

## **Indigenous Rationalism in India**

### **What is the issue?**

\n\n

\n

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

\n

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

\n

\n\n

### **How has the rationalist tradition shaped up in India?**

\n\n

\n

- 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.

\n

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

\n

\n\n

### **Ancient India:**

\n\n

\n

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

\n

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

\n

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

thinking that prioritised empiricism and scepticism over Vedic ritualism.

\n

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

\n

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

\n

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

\n

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

\n

\n\n

## **Modern Times:**

\n\n

\n

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

\n

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

\n

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

\n

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

\n

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

\n

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

\n

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

\n

\n\n

## What is the way ahead?

\n\n

\n

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

\n

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

\n

- 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.

\n

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

\n

\n\n

\n\n

**Source: Indian Express**

\n\n

\n

