the fundamental imbalance of power in the colonial system? From the debates of the 1820s about widow-burning through to the demands for Swaraj, or self-government within the Empire before and after 1914, Indian liberal projects did help to introduce slow change in India’s governance. Often Indians acted merely to supplement and dramatise campaigns mounted in London by British liberals, Irish radicals and a few London-based Indians, such as Dadabhai Naoroji. Yet Indian liberal critiques also acted to sow doubt and discomfort within the British administration. As Beatrice and Sidney Webb acidly asserted in 1912, whatever their claims to moral uprightness, most British administrators were the intellectual inferiors of the educated Indians who challenged them: ‘a stupid people find themselves governing an intellectual aristocracy’.²⁷ What I have

²⁵ Robert Darnton, *The forbidden best-sellers of pre-revolutionary France* (New York, 1976); Robert Darnton, ‘Book production in British India, 1850–1900’, *Book History*, 5 (2002), pp. 239–62.

²⁶ Pocock, *Political thought*, esp. pp. 67–86.

²⁷ Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb, *The Webbs in Asia: the 1911–12 travel diary*, ed. G. Feaver (Basingstoke, 1992), p. 330.

called counter-preaching, putting British moralists and paternalists on the back foot, was brought to a fine art. Its greatest exponent, of course, was Mohandas Gandhi.

Yet whatever their variable and slow effects on British policy and practice, the fact that Indian liberals and their critics struggled with ideas not simply about the nation but also about good government, social development, economic change and global society created a powerful set of sensibilities. These have been acted upon by Indian administrators and politicians up to the present day. In the widest sense, India's liberal republicanism as much as her tradition of voluntary association have been resolute forces underpinning and empowering her government and democracy, however rocky the political road has often been and however often scarred by terrible violence. To take a single example, the longevity of India's liberal English, Bengali, Marathi and Hindi newspapers hardly finds a parallel anywhere else, not just in the developing world, but over much of Europe. The subcontinent's first regular radical newspaper appeared as early as 1818 and vernacular newspapers authored by Indians proliferated in the following two decades.

The next section highlights the major themes of the book by comparing the classic British forms of liberalism, especially those of the generation of John Stuart Mill, with analogical Indian liberal thought. I examine these comparisons and divergences in the abstract not to subsume Indian into British liberalism, let alone to show that Indian or, for that matter, British liberals were somehow wanting but to uncover some major themes of debate. Later chapters consider arguments between liberals and their opponents in more precise historical periods and circumstances.

THE CLASSICAL DEBATES: INDIAN LIBERALS AND
JOHN STUART MILL AND OTHERS

Faced with occupation by what they believed was an alien and often oppressive government, Indian writers after 1820 turned their attention first to what transnational liberalism had to say about the legitimacy of the state. British claims to rule India rested on two different arguments. First, Company administrators argued that their right to govern derived from treaties made with the Mughal sovereign and post-Mughal governments in Awadh, Hyderabad and elsewhere. Indian liberals sought to prove that the Company had often violated these agreements. On the one hand, it had failed in its duty to support and respect Indian cultural and religious institutions. On the other hand, the Company had ignored its agreement to respect the territorial integrity of Indian states. This was the argument

Rammohan Roy made on behalf of the Mughal Empire in 1832, drawing on an emerging body of international law and using Grotius to criticise the misapplication of the notion of *terra nullius*, but blending it with an appeal to cultural inclusiveness of the old Mughal realm. The sense of India's territorial integrity which emerged from these debates empowered a long-standing popular sensibility that there existed a subcontinental cultural entity, usually still called 'Hindustan', but increasingly 'India', over and above its more strongly demarcated regional patrias.²⁸

A second claim made by the British for dominion over India was that before their intervention the subcontinent had been in a state of chaos and anarchy. Here British officials implicitly – and occasionally explicitly – drew on Thomas Hobbes's justification for authoritative government as the only alternative to the state of nature: 'the war of all against all'. Not surprisingly, Indians invoked their own traditions, but also turned to John Locke to counter this argument, sometimes, again, quite explicitly. Indian government, they said, had always been legitimated by the assent of the people through local bodies and constitutional arrangements, as the Shastras showed. This was a tacit social contract. Indians also warmed to Locke's 'providentialism' as opposed to the apparent atheism of Hobbes's position. This line of thought seemed to them to parallel the revived Hindu tradition of Vedantasastra, which spoke of an immanent Deity working in history. So if British rule was justified at all it was only as a providential intervention to allow time for the re-emergence of this Indian genius for constitutional government and the recovering of ancient liberties.

As for 'the war of all against all', Indian liberals and also conservatives argued that pre-colonial governments had been more popular, more just and had given greater scope for individual merit than the Company's government. According to many liberal Hindus, the British, indeed, had perpetuated the worst features of 'Mahomedan tyranny', without its countervailing cultural sympathy. This was an argument used particularly by western Indians who disliked the way in which British writers had characterised the Maratha states of the eighteenth century as predatory and oppressive. Yet these same writers believed that the decline of the irenic polities of the past and of the Sanskrit language, which had articulated their norms, required a vigorous engagement with the new colonial state on its own intellectual terms.

²⁸ C. A. Bayly, *The origins of nationality in South Asia: patriotism and ethical government in the making of modern India* (Delhi, 1998).