

## BOOK REVIEW

'Important and erudite.' RAGHURAM RAJAN

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# INDIAN CONSERVATIVE



A HISTORY OF  
INDIAN RIGHT-WING  
THOUGHT

J A I T H I R T H R A O

## The Indian Conservative:

A History of Indian Right-Wing Thought

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*Publisher:* Juggernaut Books

*Book Review by:* B Shruti Rao\*

While explaining the roots of Edmund Burke's ideas on conservatism, political theorist Russell Kirk had argued that Burke's defence of liberties stemmed not from the trending morals of the Age of Reason, but these liberties were considered by him to be 'ancient prerogatives, guaranteed by immemorial usage.' Kirk posited, 'Burke was liberal *because* he was conservative.'

Leading Indian conservative thinker Jaithirth Rao, in his latest book *The Indian Conservative: A History of Right-Wing Thought*, has hinted the same about Indian conservatism. According to him, Indian conservatism characterised by the supremacy of individual liberty, gradual consensual social reforms, organic social institutions, and a refraining state has been long proffered by seminal texts of India's ancient past, and countless leaders from the pre and post-independence days whose ideas have significantly informed India's history.

The book has undoubtedly come at an opportune moment. While the Indian society had always been dubbed as a highly conservative one, the idea of the nation being ruled by a party clearly

affiliating to conservative ideals has, without a doubt, ushered a new age in the national discourse. One must remember how critics, in India and abroad, have never failed to smugly call out the lack of prominent intellectuals on this side of the balance. However, the past few years give hope in this regard through a wave of resurgence in think tanks, media platforms, academicians and social commentators who have contributed to the promotion of conservative principles in our times. Today, large swathes of the Indian youth feeling disenchanted with the shrill sloganeering, and doomsday predicting left intellectuals of the country find a natural inclination towards conservatism. Rao has given these ideas an indigenous form and a grammar.

While drawing from the ideas of the Anglo-Irish statesman/philosopher Edmund Burke, British politician Benjamin Disraeli, Scottish economist Adam Smith, to the recently deceased 21st century champion of conservative values, Roger Scruton, Rao follows the string of Conservative thought back to the ancient Indian texts of *Mahabharata* (special emphasis on *Shanti Parva*) and

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Thiruvalluvar's *Tirukkural*. The state's duty, as suggested by these texts, is simply to create a favourable atmosphere for the free individual to pursue the goals of *artha* (economic and political activity), *dharma* (virtue and ethical conduct), and *kama* (passion and aesthetic pursuits) which have been suggested as the prerequisites for the attainment of the ultimate aim of *moksha* (salvation). The central idea of conservatism, nevertheless, remains universal; to not underestimate the importance of inherited traditional values and knowledge, to preserve the best of the past, while not being imprisoned by it, and to pursue gradual change consistent with the values of the changing times (*Yuga Dharma*).

Clearly denouncing anarchist and extreme libertarian positions, Rao has wonderfully marked out the importance of 'social cohesion' through 'free association of free individuals' on grounds of shared social and political vision. His emphatic idea of 'band of brothers', of distinct individuals bound by mutual loyalty, as opposed to the levelling of society through a radical redistribution of wealth, or imposed social equality can potentially hold the key to harmony and peace for our highly unequal and deeply diverse Indian society.

While marking out the contours of conservatism, Rao tussles with the examinations of contemporary intellectuals. Historian Ramchandra Guha rightly points out the similarities between Rao's idea of conservatism and the core principles of liberalism. As a response, the distinction brought out by Rao is deeply insightful as he points out the difference between French philosopher Rousseau's profound sense of

grievance against the society, and the English philosopher Hobbes' optimism about the society's gradual movement away from brutish beginnings to a better, but *not necessarily perfect*, present. This singular difference evokes distinct liberal vs conservative responses to the traditions and customs gradually and voluntarily evolved in society.

Economist Swaminathan Aiyar questions Rao's claim of the Indian Constitution being a conservative document. Rao's response to this sums up his stance on the positive contributions of the British Raj in creating the Indian state as we see it today, which at times borders an apologia for colonialism. Rao propounds that our Constitution finds its root in the Government of India Act of 1935, a product of the labour of British parliamentarians. The fact that the Constitution built on the legacies of the 1935 Act, giving India a Westminster-style Constitution with an independent judiciary rather than overturning it, marks how India's was an 'evolutionary independence, not a revolutionary one.'

He echoes the Rammohun Roy/Bankim Chandra Chatterjee proposition of the *providential* British rule as he delves on the contributions of the Raj towards India's political unity, granting rights to the oppressed sections of the Indian society, and bequeathing us with enduring political institutions which have served the nation well over the years. This serves as a reminder as to why the Indian conservative must be cognisant of the positive cultural, political and social contributions of the entire gamut of our erstwhile rulers, even those predating the British, rather than attempting

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to erase their legacies from the collective memory of the people. In this regard, Rao is amply clear in denouncing the extreme factions of Hindu nationalists who he finds similar to the *Jacobins* of the French revolution. At a broader level, however, Rao is categorical in delineating the conservative foundations of the core ideas of Hindu nationalism, India's cultural unity, and its sacred geography being just two of them.

Rao's postulations on the conservative strains of thoughts and leaders in Indian politics, economy, culture, society and aesthetics make for a wonderful exploration of some of the greatest thinkers of India's history who were carefully sidelined by the left-liberal caucuses in their respective spheres. There is no doubt that contemporary Indian leadership will benefit greatly from carrying forward the legacies of these

conservative icons such as Gokhale, Bhandarkar, Rajendra Prasad, Rajagopalachari, Masani, Shenoy, Coomaraswamy and others.

The book leaves the reader with a long list of readings and several pertinent questions. Rao bemoans the current state of Indian education where one has to constantly look at the west for the interpretation of its own heritage. The lacuna of an Indian counterpart of a Scruton, especially in a society like ours where the (heterogeneous) majority does a feeble job of defending its ideals and values, is too egregious to ignore.

The book *The Indian Conservative*, thus, in many ways serves for an appropriate unfurling of discussions on ideological conservatism in India combined with modern rationalism — a school of thought capable of providing sober answers to the many raging questions of today.

