All societies have traditions, but only a few have traditions which are central, overpowering, and vital. These are the traditional societies, the whipping boys for students of political development. Their pasts are supposed to have a stranglehold on their presents and their futures, and the pursuit of modern statehood is supposed to be outside the scope of their ancient ideas of citizenship. Yet, some traditional societies seem to take better advantage of the civilizations they represent. In these societies, the traditions are not merely dominant and living, but they are also sufficiently pliable, sufficiently complex and sufficiently self-confident to accommodate the society’s efforts to redesign its major institutions. Unlike other traditional societies these do not allow their traditions to be supplanted by modern inputs; instead, they continuously try to give old meanings to these new experiences.

Ostensibly, such societies are impervious to externally induced changes. Their very cultural autonomy forces them to carry alone, even at the nadir of their strength and dynamism, both the immense burdens and advantages of their traditions. According to some, these societies live by an awareness of this fact; according to others, they are doomed by it. But all agree that any discussion of the culture of politics in such a society must take into account not only the indigenous categories of analysis, but also the society’s own priorities and its struggle to learn from its own history whenever possible and to free itself from that history whenever necessary.

Political Culture as Choice
At different times in their political history, a people choose to remember different features of their past and to emphasise different elements of their culture. One characteristic of a protean civilization such as India’s is that it has many pasts; depending on the needs of each age, the nation brings a particular past into its conscious-
ness. There is much variation within a certain tradition—for example, from the intense, earnest pacifism of Gandhi, with its extremely limited application of the principle of unavoidable violence, to the apparently sanctimonious pacifism of Nehru, combining a universalist humanism with national self-interest, to modern self-confident nationalism, which clearly sees pacifism and nonalignment as instruments of state policy. In this respect, cultural history is a projection: one reads into it or takes out of it according to present-day needs.

What aspects of its historical civilization has Indian society been forced to emphasise—or de-emphasise—while building a political community in recent times? Which subcultures, with what traditional skills and idioms, have been given salience by the changing political needs of the community? These two questions mark a vantage ground from which one may look at the contemporary culture of Indian politics as not simply a summation of the society’s self-defined political values, but also as a collection of phase-adequate modalities of reaching, changing, or rejecting these values. The critical dynamic is the manner in which the values and the modalities have been structured into temporary gestalts by the typical problems faced by Indian politics at each phase of its development.

From such a vantage ground, it also becomes clear that some of the major concerns of past ages are fast losing their relevance for contemporary India, while others, which have been ‘recessive’ in earlier phases, are acquiring a new importance. This process of selection involves the society’s-unique orientation to politicization and political participation. We may conceive of this orientation as including four interrelated features.

The first of these features of the ‘Indian system’ is the traditional concept of politics as an amoral, ruthless statecraft, or a dispassionate pursuit of self-interest to which many of the norms of the nonpolitical sphere do not apply. The memory of the long period during which high politics in India remained the prerogative of alien rulers confirms the image of politics as far removed from day-to-day life. Moreover, Indian society is organized more around its culture than around its politics. It accepts political changes without being excessively defensive, without feeling that its very existence is being challenged, and with the confidence—often unjustified—that politics touches only its less important self.

Secondly, the concept of dharma or piety specifies different spheres of life as different systems of ethics; it is taken for granted that the values governing politics would be largely inconsistent with those governing other areas of life. At critical moments, therefore, the anomic forces released by political changes do not easily percolate into other areas. When the political sector becomes threateningly disjunctive, or begins to negate some of the major assumptions of the society, the traditional lifestyle is not dramatically disoriented. It is this segmentation which allows Indian society to incorporate the new and the original, by containing them within small compartmentalized areas of behaviour.

Thirdly, like the Sinic and Islamic, Indian civilization considers other cultures inferior; but unlike the Sinic and Islamic, this attitude does not extend to the political sphere. Learning statecraft from others is never precluded, and exogenous political ideas never seem diabolical instruments of subversion.

Finally, though Indian society is organized around its culture, this culture lacks an authoritative centre; notwithstanding a priestly caste, there is not even an organized religion. At various times, this has allowed politics to have different functional links with certain primordial groups and elements of the great tradition. For instance, early in the nineteenth century, when politics most needed a new structure of legitimacy to give meaning to the relationship between the native elite and colonial rulers, and a capacity to redefine the concept of participation in the till then alien culture of the growing modern sector, certain caste-specific skills (for example, Brahmanic skills) operating within certain institutionally more open regional subcultures (for example, Bengal) became immensely valuable assets. At a later time, these same skills and subcultural backgrounds became useless, and even liabilities. The sacred texts have also been used selectively by different groups at different times: the first generation of modernist reformers depended heavily on the Vedas and Upanishads; later, Gandhi and the nativists mainly drew support from the less universalist Gita. Such readjustments explain why politics in India often seems to underwrite the traditional cultural and social divisions. The point to remember is that the political process has underwritten different, and frequently antipodal, subcultures or strata at various times.

It is, perhaps, this particular combination of cultural forces
which has reversed the relationship between society and politics in India and given the culture of Indian politics its distinctiveness. Dominant models of political sociology define the ‘culture of politics’ to be a function of social, cultural, and psychological processes. In a country where, today, a major political goal of the elites is to alter Indian social institutions, cultural life, and shared personality traits, one is forced, at each historical phase, to re-examine the relationship between politics and society to see which system is the current pace-setter. Recently in India, politics, supported by the state’s authority, has played the role which economic and scientific changes played in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe, and which the information and media system, youth, and university cultures are increasingly playing in many Western polities. It has acted as the society’s major means of self-correction.

**Power, Authority and Dissent**

A society has not only a unique organization of power, but also a unique concept of power. Contrary to popular belief, concern with power was never low in traditional India; if anything, themes of power were ubiquitous in the modal life style. The uniqueness of the Indian concept of power lay in its strong ‘private’ connotations. The most respected form of power was power over self — self-control, particularly regulation of one’s instinctual and materialistic self.

Moreover, though rulers were recognized as legitimately wielding authority, the concept of this authority was ill defined. There was little philosophical debate on issues such as the limits to political power, its role in society, and the duties and functions of those engaged in politics. The individual was largely free to choose his authority and follow his own beliefs, rather than to try and actualize collective values. The idea of an indigenous, central, public authority exercising political power did not have much currency, because of Hindu society’s tenuous relationship, since the Middle Ages, with a succession of alien political orders, and because of the large-scale Hindu withdrawal from high politics. These experiences gradually delegitimized ‘external’ powers that had to be attained through competition and intervention in the real world; encouraged the tolerance of the authority of those who already held it, and the rejection of the concept of challenging authority from outside.

This concept of power has two contradictory implications. On the one hand, the absence of any moral sanction for the ambition to rule makes political power a somewhat illegitimate possession. There is always some pressure on the rulers to indulge in the language of conspicuous asceticism and self-sacrifice, and to vend even the most trivial politics as part of a grand moral design — as if power over one’s own self, the moral self dominating the self-seeking instinctual self — legitimizes one’s political power. On the other hand, politics is also recognized as amoral statecraft, outside the compass of everyday living; and although political leaders are expected to assume a self-righteous tone, there is also a certain cynicism about their moralism. Gandhi’s search for an authentic ‘moral politics’, however Indian or Hindu it may look, was actually a rebellion against this tradition of politics.

What, then, are the cultural checks against absolutism? What are the main sources of dissent? These are difficult questions to answer in a society where the time-worn response to dissent is to neutralize it by absorbing it into the mainstream, where defiance of authority aims not to establish an alternative power structure but to shift the locus of consensus within the existing authority system, and where the dominant tradition is ultimately that of ‘dissent through authority’.

In other words, the tradition in India is to alter the dominant culture from within, by showing dissent to be a part of orthodoxy or by reinterpreting orthodoxy in terms of the needs of dissent. This is especially true of ideological deviations or innovations, the type of challenge the society has repeatedly faced and become experienced in handling. For instance, new political ideas have always been acceptable in India, welcomed as different aspects of a larger indivisible truth, and incorporated into the polity. Even when certain political polarities were not reconcilable within politics, they could at least be accommodated within the larger cultural framework.

The creative significance of this attitude to ideological dissent is obvious, but there are liabilities too. While abstract idea systems are attractive to the Indian mind, their practical applications are
not. In fact, a slight contempt attaches to ideas that ‘work’ or that can be operationalized or tested. As a result, activism and commitment in the public sphere tend to lack prestige and there are few inner pressures to actualize one’s ideas and ideals.

The traditional relationship between authority and dissent has another aspect. Charismatic leaders are expected to represent not only the majority of people, but all people. Thus, the anti-establishment, too, must be reflected by the legitimate wielders of power. Nehru and the early Indira Gandhi symbolized something more than the axial authority; they also represented the opposition in their fight against what they and others saw as the retrograde pillars of the establishment within the government. Such an attitude frequently reduces opposition to a game, albeit a serious one, played by permissible rules. Opposition from outside the consensual system does not seem opposition at all, but an attack on the ‘true dissenters’: the power-holders themselves.

Politics and Intellectuals

At one plane, a nation is an idea. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was the intellectual elite — Brahmanic, urban-centered, and pro-British — who made current the idea of an Indian polity; India as a political community was, in one sense, their discovery. It is not surprising that intellectuals remained the main protagonists in Indian politics until a few decades ago.

The first generation of intellectuals in politics believed that this idea of India, and of Indianness, must include a new integrated cultural identity. And they spent the first half of the nineteenth century trying to create a new basis for politics by redefining the older concept of Indianness to make it compatible with ‘modern’ citizenship. Perhaps this was a red herring in a society organized around its culture; it might have been easier to align politics, a more peripheral part of life, with the existing culture. Perhaps in a compartmentalizing society, this search for congruence was unnecessary. Perhaps such an aggressively ‘modernist’ position was unavoidable in the first phase of colonialism. The fact of the matter was that the impact of the intellectuals was confined to the small, urbanized, Western-educated, upper caste groups to whom the economic and social changes initiated by the Raj offered an entirely new life style. It is to them that the idea of India as a political community made full sense.

This attempt to alter the Indian’s cultural self soon created an inward-looking defensiveness, an effort to protect self-esteem, and a controversy over the extent to which the Indian political identity could be re-defined without full-scale Westernization. Borrowing from the West continued, but it had to be done covertly and only when it could be justified as a resurrection of India’s past. One factor alone remained unchanged: the politics of cultural self-affirmation continued to underwrite existing modes of political participation and leadership. Because the debates centered on the revival or reinterpretation of India’s past, its sacred texts, and its dominant religious core, the reformers of political culture remained those who were traditionally its best interpreters, who enjoyed an inherited right to be so, and who were equipped by their socialization and education to be such interpreters, namely, the Brahmanic literati.

Not surprisingly, as soon as the semblance of participatory politics evolved in India, the culture of Indian politics became aggressively anti-intellectual. Gandhian anti-intellectualism, for example, was basically an attempt to shift the centre of political culture from liberal universalism and reinterpretations of Sanskrit texts to the hitherto-peripheral, non-Brahmanic cultures of the new participants in politics. These little traditions did not require frequent reassessment to be made modern; they were intrinsically ‘modern’ if not always in content, at least in the flexibility and scepticism with which the content was handled. Making a virtue of those elements of Indian culture which had embarrassed the earlier modernizers, the Gandhian movement, with its stress on social activism and a pragmatic ethic, made redundant all abiding concerns with metaphysics.

After independence, Nehru’s half-hearted attempts to find intellectuals a place in politics could not stop the erosion of the role of intellectuals in that sphere. Participation in competitive politics was gradually becoming a full-time job and a vocation with a tradition of its own; it could not but lead, at least in its earlier stages, to a dangerous undervaluation of all intellectual assessments of policies, ‘educated’ statecraft, political information processing, and ‘informed guesses’. A more populist political culture, a growing faith in realpolitik and the persistence of the old
belief in the separability of statecraft from intellectual activity continue to sustain this anti-intellectualism. There is still an all-
round unwillingness to recognize that political decision making may involve a new awareness and use of knowledge, in a world where information and communications systems are already per-
forming the pace-setting role once performed by economic entre-
preneurship in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and imperialism in the nineteenth century.

### Politics and Social Hierarchy

To the extent politics is a means of changing the distribution of power, political competition in India has come to mean the process through which the older hierarchies have been rendered more fluid and the individual been given more chances to alter his position in society, irrespective of his niche in the traditional order. Although the plural nature of Indian society has frequently under-
written the primordial collectivities as a basis for mass mobiliza-
tion, these collectivities have been increasingly forced to compete on the basis of equality, not on the basis of their hierarchical status. In this respect, the old social order has been irrevocably damaged.

But politics involves not only the occupation of hierarchical status; it includes also the extent to which the theme of hierarchy permeates a political culture. Indian culture traditionally applied the concept of hierarchy to more aspects of life than did many other cultures. One result of politicization in India has been that, whereas the criteria and incumbents have dramatically changed due to political competition and specially to electoral mobilization, the principle of hierarchy now applies to many more areas of life, including the expanding modern sector.

It is as if the cultural tendency to hierarchize has found in politics a new criterion for social status. Thus the new politics and its bureaucracy have increasingly attracted status-motivated persons and devalued other ‘limited status systems’—traditional, as well as modern. Persons operating within special status hierarchies, which should be at least partially autonomous from the central hierarchy (such as the professions), tend to undervalue their occupations and try to rise in ‘general’ status. An appointment as an inconsequential political or bureaucratic functionary often seems more important than recognition among one’s peers in one’s own area of specialization. The most creative intellectuals are often lost in government departments, frozen at their level of unimportance; influential positions within the educational systems frequently attract gifted scholars away from creative work; and worst of all, the self-esteem of persons not having political power tends to get badly damaged.

It is paradoxical that while politicians have played a creative role by mobilizing the peripheries of society, by partially demolishing an ancient status system and by undermining the earlier social leadership, in the process they have consolidated their power as a group and occupied the apex of a new hierarchy. Today, any activity which is outside the sphere of power politics is by definition low status. Although there are some checks against this trend in the traditional estimate of politics as amoral and politicians as un-
scrupulous, Indian society at the moment is struggling to take certain sectors out of the political arena, to decelerate the tendency of all hierarchies to be dominated by the ‘new class’ of politicians, and to build multiple centres of power and status.

One by-product of these developments is that India has partly avoided the experience of many societies where politics struggles for autonomy from other sectors, such as big business and the military. The influence of non-political sectors on politics is relatively limited in India; with the spread of political knowledge and the destruction of vote banks, it is even less effective. The politician in India now reigns supreme. In fact, the constant emphasis on nonpolitical determination of politics, popularized by some forms of radicalism, has merely encouraged political inaction in India by shifting the responsibility away from the holders of political power.

However, its autonomy from other sectors has not released Indian politics from the stranglehold of its own adjunct: the bureaucracy. If the monistic world-view in India is a means of incorporating the new, the strange and the different, the culture of Indian bureaucracy represents the society’s attempt to ‘hier-
archize away’ the new, the disruptive, and the noxious. The traditional style of containing chaos and fragmentation in India was to fit all contradictions within a new hierarchy compatible with the old order. The nation’s modern bureaucracy embodies this style. The most radical and modern policies, therefore, tend
to be translated by the bureaucracy into posts, rules, and procedures; even attempts to reform the bureaucracy merely generate new bureaucratic structures.

Public Ethics

More than a shared set of political norms, it is the continuing effort to forge these norms that has given the culture of Indian politics its uniqueness. The effort was initiated during the colonial period when many of the political leaders and social reformers sensed the need for a new blueprint of public ethics which would some day fit the needs of a competitive, open, political system, and a public life increasingly dominated by contractual relationships, large systems and modern ideas of citizenship. Perhaps, in a society where politics had mostly remained outside the traditional life style, such a search for a common framework of ethics was inevitable. With so few contact points between the majority of the people and the political structures, there were few opportunities to participate in sectors that required a clearly defined set of public norms. The common man’s subjective orientation to the public sphere, therefore, was dominated by distrust and cynicism. His early growth experiences and social exposures equipped him with ethical criteria congruent with efficient functioning in primordial interpersonal settings — in face-to-face situations, in families and in small systems. And the society’s tendency to stress situation- and time-specific morality — rather than a well-defined set of values cutting across all spheres of life, and deriving sanctity from a well-defined concept of evil, did not allow him to apply his existing concepts of the good and the evil to the political sphere.

No wonder that one of the first tasks which many nineteenth-century reform movements set for themselves was the creation of a new ethic for public life and for impersonal political relationships. The need was felt even more deeply as the elite politics of small, face-to-face, regional groupings gave way to the politics of mass participation, party building, and large-scale political organizations. Predictably, these reform movements emphasised neglected aspects of the sacred texts which had become functional in the new social context. This involved a large measure of Sanskritization, and also some amount of Westernization based on what was seen as the good and ethical aspects of the Western societies and religions. Paradoxically, Westernization was true not only of movements which were ambivalent towards British rule, but also of movements which were systematic protests against the religion, culture, politics, and administrative behaviour of Westerners. This will be obvious to anyone who cares to examine how the various religious movements of the nineteenth century tried to introduce into Hinduism the principles of organization, proselytization, specialized priestly orders, the concept of religion as a principle of political mobilization, a hard sense of history and even, in some cases, a patriarchal God.

Such attempts to set up norms of public behaviour within the frame of Sanskritic traditions and Western Utilitarianism ended with Gandhi, who sought to transcend the Brahmanic norms and to find a new set of values for Indian public life in the folk traditions of the society. In the process, he partly unshackled Indian politics from both the Brahmanic traditions and from imported Western liberalism, between which there had developed such a fine fit.

In searching for norms outside the arena within which the British government, the liberal reformers, and the earlier nationalists were operating, Gandhi represented larger historical forces. By the time he entered politics, the reform movements had already become totally dependent on the colonial government for meaningful intervention in social matters. Not only that; such movements in many cases had become a substitute for political action and a means of avoiding confrontation with the colonial government on basic social issues. Mass politics was bound to destroy them.

Politics as Self-Redefinition

The foregoing sections would seem to suggest that changes in Indian political culture have been initiated along four dimensions or phases; in each of them certain key men and groups introduced changes into everyday politics, as well as into metaphysics.

In the first phase, at the end of the eighteenth century, the universalist, Western-educated, pro-British, reformist, Brahmanic literati — till then the main beneficiaries of the Raj — began their direct onslaught on Indian traditions. Their characteristic political style may be summed up as an attempt to incorporate exogenous cultural elements on pragmatic or intellectual grounds, and then to
justify this integration by appealing to traditional concepts of goodness. While the colonial systems aided this process by underwriting the social class from which the leaders of the reform movements came, indirect support also came from the fact that in an apolitical society, the reformist leadership enjoyed a comfortable autonomy from the masses who in their apathy made few direct demands on the political system. The first phase introduced several themes in the culture of politics: popularization of the idea of the state’s relevance to daily life; the introduction of Hinduism and Indianness as important elements in the Indian elite’s self-identity, and the initiation of a debate on the relationship between Hinduism and politics; the use of the state as a means of reform (thus changing the image of the state from that of an antagonistic or dispassionate outsider on religious issues); and the acceptance of textual Brahmanism as a political force.

When Rammohun Roy (1772-1833) began speaking about Hindus and Indians and Upanishads and Vedas, he was introducing a concept of traditions based not on lokachara or folkways but on textual Brahmanism. This Brahmanism provided, for the first time, a basis for a collective political identity which was more open to new ideas and less fettered by the primordial allegiances and fragmentation of the myriad folk cultures of India. Predominantly integrationist and liberal, it was informed by a certain ‘positivist’ universalism that made sense to a majority of the Indians participating in the public sphere, as well as to a large number of colonial rulers.

**Politics as Self-Affirmation**

During the second half of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth, there emerged a different style of coping with political inputs. The style was mostly a reaction to the synthetism of the first generation of political thinkers who, being the products of a more self-confident age, had not taken adequate care about the feelings of national and cultural inferiority which full-blown colonialism invariably creates.

First, the internalization of Western norms had caused a loss of self-esteem in a sizeable section of the new, growing, urban middle classes; it was a matter of truly coming to believe that they, as Hindus and as Indians, were backward — economically, politically, and, worst of all, morally. The snowballing sense of British racial supremacy fed those feelings. Partly a result of the faster pace of the industrial revolution and scientific and technological changes in Britain, the racialism of the colonial rulers was encouraged by the growing displacement of the British feudal elements by the British middle classes within ruling circles in India. Justifying their chauvinism by referring to the new utilitarian ideas of progress, these British status-seekers sought in the concept of the white man’s burden a counter to their still-gnawing feelings of inferiority in the context of their own society.

But an even more important development was the discovery of Hinduism as an organized religion. The process began with the establishment by Rammohun Roy of the Atmya Sabha in 1815 and Brahmo Sabha in 1828; with the publication by him, between 1815 and 1830, of the first modern translations of the Vedas and the principal Upanishads into Bengali and English; and with the founding, again by Rammohun Roy, of a Brahma church in 1830. For the first time, Hindu religious organizations began to function, at least theoretically, for the entire Hindu community; took into account all spheres of life, and tried to cut across the different castes, sects, orders and their regional variants.

As soon as Roy established the Brahmo Sabha, others started forming counter-organizations, clearly splitting the political culture into the modernist and the revivalist. In the beginning the modernist idiom dominated, but as time passed and as new groups began to enter politics, the revivalist movements began to gain adherents at the expense of the modernist. They seemed better equipped to cope with the growing inferiority feelings of the Indians and more in touch with the mood of the elite.

Although the Brahmo Samaj and its nativist successors, the Arya Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission, denied caste, their style was Brahmanic and their leaders blue-blooded. The new idiom of politics reflected their social origins. It heavily depended on reinterpretations of sacred texts and the past, and its main stress was on demonstrating that many 'Western' features of the modern world were not Western, but actually in their 'purer' form parts of India’s past. In other words, the revivalists, according to them, were not legitimizing the extraneous, but reviving the indigenous.

Who were the main supporters of the revivalist? I do not think
I would be far wrong if I characterize them as urban elites drawn from those exposed to the colonial political economy and social changes, and from the English-educated gentry. Their savage attack on the Western educated, urban, high-caste gentry should not blind us to their origins. Here is Bankim Chandra Chatterji, India’s politically most influential novelist, one of the first to introduce the nativist idiom into nineteenth-century India’s political consciousness, and author of the anthem ‘Bande Mātaram’ — the war cry of both aggressive nationalism and fervent restorationism — writing of the Westernized urban gentlemen, the babus:

The babus will be indefatigable in talk, experts in a particular foreign language, and hostile to their mother tongue. . . . Some highly intelligent babus will be born who will be unable to converse in their mother tongue. [Their] . . . emaciated bony legs will be skilled in escape, their weak hands will be capable of holding pens and receiving salaries, their soft skins will be able to withstand imported boots. . . . Like Vishnu they will have ten incarnations, namely clerk, teacher, Brahmo, accountant, doctor, lawyer, magistrate, landlord, editor and un-employed. . . . They will be Christians to missionaries, Brahmos to the Brahmo leaders, Hindus to their fathers, and atheists to the begging Brahmins. Babus will consume water at home, alcohol at friends’, abuses at the prostitute’s and humiliation at the employer’s.

Who would suspect from this savage attack that the author himself was a district magistrate in the Raj, and an English educated, pro-British, member of the Calcutta gentry?

Bankim Chandra’s self-criticism reveals somewhat more than an individual’s social consciousness. It shows that men like him were something more than mere revivalists; they were trying to lay the foundation of an Indian self-image that would not humiliate the country’s majority of Hindu inhabitants. On the one hand, they were deciding which aspects of Westernization could be included within India’s image of itself without destroying the basic self-regard with which most Indians had lived; on the other, they were rejecting the earlier mode of identifying with the aggressive, victorious British and seeking modern referents within the traditional culture itself. In other words, they were seeking parity, without breaking away from their own historical roots and without accepting the Utilitarian theory of progress.

*Politics as Autonomy Seeking*

The first two phases of India’s politicization were clearly elitist. Changes in economic and political institutions and in public consciousness only seemed to confirm the historical role of the Brahmanic elites as inventors of laws, interpreters of traditions, and ‘sanctifiers’ of new means of livelihood. But gradually, this new Brahmanism became scholastic and rigidly ideological — a depot of Hindu chauvinism on the one hand, and of doctrinaire modernism on the other. Those articulating the idiom had developed a vested interest in colonial politics, which understandably coloured their perception of the political needs of the community. The modernists paid their homage to the alien authorities by identification and imitation; the nativists by compulsive and counterphobic rejection.

It was Gandhi in the 1920’s who began to organize the fragments of a new style into the dominant language of Indian politics. This new style, while continuing to borrow from the Sanskrit world view, emphasized a more pragmatic, businesslike approach to politics which had been latent in the Indian folk cultures. Like many self-confident, partially ‘closed’ peasant cultures, this attitude toward political change was less self-conscious and more autonomous. Gandhi himself, for instance, always claimed to be a sanatani or traditionalist; he never made a secret of his contempt for those who, like Rammohun Roy, had tried to reform Hinduism, because he felt that they were wrongly trying to redefine the Indian way of life. The perversion of the original Indian way of life, Gandhi believed, accounted for the miseries of India. When he initiated new concepts of time, pacifism, or consensualism — and demanded ruthless conformity to them — he was convinced that he was not importing Western ideas to improve traditional values; he was only using authentic Indian concepts. Gandhism also brought to the centre of the political culture traits that had come to be associated with femininity, primitivism, passivity and cowardice. Elements which were considered by the earlier modernizers a weakness of the society seemed to Gandhi the strengths of an older, more compassionate order.

The success of Gandhi lay not so much in his pacifism and nationalism, nor even in his mobilizational or organizational skills, but in his ability to bring to the centre of political activity the hardy, non-ideological, albeit ‘dull’ and low-key, masses for whom reformers and revolutionaries had long fought, but rarely ‘represented’. Even before the later versions of radicalism made
such ideas fashionable, the sleepy conformist peasants and the ‘idiocy of village life’ were for him, the revolutionary stuff out of which a new society had to be built. And he sought the roots of his approach — strange though it may seem to associate this with Gandhi — in the native shrewdness, this-worldly individualism, and efficacy of peasant communities that had for centuries toiled against nature and fought a ruthless battle for survival.

The Gandhian phase also established, for the first time in Indian history, the primacy of politics in the life of the Indian. Its ending marked the termination of the period of grace, which the earlier leadership has been given, to introduce political changes without disturbing the Indian masses, to work out the implications of the new political institutions with which the society was experimenting, and to make political decisions based on visions of a desirable society with which the majority was not concerned. By the end of this period, India had also acquired a large body of discontinuous political traditions: a fact which may be said to mark the beginnings of post-traditionality in a society.

It is from these elements of Gandhism, rather than from Gandhi’s saintliness, that one must trace many of the features of contemporary politics in India. Nevertheless, the latter also had a role to play. If Gandhi’s pragmatism and organizational skills cornered the liberals and the nativists, his saintliness attracted former dissenters from the mainstream nationalist ideology to a new nationalist consensus, negated the older idea of politics as amoral, and underwrote a concept of humane politics which may mean little to the social scientists, but which does make a difference to the quality of life in a polity.

Politics as Banality

The politics of autonomy-seeking may have laid the basis for the primacy of politics in society, but its growth as a vocation is primarily a post-Gandhian phenomenon. Naturally so; the colonial rule involved pliancy and collaboration, and defiance and high drama, but it was only after independence that politics could hope to become a dull, everyday affair.

National freedom, however, does not automatically reinstate the authentic self-hood of a culture. By reinforcing the elements which suit it best, colonialism activates some features of the traditional self-concept which later become dysfunctional, but nonetheless continue to survive as important traditions. India’s colonial past, too, is a part of its living history. Neither the spirit of nationalism nor the vicissitudes of post-independence politics can wipe it away. Particularly, the meaning the society gave to subjection, according to indigenous theories of living, has itself ensured certain continuities. These continuities have arisen from the efforts to integrate external cultural challenges, while seeking autonomy to deal with the society’s problems in its own way.

One aspect of the colonial political culture which survives is the conscious use of politics as a channel of group mobility and economic gain. This tradition assumes a perfect fit between economic rationality and political expediency and a broad congruence between a group’s self-interest and the society’s good. Three processes have strengthened this tradition.

First, the political culture of the districts is reaching out towards the national centre as a function of mass politics. As this taming of national politics proceeds, politics increasingly becomes non-heroic, self-interest based, realpolitik. It continues to have an idiom, but becomes in essence, a non-ideological, non-synergic game. Understandably, to the carriers of the liberal-intellectual traditions and the inheritors of the Gandhian style, this politics seems a betrayal of the values of the earlier modernisers and a sure sign of the failure of moral politics in India.

Second, there has grown a close link between politics and the other subsystems of the society. Today in India not only is politics spilling over its boundaries, it is paying for its primacy by carrying an enormous load of expectations. Because it has usurped some of the control functions of other subsystems, because it has assumed a role in setting social priorities, and because it has begun to ‘inject’ demands and tension generated within other subsystems, many problems which were once non-political have now become the responsibility of politics. Apparently, the society is yet to devise the means by which certain problems and sectors could be excluded from politics for the sake of the survival of democratic politics itself.

Third, with the politics of the centre reasserting its supremacy in the national scene again, the task of the lower level leadership has been changing from aggregation of interests to accountability to the political centre. Although this accountability has enor-
mously increased the centre’s power, it has also made it more vulnerable. All grievances now travel up to the centre and all non-performance and all political failures seem to be the responsibility of the top-most rung of leaders. The lower levels of politics in India now increasingly seem to be the preserve of those who carry to the bottom the messages emanating from the top.

**The Order of Change**

Even though the four ‘phases’ in the relationship between politics and culture have not produced exclusive styles, they do survive as four identifiable emphases in the culture of Indian politics. Those very forces which once determined the sequence of the phases also seem to regulate the present interplay and the relative influence of each style.

Take, for instance, the manner in which the leadership in the first phase tried to ascribe meaning, in terms of native symbols, to the disruptive inputs of a newly established colonial system. Colonial policies were not a matter of choice for the Indian leaders then; what the latter could deal with were the psychological reactions to these inputs, the fears and anxieties associated with cultural shock and structural change. They handled these fears and anxieties by finding sacred sanctions for cultural self-criticisms and for a certain cultural catholicity or inclusiveness. Take also the fact that the efforts by this reformist leadership to alter Indian cultural identity provoked important sectors of the same elite to organize in protest, to redefine the nature of the external challenge, and to devise adaptive strategies more congruent with the self respect of the community.

In contemporary India, too, the politics of self-redefinition survives in some universalist forms of liberalism and radicalism. Even in defeat, this style contributes to national life by its greater ability to borrow from outside, by building the intellectual basis for this borrowing, and by cushioning the intellectuals — especially the scientists and technologists — from too many local and provincial pressures. Similarly, the politics of self-affirmation checks the tendency in the political elites to stray too far from their task of searching for a political identity relatively free of external referents, and underlines the society’s freedom to pursue its independent path to its own utopia. Roughly in the same way that the phase of self-affirmation corrected the excesses of the politics of self-redefinition, the present interaction of the two styles acts as a cultural radar for the self-corrections of the society. Only the earlier styles must now operate within a context dominated by a less heroic style. In this respect, they have become recessive, confined to small sections of the population, and have come to reflect those levels of the nation’s distinctiveness that are less frequently triggered by the contemporary needs of society.

Such possibilities of self-correction suggest that the days of dramatic crises and drastic shifts in India’s political culture — which once led to vociferous and strident debates on the role and nature of political traditions — are now more or less over and the society is moving into a phase in which it may be possible to take for granted the cultural parameters of the polity.

If the foregoing analysis suggests that the evolution of Indian political culture has, today, been completed, it is obviously the result of my attempts to retrospectively identify trends and impose a schema. Certainly the present culture of Indian politics cannot pre-empt fundamental alterations in the future. On the other hand, as the norms of a political order are institutionalized and become a part of everyday life, it also becomes increasingly difficult to change a nation’s political culture. Stability has a cost.

Such hardening of arteries may be a necessary feature of the continuous tradition-building and institutionalization which goes in each state system, but nothing eliminates the possibility that a society may begin to perceive as a threat what it once did not even define as a challenge; that social concerns and goals, which once seemed only marginally important, may acquire a new centrality, and that what a society once took for granted may again become open to controversy. In this sense, the death warrant of every political culture is written on its birth certificate. That unmaking of a political culture, in response to changes in a society’s unique definition of the human predicament and human destiny, is, of course, another story.

**NOTES**

1. Historical societies are not necessarily societies with a sense of linear history. Indian society, for instance, seems almost ahistorical to many because of its distinctive concept of time.
2. This position is compatible with the new neo-Freudian concept of culture as a collective defence. See a review of the latter position in B. J. Bergen and S. D. Rosenberg, ‘The New Neo-Freudians, Psychoanalytic Dimensions of Social Change’, *Psychiatry*, 1971, 34, 19–39. A similar conceptualization of culture at the level of small groups is in W. R. Bion, *Experience in Groups* (London: Tavistock, 1961). The present approach however, imputes greater manoeuvrability, self-correction, and information-seeking to the society. Such processes can be seen as analogous to what at the individual level is ‘insight’.

3. There is an enormous literature on the role of themes, traditions, and world views in politics. None the less, these theme-by-theme analyses have given confusing and incomplete results. To begin with, any theme associated with politically developed statehood was considered ‘modern’ and was sought in less fortunate nation-states with the zeal of a trained sleuth. Now the emphasis has shifted to the particular ‘mixes’ of tradition and modernity which characterize politics at different developmental stages. Probably it is time to give more attention to the social modes or methods of coping with traditions or themes, with reference to issues such as the extent of sanctity attaching to norms, the totalism of the traditional system, the importance and sanctity given to artificial or recreated history in addition to actual history, the society’s ability to add new traditions to its original mass of traditions and its ability to particularize or sanctify new elements and detraditionalize dysfunctional elements, the extent to which the society can draw upon different subtraditions within it or play one subculture against another, the tolerance of contradictory or unrelated norms coexisting in the polity, and the tolerance of normative ambiguity and chaos. Emphasis on these processes may make societies seem more like self-correcting systems and less like reactive, programmed organisms.


8. The private symbolic associations of power at different levels of personality, expressed particularly as the fear of loss of potency and virility, are described in G. M. Carstairs, *The Twice Born* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957); and P. Spratt, *Hindu Culture and Personality* (Bombay: ManaktaLas, 1966).


10. Hinduism, when it comes to social ethics, is particularly individualistic. Religious values, as opposed to sacred rituals, are a matter of lonely pursuit. It lacks in this respect the collectivist orientation of Christianity and Islam.

11. It has been said that Indian cultural products are remarkably free from any expression of the oedipal hostility toward paternal authority. See Dhirendra Narayan, *Hindu Character* (Bombay: Bombay University Press, 1957). I leave it to the psychologically-minded reader to decide if this orientation could have been generalized to the political authorities — if they were also seen, at some level, as distant powers with whom one did not compete or quarrel, but tried to establish a *modus vivendi*.


13. In *Politics in India*, Kothari considers this tolerance of hypocrisy to provide an important clue to the contemporary culture of Indian politics. This can also be explained in terms of the cultural tendency to pitch ideals too high for realization by lesser mortals. See Rudolph and Rudolph, *The Modernity of Traditions*, Part 2; K. P. Gupta, ‘A Theoretical Approach to Hinduism and Modernization of India’, and ‘A Rejoinder’, *Indian Journal of Sociology*, 1971, 2, 59–91, 213–16.


15. The metaphysical position from which this drew strength was *adwaita* or monism. See a brief discussion of the political implications of this theme, in ‘Sati or A Nineteenth Century Tale of Woman, Violence and Protest’, in this book.


19. Whatever its end result, it was perhaps necessary for a few men to break away more or less entirely from the existing modes of living and thinking to look more passionately at their own society. And these men *did* provide an intellectual basis for the integration of new cultural elements, for defining the challenge facing the society in intelligible terms, and for the alternation and reinterpretation of the indigenous culture. Most important of all, their very
activism was a living protest against the shared identity of the literati, who conceived of intellectual activity as an instrument of self-knowledge and personal salvation only.

20. A case study of the way in which the Gandhian style of political mobilization not only undercut the earlier liberal universalism, but also ultimately forced the latter to reveal its clay feet is in J. Broomfield, Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1968).

21. See a discussion of this in Final Encounter, in this book.

22. The political isolation of intellectuals is not, however, an indicator of low social status. If anything, with the spread of Brahmanic norms, the intellectual has perhaps improved his social standing.


24. To continue with the example of caste, there were caste systems of celestial bodies, gods, souls, temples, and gems, in addition to that of men. N. K. Bose, Culture and Society in India (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1967), p. 237.

25. This distrust and cynicism perhaps had support in some aspects of the modal personality system. See Carstairs, The Twice Born, particularly pp. 40-5.


27. The British, who were then yet to recover from the shock of discovering themselves the rulers of a continental land mass, tended to leave the social and religious systems untouched, to alter only the economic system, to recognize the Indian elites as legitimate participants in the polity and — to the limited extent a ruling group can think so — as their equals. In fact, in the case of each reform, the British consolidated through legal measures, often after decades, the gains of the reformers only after their movements had acquired substantial momentum. This ambivalence ensured some support to the reformers, while containing the anxiety of the traditionalists.

At first it may seem paradoxical that it was the so-called core of the Hindu society, religion, which faced the first attack of men who themselves were supposedly the core carriers of Hindu traditions. Perhaps it was the sheer salience of religion in the society; perhaps it was the unorganized nature of Hinduism which made it look vulnerable and amenable to reform; perhaps it was the well-known institutional rigidity and ideological pliability of Brahmanism.

28. These were not always functional. The folkways were, after all, in some respects more responsive to changes in environment; the texts, from which these values mostly came, were less so. Rudolph and Rudolph, in The Modernity of Traditions, Part 3, for instance, describe how the wholesale acceptance of such Brahmanic norms did freeze the legal system around a stagnant concept of indigenous law.


30. Bankim Chandra Chatterji, Babu (1873), Rachanabali, Vol. II, pp. 10-12. I have taken slight liberties with the translation, to eliminate the more abstruse allusions and the involved nineteenth-century Bengali sentences.

31. A fascinating attempt at self-esteem building on these lines was by Swami Vivekananda: see his Prāchya o Pāśchātya (1900-02) (Almora: Advaita Ashram, n. d.). The complex meaning of Hinduization of politics which began in this phase has been analyzed by Gupta, ‘A Theoretical Approach to Hinduism’ and ‘A Rejoinder’.


34. I have not dealt with Gandhi's saintly politics in detail because a number of excellent analyses have become available in recent years. The most ambitious of these is Erik H. Erikson, Gandhi's Truth (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969). On the remnants of the saintly style in contemporary India see G. Ostergaard and R. C. Carrell, The Gentle Anarchists (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971).