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Contrary to Yogendra Yadav's Dim View, Indian Political Thought is Alive and Thriving



Salmoli Choudhuri and Moiz Tundawala

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Generating considerable public debate, Yogendra Yadav has recently pronounced the demise of political thought in India to the complete absence of any new imagination in the field of politics.



Illustration: Pariplab Chakraborty

Initiating a new public debate in his newspaper column [last week](#), Yogendra Yadav has boldly declared the sudden death of Indian political thought. [This week](#), responding to his critics, Yadav has defined political thought as a normative repository of desired goals which actual politics has to measure itself against and strive to accomplish.

Arguing that the anticolonial movement and early postcolonial India produced many grand, if rival, visions for the future, Yadav pegs the recent demise of political thought to the complete absence of any new imagination in the field of politics since the 1960s. We disagree with the basic premise of his argument that parses apart politics as an ever-present domain of interest and action, from political thought as a lost world of lofty ideas meant to supply the programmatic agenda for the working of the republic.

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Yogendra Yadav. Photo: X (Twitter)/@_YogendraYadav

Whether public life has deteriorated today compared to the founding moment is an open question, but no politics is possible without political thought. Contrary to Yadav's separation thesis, ideas – good or bad, consciously stated or implicitly assumed – are constitutive of politics. Without discounting the intellectual agency of political activists, it must be emphasised that the historical and philosophical illumination of ideas and their working out in politics is a primary responsibility of the world of scholarship.

The key figures whom Yadav considers as pace-setters for modern Indian political thinking, including Gandhi, Nehru, Ambedkar, Azad and Savarkar, were not viewed as such throughout the twentieth century. This was largely because they did not leave behind an intellectual corpus

of systematic thought comparable to the classic modern canon of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Hegel and Marx. It is only in the last two decades that Indian political thought as a discipline has come of age and become global.

‘Political thought in action’

While Yadav reads in the archives a pre-existing tradition of ‘Modern Indian Political Thought’ which has now been lost, the fact is that this discipline has actually been created through careful interpretive efforts. This point is completely unacknowledged in both his pieces.

Addressing the absence of a political thought canon in India, a new body of scholarship has reconstructed **political actors into thinkers** by interpreting a large variety of texts, ranging from treatises, pamphlets and manifestos to letters, lectures and speeches. To use Shruti Kapila and Faisal Devji's succinct coinage which has profound methodological and philosophical implications, what is sought to be done without being bogged down by the lack of a well-defined corpus, is to trace and pursue the career of **‘political thought in action’**.

With the centre-staging of human action, the discipline of Indian political thought has moved beyond interrogating different ideologies of world-making such as liberalism, socialism, communism and conservatism. Rather, in a markedly Hegelian way, the intellectual task that it sets for itself is to

discern the work of ideas through a careful study of political action. To put it simply, the call is not to focus merely on what political actors say, but more importantly on what they do.

Who are our political thinkers?

This manoeuvre has made possible fresh reinterpretations of modern political thought in India. Far from drawing upon Western ideas in a derivative manner or departing from them in a purely nativist way, Indian political actors have been recast as conceptual innovators who have remade the language of political modernity for our global age. The rich scholarship that has been produced on sovereignty, subjectivity, violence, truth, ethics, equality and democracy is generative not just for India but speaks to the rest of the world as well.

One may lament, as does Yadav, that unlike political actors of the past, politicians today have ceased to be reflective of their own actions which has in a way contributed to the decline of the standards of public culture in our times. However, the burden of thought and theory whose ambition is to openly and critically express the silent unconscious workings of politics and society falls much more on the shoulders of academics and intellectuals.

While list making is a perilous exercise and best avoided, Yadav's initial all-male inventory of major scholars, though formidable, is grossly inadequate. In the face of criticism on **social media**, he has supplemented it in his second column with some more names of political and social activists, while giving a miss to the field of scholarship available in the subject. The discipline of Indian political thought has recently been nourished by contributions from Dipesh Chakrabarty, Chris Bayly, Ajay Skaria, Aishwary Kumar and Prathama Banerjee, besides Kapila and Devji. Political theory in India is more well known and has been enriched by the scholarship of Akeel Bilgrami, Uday Singh Mehta, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Gopal Guru, Ajay Gudavarthy, Nivedita Menon, Gurpreet Mahajan, Neera Chandhoke, Niraja Gopal Jayal, Rochana Bajpai and Karuna Mantena. It is regrettable that despite the glowing record of female scholars in these fields, none of them find mention in Yadav's list.

On the putative 'decline' of political imagination

The expectation of intellectual imagination that Yadav places on the political class is itself misdirected. This is especially at a time when the hegemonic structuring principles of democracy and diversity have replaced debates over all other competing values and ideals. The decade of the 1960s that he identifies as marking the sudden demise of new political thought is strikingly also the moment when multiparty democracy first freed itself from the hold of the Indian National Congress. It subsequently came of age around the questions of language, caste and religion, and thereby gave a fresh lease to new political thinking on these ideas.

In fact, what Yadav refers to as the 'poverty of political imagination' is not a specifically Indian problem but has been a feature of global politics since the end of the World War II. The project of imagining grand utopic futures suffered a serious setback owing to the rise of the security state during the **Cold War** and has not recovered ever since. For sure, India was insulated from the global pressures of the warring ideologies of capitalism and communism due to its non-alignment policy. Yet, as we have argued **elsewhere**, the birth of the postcolonial republic tied academic pursuit to the national spirit of developmentalism, making social sciences entirely serviceable to the state and curtailing the space for theory and philosophy.

Our point is that the decline of utopia in the present age is a question that is being reckoned with by political thinkers across the world. There are many ways of doing political thought and the unavailability of new programmatic visions should not lead us to diagnose the death of the discipline itself.

India today is primed for new political thinking

The occasion which spurred Yadav to comment on the evaporation of political imagination in India was the Prime Minister's lacklustre Independence Day speech. Given that this was his first 15th August speech after a third straight victory in the general elections, one could have expected a novel forward-looking vision for the years ahead. But what we got was a rehashing of the well-worn out expression of 'Viksit Bharat' or 'developed India' that has been in vogue since the 1950s. Rather than signalling a decline of political thought, this could be interpreted as a subdued statement from a leader chastened by a reduced mandate or one biding his time for the next course of action.

It is surprising that such a dim view of Indian political imagination is being advanced at a time when the recent election presented a genuine ideological opposition to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party for the first time in a decade. Displaying clarity of thought and vision, the electoral battlelines were drawn between **Hindu nationalism and an inclusive politics of love**, social fragmentation and caste justice, crony capitalism and joblessness, and temple politics versus the saving of the Ambedkarite Constitution. One may even venture to say that in what is being hailed as the '**age of consensus**' across the world where governments change without any major shift in the ruling ideology of the state, India has defied the global trend in opening up new possibilities for genuine political contestation.

During the campaign, amidst predictions of an absolute and overwhelming majority for the BJP which would have further shrunk the space for an already toothless Opposition, Yadav's was a rare voice of democratic hope. It is disheartening to see him now use the 20th century intellectual aesthetic of declaring the death of one or the other philosophical concept. After the death of God, Enlightenment, Author, Subject, and History, we are now left to grapple with the death of Indian political thought. Yadav reassures in his sequel that revival rather than mourning is the right way to deal with the loss. Even then, he is too quick to declare the premature death of a discipline which is alive and thriving. Whether recognised as such or not, political thought will carry on its work as long as we continue to inhabit a world of political action.

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