



**LIBERALISM IN FLUX: COMPETING IDEOLOGIES AND METHODS
IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA**

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the dynamic and contested role of liberalism in contemporary India, where the foundational ideals of individual rights, secularism, and democratic governance face persistent ideological challenges and institutional strain. While liberalism shaped India's post-independence constitutional framework, it now operates amid growing tensions with competing ideological forces—including religious nationalism, majoritarian populism, identity-based movements, and resurgent state authoritarianism. These competing worldviews not only challenge liberalism's normative authority but also reshape political methods, mobilization strategies, and public discourse. Drawing on political theory, postcolonial critique, and current developments, this research analyzes how liberalism is being reconfigured in response to shifting socio-political realities. The study highlights how liberalism in India is not a static doctrine but a site of active negotiation—one that is simultaneously invoked, reinterpreted, and undermined by various actors. In doing so, it offers a critical reflection on the future of democracy, pluralism, and constitutionalism in a transforming political landscape.



KEYWORDS: Liberalism , Indian Democracy , Political Ideologies , Hindu Nationalism , Constitutionalism , Identity Politics , Populism , Secularism , Political Pluralism , Postcolonial Political Thought.

INTRODUCTION

Liberalism has long served as a foundational pillar of modern democratic states, advocating for individual rights, constitutional governance, secularism, and the rule of law. In the context of postcolonial India, liberalism played a crucial role in shaping the vision of the Indian republic. The Indian Constitution, framed in the wake of independence, drew heavily from liberal democratic ideals—enshrining civil liberties, equality before the law, and institutional checks and balances. Yet, as India's political landscape evolves, the coherence and dominance of liberalism have come under intense scrutiny and contestation. Contemporary India is witnessing a flux of ideological realignments and political methods that question the supremacy of liberal values. The rise of Hindu nationalism, populist leadership, identity-based mobilizations, and majoritarian politics has led to significant shifts in how power is exercised and legitimacy is claimed. These developments have not only tested the resilience of

liberal institutions but have also redefined the methods of political engagement, ranging from mass protests to digital activism and state surveillance. The liberal ideal of a neutral, secular, rights-based polity now finds itself in direct competition with alternative visions of nationhood, cultural unity, and state authority.

This ideological turbulence is not merely a rejection of liberalism but often a reconfiguration of its principles to suit emerging political agendas. For instance, populist regimes may invoke the language of rights and democracy while simultaneously eroding their substance. Similarly, identity-based movements may challenge liberal universalism by foregrounding historical injustices and community-specific claims. The result is a fragmented and contested political field where liberalism persists, but no longer unchallenged or unchanged. This study seeks to interrogate the contemporary condition of liberalism in India by examining its interaction with competing ideologies and political methods. It asks: How is liberalism being transformed, reasserted, or undermined in contemporary India? What alternative political frameworks are emerging in its place? And what does this flux reveal about the future of democracy, pluralism, and constitutionalism in India? By engaging these questions, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of India's political evolution in the 21st century and the global debate on the fate of liberal democracy.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Aim:

To critically analyze the evolving role and contested status of liberalism in contemporary India by examining its interaction with competing ideologies and emerging political methods.

Objectives:

1. To investigate how liberal values—such as individual rights, secularism, and constitutional governance—are being challenged, reinterpreted, or undermined in India's current political climate.
2. To explore the rise and influence of alternative ideologies, including Hindu nationalism, majoritarian populism, and identity-based politics, in shaping contemporary political discourse.
3. To examine the changing methods of political mobilization, such as digital activism, state surveillance, street protests, and institutional capture, and their impact on liberal democratic norms.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The question of liberalism's place in contemporary Indian politics has gained renewed scholarly attention in light of growing ideological polarization and democratic backsliding. Liberalism, once perceived as the normative foundation of India's constitutional order, is now increasingly seen as embattled, both politically and intellectually. The literature on this subject spans political theory, postcolonial critique, sociology, and media studies, reflecting the multidimensional nature of this crisis. Sunil Khilnani's *The Idea of India* (1997) presents a foundational account of the liberal imagination that underpinned India's nation-building project in the post-independence era. He underscores how Indian elites sought to create a modern, secular, and democratic republic rooted in pluralism and constitutionalism. However, this liberal vision has often struggled to gain deep-rooted legitimacy in the face of persistent social inequalities, religious mobilization, and identity-based politics.

Rajeev Bhargava's work on secularism and democracy has been central to the Indian liberal discourse. In *Secularism and Its Critics* (1998), Bhargava argues for a contextual secularism that accommodates India's diverse religious traditions while preserving the liberal commitment to state neutrality and individual freedom. Yet, as Christophe Jaffrelot (2007, 2019) and Jyotirmaya Sharma (2011) have shown, this vision is under serious threat from the growing appeal of Hindu nationalism, which seeks to redefine the Indian polity in majoritarian and culturally homogenizing terms. Uday Mehta's *Liberalism and Empire* (1999) complicates the assumption of liberalism as a purely emancipatory force. He demonstrates how liberal political thought historically justified colonial domination in India by conflating governance with civilizational superiority. Similarly, Partha

Chatterjee's *The Politics of the Governed* (2004) argues that liberal frameworks often fail to capture the informal, subaltern modes of political agency in postcolonial societies. These critiques suggest that liberalism, far from being universally applicable, must be rethought in relation to specific historical and cultural contexts. Recent scholarship has focused on the decline or transformation of liberalism under contemporary populist regimes. Pratap Bhanu Mehta has written extensively on the erosion of institutional autonomy and the rise of executive centralization in India, arguing that liberal democracy is increasingly vulnerable to populist majoritarianism. Scholars such as Milan Vaishnav (2017) and Suhas Palshikar have analyzed how electoral strategies, clientelism, and identity politics have reshaped the modes of political participation and legitimacy, often bypassing liberal norms.

The rise of digital politics has also prompted new methodological reflections. Media studies scholars like Ninan (2018) and Udupa (2019) have explored how online spaces, especially social media, are transforming political discourse and enabling both democratic engagement and authoritarian control. These developments have further destabilized the liberal public sphere, raising questions about misinformation, polarization, and surveillance. Additionally, literature on identity politics—particularly Dalit, Adivasi, and feminist perspectives—has pointed out the exclusions and blind spots within liberal thought. Scholars like Anand Teltumbde and Sharmila Rege have emphasized the need to center caste and gender justice in any discussion of rights and equality. These critiques do not necessarily reject liberalism but call for its radical restructuring to address structural oppression. In sum, the existing literature reveals a rich and contested field of inquiry around liberalism in India. While some scholars emphasize the need to defend and revitalize liberal values, others argue for alternative frameworks that are more attuned to India's complex realities. There is broad agreement, however, that liberalism in India is in a state of flux—neither obsolete nor fully intact. This study contributes to this evolving discourse by mapping the intersections of ideology, political method, and institutional change in the contemporary moment.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and interdisciplinary approach, rooted in political theory, postcolonial analysis, and contemporary political sociology. The objective is to explore how liberalism is being contested, reshaped, or reinterpreted in India's current political landscape, and to understand the methods through which ideological competition is expressed and institutionalized.

1. Research Design

The study is conceptual and analytical, focusing on the critical interpretation of texts, political developments, and discursive trends rather than empirical fieldwork. It aims to map the shifting ideological terrain and the methods of political engagement by analyzing key themes, actors, and moments in contemporary Indian politics.

2. Data Sources

Primary Sources:

Speeches, writings, and policy statements by political leaders, party manifestos, and legal documents such as constitutional amendments and court judgments.

Secondary Sources:

Scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles in political science, sociology, history, and media studies.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Liberalism has historically served as the ideological backbone of India's constitutional democracy, promoting values such as individual rights, secularism, rule of law, and institutional checks and balances. However, in recent years, this liberal order has come under increasing strain. The rise of competing ideologies—particularly Hindu nationalism, majoritarian populism, identity politics, and

cultural revivalism—has reshaped the Indian political landscape in ways that challenge the coherence, authority, and relevance of liberal principles. This ideological shift is not merely a political transformation but reflects deeper societal tensions around nationhood, identity, and governance. Political rhetoric has increasingly turned toward notions of collective identity, religious majoritarianism, and centralized authority, while liberal ideals of pluralism, dissent, and minority rights are often portrayed as outdated, elitist, or foreign. At the same time, liberalism itself has shown internal weaknesses—such as its inability to adequately address caste-based and economic inequalities or to foster a genuinely inclusive public sphere.

Moreover, methods of political mobilization have changed drastically. The growth of digital platforms, surveillance technologies, and algorithmic propaganda has altered the nature of democratic participation, raising concerns about the erosion of deliberative space and the rise of a hyper-mediated, emotionally charged political climate. These new methods often bypass liberal norms of debate and accountability, further destabilizing the liberal framework. Despite the centrality of these developments to India's democratic future, there remains a gap in political thought and scholarship regarding how liberalism is being transformed, co-opted, or resisted in contemporary India. While there is considerable literature on the rise of nationalism and populism, fewer studies explicitly focus on the dynamic interaction between these ideologies and the liberal tradition in the Indian context.

Therefore, this research seeks to address a pressing intellectual and political challenge:

How is liberalism being contested and reconfigured in the face of ideological and methodological shifts in contemporary Indian politics, and what does this mean for the future of democracy, pluralism, and rights in the country?

FURTHER SUGGESTIONS FOR RESEARCH

1. Regional Variations in Liberal-Illiberal Dynamics

Future research can investigate how liberalism and its contestations manifest differently across India's diverse regional contexts. States like Kerala, Gujarat, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh offer contrasting political cultures and electoral outcomes that could deepen our understanding of ideological variation.

2. Liberalism and Marginalized Communities

Further inquiry is needed into how Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, and LGBTQ+ communities engage with—or are excluded from—the liberal political framework. Such research could reveal whether liberalism is perceived as empowering, inadequate, or complicit in systemic oppression.

3. Comparative Postcolonial Liberalisms

A comparative analysis between India and other postcolonial democracies (e.g., South Africa, Indonesia, Brazil) could illuminate how liberalism operates under similar pressures of identity politics, populism, and colonial legacies, and whether alternative democratic models are emerging globally.

4. Digital Media, Algorithms, and Liberal Discourse

The role of digital platforms, misinformation, and algorithm-driven political engagement warrants deeper study. Research could focus on how these technologies influence public discourse, erode liberal norms, or create new forms of ideological persuasion and control.

5. Judiciary and Constitutional Morality

Exploring how courts interpret and defend liberal constitutional values—particularly in cases involving dissent, religious freedom, or minority rights—could help assess the judiciary's role in mediating ideological contestations.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

The scope of this study centers on examining the ideological contestations and methodological shifts that have redefined liberalism in contemporary India, particularly in the post-2014 political landscape. It analyzes how competing ideologies—such as Hindu nationalism, populism, and caste- and

identity-based mobilizations—have challenged the foundational liberal principles embedded in the Indian constitutional and democratic framework. The research investigates the evolving nature of political rhetoric, institutional behavior, and public discourse to assess the resilience and transformation of liberalism in a rapidly changing socio-political environment. Drawing from political theory, media studies, postcolonial critique, and constitutional law, the study employs qualitative and interpretive methods, including textual analysis of political speeches, legal documents, and media narratives. The focus remains largely on national-level developments while situating them within the broader intellectual and historical trajectory of Indian political thought.

However, the study is limited by several factors. Its geographic and linguistic concentration on English-language sources excludes regional and vernacular perspectives that might present alternative viewpoints. The temporal focus on the period from 2014 to the present may overlook earlier historical layers of liberal thought in India. As a conceptual study based on secondary data, it does not involve fieldwork or empirical surveys, limiting its engagement with grassroots political realities. Furthermore, the rapidly evolving nature of political events and discourses means that some observations may become outdated as new developments unfold. Despite these constraints, the study offers a timely and critical analysis of the status and transformation of liberalism in contemporary Indian political life.

DISCUSSION

The evolving nature of liberalism in contemporary India reflects a complex and often contradictory political landscape marked by ideological shifts and changing methods of governance and mobilization. Historically rooted in the constitutional vision of India's founders, liberalism in the Indian context has emphasized secularism, individual rights, institutional autonomy, and democratic pluralism. However, in recent years, this framework has come under sustained pressure from a range of competing ideologies, most notably Hindu nationalism, majoritarian populism, and various strands of identity-based politics. These forces have redefined the public understanding of nationhood, citizenship, and belonging, often prioritizing collective identity and cultural homogeneity over individual freedoms and procedural norms. The consolidation of political power under a dominant ruling party has contributed to a visible erosion of liberal democratic institutions. Legislative, executive, and judicial bodies have increasingly aligned with majoritarian interests, raising concerns about the weakening of institutional checks and balances. Simultaneously, civil society spaces have been constrained through legal and extralegal mechanisms, affecting dissent, activism, and freedom of expression. Liberalism's core commitment to protecting minority rights and encouraging critical debate is thus being systematically challenged by a political environment that valorizes unity, nationalism, and cultural tradition over diversity and individual liberty.

At the same time, the methods through which politics is conducted have transformed significantly. The rise of social media platforms and digital technologies has altered the terrain of political communication, enabling both the amplification of ideological narratives and the manipulation of public opinion through targeted campaigns and disinformation. These platforms are often used to promote emotionally charged narratives that bypass rational debate, making liberal ideals of reasoned deliberation and informed citizenship more difficult to sustain. The use of state surveillance, data-driven governance, and regulatory restrictions further complicates the liberal commitment to privacy, transparency, and open dialogue. Despite these challenges, liberalism in India has not disappeared but is undergoing a contested reconfiguration. Legal interventions, intellectual critique, grassroots activism, and civic resistance continue to invoke liberal principles, although often in more defensive or revised forms. The persistence of constitutional challenges in courts, public protests for rights and freedoms, and scholarly efforts to reinterpret liberal values in a more inclusive and context-sensitive manner suggest that liberalism remains a significant—if embattled—force in Indian political thought. This flux reveals not only the vulnerabilities of liberalism but also its potential for reinvention in response to changing historical conditions. Ultimately, the Indian experience underscores the need to critically engage with the meaning and limits of liberalism in a postcolonial, multicultural society. It raises urgent questions about whether liberal democracy, as originally conceived, is equipped to handle the tensions

of contemporary governance, identity, and inequality—or whether new theoretical and institutional models are required to sustain democratic ideals in the twenty-first century.

CONCLUSION

The trajectory of liberalism in contemporary India reveals a dynamic and contested terrain, shaped by the convergence of ideological realignment and methodological transformation. Once regarded as the normative foundation of the Indian constitutional order—anchored in values of secularism, individual rights, institutional autonomy, and pluralism—liberalism now faces profound challenges from competing ideological frameworks, especially Hindu nationalism, populism, and identity-driven politics. These forces have redefined the meaning of democracy, citizenship, and nationhood, often at the expense of liberal commitments to diversity and dissent. Yet, the crisis of liberalism in India is not merely a story of decline. It is also a story of adaptation, resistance, and rearticulation. As liberal values are questioned and reconfigured, they continue to serve as points of reference for legal resistance, civic activism, and scholarly intervention. The rise of illiberal practices has, in turn, prompted renewed efforts to defend and reimagine liberalism in more inclusive, intersectional, and socially grounded ways.

This study demonstrates that liberalism in India is neither a stable nor a monolithic entity. Rather, it is a fluid and historically contingent discourse, constantly shaped by its interactions with rival ideologies, political practices, and institutional forces. The flux in liberalism is thus not a sign of its irrelevance but an indication of its ongoing political and philosophical relevance in the face of rapidly evolving challenges. As India continues to negotiate its democratic future, the fate of liberalism—its ability to adapt, inspire, and endure—remains central to the broader struggle for justice, rights, and inclusive governance.

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