

Indigenous Rationalism in India

What is the issue?

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- Hindu rightwing groups tend to portray rationalism as a western concept which is alien to Indian ethos and way of life.

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- But a look at India's deep rooted philosophical tradition reveals that there has been a vibrant spirit of rationalist throughout.

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How has the rationalist tradition shaped up in India?

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- It is believed that faith rules in India and that the number of Indians who didn't state their religion was only 3 million in the 2011 census.

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- Nonetheless, this is a massive increase from the 2001 census where just about 700,000 had not declared a religion.

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Ancient India:

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- Rationalists and sceptics who held out for scientific ideas have been a part of the Indian tradition since at least the 6th century BC.

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- "Ajita Kesakambalin", a contemporary of the Buddha, was the earliest known teacher of complete materialism (stripped of any spiritual pursuit in life).

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- The "Charvakas Philosophical Tradition", is largely a product of his

thinking that prioritised empiricism and scepticism over Vedic ritualism.

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- The original texts of the Charvakas have not survived, but references to their rationalist tradition are found in Buddhist and Jain works.

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- The Buddha himself cautioned against accepting “what has been acquired by repeated hearing”, and encouraged independent study and thinking.

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- Even within the wider Brahminical tradition, shades of opinion prevailed between the Brahmanas and the Shramanas, and active debate prevailed.

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- Notably, even in Chhandogya Upanishad, one Uddalaka Aruni speaks of the importance observing the surrounding rather than being superstitious.

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Modern Times:

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- In the early modern period in Bengal, Raja Ram Mohan Roy and the Brahmo Samaj led the charge against regressive tradition.

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- The regions of present day Maharashtra has a long history of radical thought that challenged several ideas embedded in the caste hierarchies.

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- It was here that Babasaheb Ambedkar embraced Buddhism, and the Republican parties carry forward his legacy in their own ways.

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- Jyotiba Phule and Savitri Phule rejected caste and gender inequalities.

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- The first recorded reservation in educational institutes for backward castes was in Maharashtra by Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur (1894-1922).

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- Narayana Guru in Kerala and E V Ramasamy (Periyar) in Tamil Nadu were early advocates of progress, and their ideas impacted politics deeply.

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- The Self-Respect movement in Tamil Nadu and the Leftist movement in Kerala and West Bengal made a strong case for rationalism and egalitarianism.

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What is the way ahead?

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- Article 51A (H) of the Constitution of India gives a call “to develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform”.

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- The leaders of the national movement hoped that the lofty ideals of the emerging Indian state would encourage a modern and progressive outlook.

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- Rationalism would also help in undoing the feudal setup that has been in place since long and put us strongly on a path towards social and economic equality.

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- In this context, it is important for the state to ensure that vested interests don't succeed in stifling the voices of progressivism.

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Source: Indian Express

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