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POLITICAL AWARENESS AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN BHARAT: AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF INDIGENOUS FRAMEWORKS AND COLONIAL CONSTRUCTS

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ABSTRACT:

Contemporary studies of political awareness and political participation in India are largely shaped by Western epistemological frameworks that privilege rights-based citizenship, electoral behavior, and state-centric visibility. Such approaches often marginalize indigenous political traditions by evaluating them against Eurocentric normative standards. This paper undertakes an epistemological analysis of political awareness and participation in Bharat by reconstructing indigenous political frameworks and examining their displacement under colonial and postcolonial intellectual constructs.

Drawing upon classical political texts, inscriptions, and medieval treatises on polity, the study demonstrates that political awareness in Bharatiya civilization was neither episodic nor confined to formal state mechanisms. Instead, it functioned as a civilizational ethos grounded in Dharma, Rājadharma, and Loknīti, wherein political participation was embedded in ethical self-regulation, collective responsibility, and decentralized institutional practices. Deliberative and administrative institutions such as sabhās, samitis, pañcāyats, guilds, monastic assemblies, and temple-based systems facilitated sustained governance and accountability without reliance on adversarial or purely electoral models.

The paper further argues that colonial and postcolonial academic frameworks reframed political participation through narrow behavioral and procedural lenses, obscuring indigenous modes of political consciousness rooted in duty, moral obligation, and social regulation. By foregrounding indigenous epistemology, this study challenges universalist assumptions in political theory and offers an alternative conceptualization of political awareness that integrates ethical order, social continuity, and institutional plurality. The paper concludes that political participation in Bharat was not a modern import but an intrinsic feature of its

political and moral philosophy.

KEYWORDS: Indigenous Epistemology, Political Awareness in Bharat, Political Participation, Dandanīti, Colonial Constructs.

I. INTRODUCTION:

Political awareness and political participation occupy a central position in political science, serving as key indicators for understanding legitimacy, governance, citizenship, and the functioning of political systems. Conventionally, these concepts have been examined through frameworks that prioritize observable behaviour such as voting, protest, opinion articulation, and engagement with formal state institutions. Within this dominant approach, political awareness is treated as informational competence regarding political actors and processes, while political participation is assessed through measurable, institutionalized interventions (Almond & Verba, 1963; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Despite their wide acceptance, these approaches rest on epistemological assumptions that are rarely subjected to critical scrutiny.

The study of political life, notwithstanding its universalist claims, has been historically shaped by Western political experience. The development of political science as a discipline is deeply embedded in the social and intellectual trajectories of Europe and North America, marked by the rise of the nation-state, struggles for individual rights, church–state conflicts, industrialization, and the institutionalization of electoral democracy. Concepts such as liberty, equality, justice, rights, citizenship, and representation emerged within these specific contexts and gradually came to function as foundational analytical anchors for political inquiry (Locke, 1988; Rousseau, 1997; Marshall, 1950). Over time, these historically contingent categories were elevated to the status of universal norms, shaping how political awareness and participation are conceptualized across diverse societies.

This universalization raises a fundamental methodological question: *can political awareness and political participation be understood through identical conceptual frameworks across civilizational contexts shaped by distinct ethical, social, and institutional logics?* When categories derived from Western historical experience are applied uncritically to non-Western societies, they risk obscuring rather than illuminating indigenous forms of political consciousness. Political practices that do not conform to rights-based, state-centric, or adversarial models are frequently rendered invisible or normatively deficient (Kaviraj, 2010).

This problem is particularly evident in the study of Bharat, where political life historically evolved through moral, social, and decentralized institutional arrangements that do not align neatly with modern Western political categories. The dominance of Western methodologies in the academic study of Indian politics, reinforced during the colonial period and continued in postcolonial scholarship, has contributed to a narrowing of inquiry. Political awareness is often equated with modern democratic participation, while earlier and alternative modes of political engagement are treated as pre-political or normatively inferior, producing narratives that frame political consciousness in India as absent prior to colonial modernity (Cohn, 1996).

Compounding this issue is a broader intellectual drift within contemporary political studies, where normative activism increasingly substitutes epistemic inquiry. Rather than examining how political awareness is constituted within different cultural and civilizational contexts, scholarship frequently evaluates societies against predefined ideological standards, displacing the core investigative task of political science: understanding how political consciousness is formed, sustained, and expressed within specific social orders (Shapiro, 2002).

Re-centering the study of political awareness and political participation therefore requires a return to foundational epistemological questions: *what constitutes political awareness within a given tradition, through which practices and institutions does political participation manifest, and how can political inquiry maintain analytical rigor while remaining attentive to civilizational plurality?*

This paper approaches these questions through an epistemological analysis of political awareness and participation in Bharat. Drawing upon primary sources ranging from the *Arthaśāstra* and *Dandanīti* literature to *Smṛtis*, inscriptions, and medieval Sanskrit treatises, it reconstructs indigenous political frameworks in which awareness and participation were embedded in ethical obligation, social responsibility, and decentralized institutional practices (Jayaswal, 1943; Altekar, 1958; Kangle, 1969).

By critically engaging colonial constructs that reshaped the academic interpretation of Indian political life, the paper demonstrates how Western epistemological frameworks, when universalized, reframed political awareness and participation through narrow procedural and state-centric lenses. In foregrounding indigenous epistemology, this study seeks to move beyond deficit narratives and contribute to broader debates in political theory by demonstrating that political awareness and participation are not universally constituted phenomena but are shaped by distinct epistemic traditions.

Comparative Table: Political Experience as Epistemic Foundation

Dimension	Western Political Experience	Bharatiya Political Experience
Historical Anchor	Revolutions, rights struggles, church–state conflict	Dharma, social order, ethical kingship
View of Authority	Inherently suspect, to be constrained	Legitimate when bound by Rajadharma
Political Awareness	Awareness of rights and state institutions	Awareness of duty, moral limits, and social obligation
Political Participation	Electoral, adversarial, state-centric	Decentralized, ethical, institutionally plural
Role of Conflict	Central to political development	Regulated, not foundational
Welfare Provision	Often outcome of political mobilization	Normative obligation of rulers
Accountability	Legal and electoral mechanisms	Ethical, institutional, and social sanction
Model of Citizenship	Individualistic and rights-based	Relational and duty-oriented

II. The Hidden Premise: Experience as Theory

Modern political science, notwithstanding its universalist vocabulary, has developed primarily from Western historical experience. The conceptual frameworks through which political awareness and political participation are theorized have been shaped by specific socio-political conditions, including the rise of the modern nation-state, conflicts between monarchy and citizenry, church–state struggles, industrial capitalism, class mobilization, and the institutionalization of electoral democracy (Skinner, 1978; Weber, 1978). These experiences have decisively influenced how political life is conceptualized, measured, and evaluated within the discipline.

As a consequence, Western political theory often treats its own historical trajectory as a generalizable template, implicitly assuming that political awareness emerges through the conflictual assertion of rights against authority and that political participation is most authentically expressed through engagement with centralized state institutions. These assumptions are embedded in dominant analytical categories and research methodologies and are frequently applied across societies with distinct civilizational trajectories, producing not merely comparative imbalance but epistemic distortion (Kaviraj, 2010).

One manifestation of this distortion is the uncritical application of Western theoretical *bricoleurs*, particularly Marxist class analysis, to the study of Bharatiya political history. Developed in response to the conditions of industrial Europe, class-based frameworks often recast ancient Indian kingship as inherently exploitative and feudal, positioning rulers as "haves" opposed to an oppressed populace. Such interpretations persist despite extensive

textual and inscriptional evidence indicating that kingship in Bharat was institutionally constrained by *Dharma* and *Rājadharma*, which imposed ethical obligations, welfare responsibilities, and mechanisms of social accountability (Jayaswal, 1943; Altekar, 1958).

This epistemic mismatch is evident even in texts that are explicitly realist in orientation. In the *Arthaśāstra*, Kauṭilya defines kingship not as unrestrained domination but as trusteeship, asserting that the king's welfare is inseparable from that of his subjects (*Arthaśāstra* 1.19.34). He further warns that rulers who oppress their people invite political collapse (*Arthaśāstra* 4.13), indicating a clear mechanism of accountability grounded in ethical governance rather than class antagonism (Kangle, 1969).

Comparable constraints on authority are articulated in the *Manusmṛti*, which portrays the king as a moral guardian bound to protect society and subject to ethical judgment for failure (*Manusmṛti* 7.35–36; 8.304). The *Mahābhārata*, particularly the *Śānti Parva*, advances a similar logic by asserting that rulers who violate *Dharma* forfeit legitimacy and may be abandoned by their people (*Mahābhārata*, *Śānti Parva* 90.24). These formulations emphasize withdrawal of legitimacy rather than rebellion as a central mode of political participation.

Administrative inscriptions further corroborate this framework of accountability. The Uttaramerur inscriptions of the tenth century CE detail procedures for local self-governance, including disqualification of corrupt officials, public audits, and removal for misconduct. As noted by Nilakanta Sastri, these records reveal a highly organized system of local governance with explicit norms of public oversight, directly challenging assumptions that ancient Indian polity lacked mechanisms of participation or scrutiny (Nilakanta Sastri, 1955).

Scholarly assessments reinforce this interpretation. Jayaswal argues that absolutism in the European sense was absent from the Bharatiya political tradition, while Altekar emphasizes that kings were consistently subject to *Dharma* and public opinion. Even critical leftist historians such as Romila Thapar acknowledge that political legitimacy in ancient India depended upon moral performance and conformity to ethical norms (Thapar, 2002).

Taken together, these examples illustrate a broader methodological problem. When Western political experience is treated as the anchoring point for universal theory, societies whose political consciousness evolved through different ethical and institutional logics are misinterpreted. The divergence between Western and Bharatiya political traditions reflects not developmental lag but civilizational difference. Recognizing this distinction is essential for understanding political awareness and political participation in Bharat without forcing them into frameworks shaped by historically specific Western conditions.

III. Conceptual Fixation: How Western Experience Became Universal

The conceptual vocabulary that dominates modern political science, rights, liberty, equality, justice, citizenship, sovereignty, and participation, did not emerge simultaneously or universally. These concepts were articulated incrementally by Western political thinkers in response to specific historical disruptions, each seeking to resolve crises of authority, order, and legitimacy within European societies. Over time, these context-bound solutions were abstracted into general political principles and came to function as universal analytical anchors (Skinner, 1978).

The problem of political obligation and sovereignty was most starkly formulated by Thomas Hobbes, whose *Leviathan* emerged from the experience of civil war in seventeenth-century England. Hobbes conceptualized political awareness as recognition of the necessity of absolute authority to escape a violent state of nature, and political participation as a foundational but terminal act of consent, after which political agency largely dissolves into obedience (Hobbes, 1996). In contrast, John Locke grounded political legitimacy in natural rights, framing political awareness as rights-consciousness and participation as conditional consent, including the moral authority to resist unjust rule (Locke, 1988).

The question of obligation was further refined by David Hume, who rejected contractual accounts in favor of habit, convention, and utility, thereby minimizing participatory expectations and emphasizing institutional stability over moral principle (Hume, 1987). Jean-Jacques Rousseau, responding to Enlightenment anxieties about freedom and authority, reimagined political participation as continuous moral engagement with the collective through the concept of the general will, though his model presupposed small, culturally homogeneous communities capable of sustained civic deliberation (Rousseau, 1997). Enlightenment critiques of authority were further sharpened by figures such as Voltaire, who linked political awareness primarily to resistance against clerical domination and dogma rather than to ethical obligation or social harmony.

The nineteenth century introduced a radically different framework through Karl Marx, who recast political awareness as class consciousness and political participation as collective struggle against economic exploitation. While analytically powerful within the context of industrial capitalism, Marx's framework presupposed antagonistic class relations as the primary motor of political life and has often been uncritically extended to societies with distinct social and economic structures (Marx, 1976).

Through these thinkers, Western political thought crystallized a model in which political

awareness is understood primarily as consciousness of rights, interests, or class position, and political participation as engagement, often adversarial, with centralized state power. These historically situated formulations were gradually detached from their contexts and re-presented as neutral, universal categories suitable for comparative analysis.

Parallel and earlier political reflections in the Indian intellectual tradition articulate fundamentally different assumptions about political order, awareness, and participation. In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, political authority is embedded within *ṛta*, a cosmic and moral order that precedes both ruler and subject, situating kingship as a ritual-ethical function rather than a contractual or coercive arrangement. Political awareness, within this framework, entails recognition of one's role within an ordered whole rather than assertion against authority (Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa). Early Vedic assemblies such as *sabha* and *samiti* similarly emphasize deliberation, consensus (*saṃmati*), and collective alignment rather than adversarial competition.

Ancient Indian political thought thus resists the individual–state dichotomy central to Western theory. Authority is neither absolute, purely contractual, nor fundamentally antagonistic; it is relational, conditional, and ethically bounded. Political awareness is cultivated through socialization, ritual practice, and moral instruction rather than ideological mobilization.

The divergence between these traditions demonstrates that Western political concepts were not incorrect answers to universal questions but context-specific responses to particular historical problems. Their elevation to universal analytical standards occurred through abstraction, institutionalization, and global intellectual dominance rather than through demonstrated cross-civilizational applicability. Recognizing this distinction allows political science to separate genuinely universal concerns, such as legitimacy, order, and accountability, from historically contingent conceptual solutions, enabling the study of political awareness and participation without reducing civilizational difference to analytical deficiency.

IV. Colonial Translation and Epistemic Loss

Once Western political concepts acquired the status of universal analytical categories, their global diffusion occurred not merely through intellectual exchange but through institutionalized processes of colonial governance and education. In Bharat, colonial rule did not simply introduce new political institutions; it reorganized the epistemic conditions

through which political awareness and political participation were conceptualized, taught, and evaluated. This transformation operated through what may be described as *colonial translation*, the systematic re-coding of indigenous political knowledge into Western conceptual categories (Cohn, 1996).

Colonial translation functioned on the assumption that Indian society could be understood, classified, and governed through frameworks developed in Europe. Indigenous concepts were not engaged on their own epistemic terms but rendered intelligible only insofar as they could be mapped onto Western equivalents. Categories such as *dharma*, *rājadharma*, *sabha*, *samiti*, and *svadharma* were translated into moral, religious, or customary notions, thereby stripping them of their political content. What had functioned as comprehensive frameworks of political order were reduced to cultural residues peripheral to "proper" politics (Kaviraj, 2010).

This epistemic restructuring was most explicitly articulated in colonial educational policy. In his 1835 *Minute on Indian Education*, Thomas Babington Macaulay dismissed indigenous knowledge systems as inferior to European sciences and political thought, advocating English education as the foundation of intellectual instruction in India. The objective was not merely administrative efficiency but the production of an intermediary class trained to internalize Western categories and apply them to Indian society (Macaulay, 1835/1995). Political awareness, within this framework, came to be defined as familiarity with Western political ideals and institutions rather than engagement with indigenous political traditions.

Colonial historiography further reinforced this displacement. James Mill, in *The History of British India*, portrayed Indian political life as despotic, static, and irrational, evaluating it against Enlightenment standards of progress and representation. Such judgments were based not on engagement with indigenous sources but on normative assumptions derived from European historical experience (Mill, 1817/1990). This historiographical tradition normalized a developmental narrative in which political awareness and participation were presumed to emerge in India only through colonial modernity.

Colonial administrative practices deepened this epistemic shift. Centralized bureaucratic governance subordinated decentralized and socially embedded institutions to colonial authority, transforming participatory practices into instruments of administration rather than expressions of political agency. Political awareness increasingly became associated with engagement with the colonial state, petitions, legal appeals, and later electoral mechanisms,

while indigenous modes of participation receded from analytical recognition (Dirks, 2001).

Importantly, colonial translation did not eliminate indigenous political practices; it redefined the criteria by which political awareness itself was recognized. Forms of political consciousness grounded in ethical obligation, communal deliberation, and moral sanction were rendered epistemically invisible because they did not conform to the dominant analytical grammar. This legacy persisted into postcolonial political science, which often inherited Western frameworks as neutral scientific tools, reproducing deficit narratives about indigenous political life.

Understanding colonial translation as an epistemic process is therefore essential for re-examining political awareness and political participation in Bharat. It reveals that the marginalization of indigenous political frameworks resulted not from their inadequacy but from their displacement by a universalized conceptual regime. Recognizing this displacement is a necessary step toward reconstructing analytical frameworks capable of engaging Bharatiya political life on its own epistemic terms.

V. Indigenous Political Epistemology: How Political Awareness Is Constituted in Bharat

Within the Bharatiya civilizational framework, political awareness is not constituted as mere information about rulers, institutions, or laws, nor is it primarily expressed through ideological articulation or rights-consciousness. Rather, political awareness emerges as an epistemic condition grounded in ethical cognition, social responsibility, and lived experience. It is cultivated through participation in an ordered social life rather than through episodic engagement with the state, and thus precedes formal political structures rather than deriving legitimacy from them.

Indigenous political epistemology situates awareness within a broader knowledge framework integrating perception *(pratyakṣa),* inference (*anumāna*), normative memory (*smṛti*), conduct (*ācāra*), and experiential realization (*anubhava*). Knowledge of political order, within this schema, is embedded in practice rather than abstracted into ideology. Individuals become politically aware not by asserting claims against authority but by internalizing roles, obligations, and limits within a moral and social order structured by *dharma* (Sharma, 2000; Radhakrishnan, 1951). Political awareness is therefore relational rather than oppositional, and integrative rather than adversarial.

This epistemic orientation produces a distinct conception of political consciousness.

Awareness involves recognition of the ethical boundaries of authority, reciprocal obligations between ruler and society, and collective responsibility for maintaining order. Such awareness does not depend on constant articulation or mobilization; it operates through internalized norms, social expectations, and shared moral evaluation. Political knowledge is thus distributed socially and transmitted through everyday practice rather than concentrated institutionally or ideologically (Srinivas, 1980).

Crucially, this framework dissolves the sharp separation between the political and the ethical that characterizes much of modern Western political theory. In the Bharatiya tradition, politics is not an autonomous domain governed solely by power or interest but is embedded within a larger moral cosmos (*ṛta–dharma*). Political awareness is therefore sustained continuously through conduct, deliberation, and social regulation rather than confined to moments of crisis or contestation (Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa).

Recognizing political awareness in this epistemic sense allows political life to be understood beyond state-centric and rights-based models. It reveals a form of political consciousness that is neither passive nor deficient but differently constituted—privileging ethical responsibility over ideological assertion and social coherence over perpetual confrontation. This indigenous epistemological grounding provides the foundation upon which political participation in Bharat must be analyzed and theorized.

VI. Society as the Primary Political Site

A distinctive feature of Bharatiya political epistemology is the location of political awareness and participation primarily within society rather than the state. Unlike modern Western frameworks that treat political consciousness as emerging through interaction with centralized institutions, Bharatiya political thought assumes that society precedes the state both temporally and normatively. Political order is grounded in *dharma*, which operates as a social-ethical principle regulating conduct across familial, occupational, and communal life, independent of formal political authority (Sharma, 2000).

This social grounding of political awareness is evident in early Vedic and Brāhmaṇical literature. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* situates authority within *ṛta*, a cosmic and moral order that binds rulers and subjects alike, thereby locating political legitimacy outside the sovereign's will. Political awareness, within this framework, consists in recognizing one's place within an ordered whole rather than asserting claims against authority. Similarly, references to *sabha* and *samiti* in Vedic sources indicate deliberative spaces embedded within society, functioning prior to and alongside kingship (Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa).

Classical political treatises reinforce this orientation. In the *Arthaśāstra*, while the state is acknowledged as necessary, governance is shown to depend upon social stability, ethical conduct, and local regulation. Kauṭilya's emphasis on village administration, guild autonomy, and customary norms indicates that political participation was distributed across social institutions rather than monopolized by central authority (Kangle, 1969).

Modern scholarship corroborates this societal embedding of political life. K. P. Jayaswal argues that ancient Indian polity functioned through a balance between royal authority and popular institutions, while M. N. Srinivas demonstrates how norms, reputation, and collective sanction operated as effective mechanisms of social regulation, often more influential than formal law (Jayaswal, 1943; Srinivas, 1980). Locating political awareness within society thus challenges the assumption that meaningful participation must be state-facing or adversarial, revealing a form of political engagement that was continuous, decentralized, and embedded in everyday life.

VII. Dandanīti and Rājadharma: Power, Accountability, and Ethical Restraint

Bharatiya political thought does not deny the necessity of power; it disciplines it. This discipline is articulated through the twin concepts of *Dandanīti* (the science of coercive authority) and *Rājadharma* (the ethical obligations of rule), which together constitute a framework that balances order, welfare, and accountability without presupposing permanent opposition or contractual consent. Political awareness within this framework includes understanding the legitimate use of force, the moral limits of authority, and the social consequences of transgression.

In the *Arthaśāstra*, *daṇḍa* is recognized as essential to social order but is repeatedly subordinated to ethical purpose and public welfare. Kauṭilya's realism presents authority not as domination but as trusteeship, where legitimacy depends upon outcomes aligned with *dharma* rather than coercive capacity alone (Kangle, 1969). Political participation, in this schema, includes evaluation of ethical performance and withdrawal of legitimacy when restraint fails, rather than continuous resistance to power.

Rājadharma further embeds authority within a moral order that precedes both ruler and state. In the *Mahābhārata*, particularly the *Śānti Parva*, kingship is explicitly conditional upon adherence to *dharma*, with moral failure constituting grounds for loss of legitimacy. This represents a mode of accountability distinct from electoral sanction, sustained through ethical conformity and social approval rather than procedural validation (Mahābhārata, Śānti Parva).

The *Śukranīti* reinforces this logic by emphasizing restraint, consultation, and proportional

punishment as conditions of stable rule, portraying power as relational and revocable rather than absolute. Modern scholars confirm this interpretation. A. S. Altekar notes that ancient Indian kingship was consistently subject to moral law and public opinion, while K. P. Jayaswal emphasizes the role of assemblies and social bodies in limiting royal authority (Altekar, 1958; Jayaswal, 1943).

Together, *Dandanīti* and *Rājadharma* reveal a political epistemology in which power is legitimate only when ethically exercised and socially sanctioned. Political awareness consists in recognizing these limits, and political participation manifests through sustaining, evaluating, and correcting authority without presuming constant confrontation as the sole mode of engagement.

VIII. Political Participation Without Adversarialism

Modern political theory frequently equates political participation with opposition, contestation, and visible intervention against authority. Within this framework, dissent, protest, and electoral competition are treated as primary indicators of political engagement. However, this adversarial model reflects a specific Western historical experience shaped by struggles against absolutist power and does not exhaust the possible forms through which participation may operate (Hirschman, 1970; Tilly, 2004).

Bharatiya political thought articulates a different conception of participation—one that does not presume perpetual conflict between ruler and society. Political participation is understood as co-maintenance of order rather than continuous resistance to authority. Participation manifests through deliberation, counsel, ethical expectation, and social sanction, functioning within a framework where authority is already normatively constrained by dharma (Mahābhārata, Śānti Parva). In this context, the absence of constant confrontation does not indicate political apathy but may instead signify successful ethical regulation of power.

Classical texts explicitly recognize non-adversarial modes of participation. The Mahābhārata emphasizes that legitimacy depends upon moral conduct and social approval, and that withdrawal of support, rather than rebellion, is the appropriate response to sustained ethical failure (Mahābhārata, Śānti Parva 90–93). Similarly, Dandanīti traditions frame participation as the capacity of society to evaluate, advise, and sanction authority without destabilizing social order (Kangle, 1969).

This model aligns with sociological observations regarding normative regulation. M. N. Srinivas notes that in traditional Indian society, social sanction, reputation, and moral censure

often functioned as effective constraints on authority, reducing the need for overt confrontation (Srinivas, 1980). Participation thus operates through embedded social mechanisms rather than episodic political mobilization.

Crucially, this framework challenges the assumption that political silence necessarily reflects exclusion or disempowerment. In Bharatiya political epistemology, silence may indicate consent, stability, or ethical satisfaction rather than political disengagement. Political participation, therefore, cannot be reduced to visible opposition alone; it must also be understood through practices that sustain order, enforce accountability, and preserve legitimacy without adversarial escalation.

IX. Institutions of Participation: Expression, Not Origin

In Bharatiya political life, institutions of participation did not create political awareness; they expressed and organized a pre-existing ethical and social consciousness. This distinction is crucial. Whereas modern political theory often treats institutions, parliaments, parties, elections, as the primary generators of participation, Bharatiya frameworks presuppose political awareness as socially cultivated and institutionally articulated rather than institutionally produced.

Early textual and historical evidence indicates a plural and decentralized institutional ecology. References to sabha and samiti in Vedic literature denote deliberative spaces embedded within social life, functioning alongside, and sometimes independent of, centralized authority (Satavalekar, 1964). These bodies did not operate as oppositional legislatures but as forums for counsel, consensus-building, and normative alignment. Participation here was role-specific and situational, reflecting social competence rather than uniform political rights.

This institutional plurality persisted across historical periods. Guilds (śreṇīs) regulated economic life, resolved disputes, and represented collective interests without reliance on state mediation (Sharma, 2009). Monastic assemblies in Buddhist and Jain traditions practiced collective decision-making through codified procedures, emphasizing consensus and disciplinary accountability (Dīgha Nikāya; Vinaya Piṭaka). Temple administrations, evidenced through inscriptional records, managed land, labor, and welfare functions, often with community oversight, indicating sustained public involvement in governance beyond royal courts (Nilakanta Sastri, 1955).

The significance of these institutions lies not in their resemblance to modern democratic bodies but in their function as interfaces between ethical awareness and political

order.

Participation was neither episodic nor homogenized; it varied according to social role, institutional context, and moral expectation. As K. P. Jayaswal observes, ancient Indian polity operated through a balance of royal authority and corporate bodies, with no single institution monopolizing political participation (Jayaswal, 1943).

Understanding these institutions as expressions rather than origins of participation prevents analytical distortion. It reveals a political order in which awareness was cultivated socially and participation institutionalized plurally, challenging state-centric and electoral assumptions about political engagement.

X. Welfare, Responsibility, and Political Awareness

A critical distinction between Bharatiya and modern Western frameworks of political participation lies in how welfare is conceptualized and secured. In much of Western political theory, welfare is frequently understood as an outcome of political mobilization—achieved through rights-claims, electoral bargaining, or collective pressure on the state. Political participation, in this view, becomes instrumental to extracting concessions from authority (Marshall, 1950; Esping-Andersen, 1990).

By contrast, Bharatiya political thought treats welfare as an intrinsic obligation of authority**,** grounded in *dharma* rather than contingent upon popular agitation. Political awareness includes an understanding of what rulers owe society, independent of whether such obligations are actively demanded. Classical political texts repeatedly emphasize that governance is legitimate only insofar as it secures material well-being, social stability, and moral order (Kangle, 1969). This orientation alters the meaning of political participation. Participation is not limited to mobilization or protest but operates through expectation, evaluation, and ethical judgment. Society participates politically by holding rulers to normative standards, assessing performance against moral obligations, and withdrawing legitimacy when welfare responsibilities are persistently violated. Such participation is continuous and evaluative rather than episodic and confrontational.

Historians of Indian polity have noted that this framework produced durable expectations of state responsibility without necessitating constant political intervention. A. S. Altekar observes that rulers were judged less by popular acclaim than by conformity to welfare-oriented governance and public opinion (Altekar, 1958). Welfare, therefore, functioned as a criterion of legitimacy rather than as a reward for participation.

Understanding welfare as obligation clarifies why political awareness in Bharat cannot be

reduced to visible mobilization. Awareness operates through normative expectation and social evaluation, sustaining accountability even in the absence of overt political contestation.

XI. Reversal of the Gaze: What Western Political Theory Cannot Explain

Having examined political awareness and participation through indigenous epistemological frameworks, it becomes possible to reverse the analytical gaze and assess the limits of dominant Western political theory. This reversal is not an act of rejection but of diagnostic clarification. When applied as universal models, Western frameworks encounter persistent difficulty in explaining political orders where legitimacy, accountability, and participation operate without electoral centrality, permanent opposition, or rights-based mobilization.

Classical Western theory tends to associate legitimacy with consent expressed through formal mechanisms. From John Locke's emphasis on conditional consent to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's notion of the general will, participation is imagined as an active, visible, and often adversarial engagement with authority. Even realist and institutional approaches, such as those advanced by Max Weber, privilege legality and bureaucratic rationality as the basis of legitimate rule. These models struggle to account for political systems where authority is ethically bounded, socially evaluated, and sustained through moral performance rather than procedural validation.

Similarly, theories of political participation grounded in mobilization and contention, developed in response to European and American experiences, often equate political silence with exclusion or apathy (Tilly, 2004; Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995). Such assumptions fail to recognize contexts in which participation operates through non-adversarial mechanisms such as counsel, normative sanction, and withdrawal of legitimacy. The Bharatiya case illustrates that political engagement need not be continuously visible to be effective; it may function through socially embedded expectations that discipline power indirectly.

Western political theory also encounters difficulty explaining accountability without institutionalized opposition. In Bharatiya frameworks, accountability is sustained through ethical obligation (*dharma*), social reputation, and moral judgment rather than through permanent contestation. These modes of regulation fall outside the explanatory reach of theories that conflate accountability with electoral competition or legal enforcement alone.

The inability of Western political theory to adequately theorize such arrangements does not indicate their absence or inferiority. Rather, it reveals the limits of frameworks derived from specific historical experiences when applied universally. Recognizing these limits is essential

for developing a more plural and epistemically grounded understanding of political awareness and participation across civilizational contexts.

XII. Implications for Contemporary Political Analysis

The foregoing analysis has significant implications for how political awareness and political participation are assessed in contemporary India. Dominant evaluative frameworks, largely inherited from Western political science, continue to measure awareness through indicators such as voting behavior, ideological articulation, protest participation, and engagement with formal state institutions. While these indicators capture certain dimensions of political life, they risk misrepresenting political consciousness in contexts where participation is ethically embedded, socially distributed, and institutionally plural.

Empirical assessments that rely exclusively on behavioral visibility often interpret the absence of overt mobilization as apathy or democratic deficit. However, as demonstrated in the Bharatiya case, political awareness may operate through normative expectation, social evaluation, and moral judgment rather than through constant state-facing action. This epistemic mismatch has consequences for policy design, governance evaluation, and democratic discourse, where citizens are frequently judged against standards that do not align with indigenous political grammars.

Contemporary political engagement in India continues to reflect layered forms of participation, ranging from community deliberation and social sanction to selective electoral involvement, that cannot be adequately captured by adversarial or procedural models alone. Scholars such as Partha Chatterjee have noted that much of postcolonial political participation operates outside formal civil society, challenging liberal assumptions about political visibility

(Chatterjee, 2004). Recognizing these patterns requires expanding analytical tools rather than dismissing non-conforming practices as residual or informal.

Re-centering political analysis on epistemology rather than prescription allows for a more accurate understanding of how political awareness is cultivated and expressed. Such an approach does not reject modern democratic institutions but situates them within a broader civilizational context, enabling political science to engage contemporary Indian politics without reproducing deficit narratives rooted in conceptual misfit.

CONCLUSION

This study has argued that political awareness and political participation in Bharat cannot be

adequately understood through conceptual frameworks derived exclusively from Western historical experience. By tracing the epistemic foundations of Bharatiya political thought, the paper demonstrates that political consciousness was constituted through ethical cognition, social responsibility, and experiential knowledge rather than through rights-centric or adversarial engagement alone. Participation operated through decentralized institutions, moral evaluation of authority, and socially embedded mechanisms of accountability.

The analysis challenges linear and universalist assumptions that equate political maturity with specific institutional forms or behavioral expressions. Difference, in this context, does not signify deficiency but reflects an alternative civilizational grammar of political life. By reversing the analytical gaze, the paper highlights the limits of dominant political theory when applied uncritically across contexts and underscores the need for epistemic plurality within political science.

Reconstructing indigenous political epistemology is not an exercise in revivalism or rejection of modernity. Rather, it is an effort to expand the conceptual horizons of political inquiry so that political awareness and participation may be understood as historically grounded, culturally embedded, and theoretically diverse phenomena. Such an expansion is essential for developing a more inclusive and accurate understanding of political life in India and beyond.

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