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Deendayal Upadhyaya In Historical Perspective: Reconstructing Indian Political Thought In Post-Colonial India

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Abstract

This paper examines Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya's philosophy of *Integral Humanism* within the historical context of post-colonial India, focusing on its contribution to reconstructing Indian political thought after independence. Emerging in the 1960s, Upadhyaya's ideas provided a moral and cultural counterpoint to the dominant Western ideologies of capitalism and socialism. He envisioned a system rooted in India's civilizational ethos, emphasizing the integral development of human beings—body, mind, intellect, and soul. His thought sought to harmonize individual freedom with social responsibility, material progress with moral order, and democracy with cultural continuity. The study situates Upadhyaya's philosophy within the broader intellectual landscape of post-colonial reconstruction, when India faced the challenge of nation-building amidst competing ideological frameworks. The central argument is that Upadhyaya's thought represents a unique effort to indigenize modern political concepts through the moral vocabulary of *dharma* and *Antyodaya* (upliftment of the last person). While Gandhi had laid the moral foundation of Indian nationalism, Upadhyaya extended this into a systematic philosophical framework aimed at constructing a self-sustaining, ethical polity. The paper uses historical-analytical and interpretive methods to trace the evolution of Upadhyaya's ideas and assess their impact on India's socio-political discourse. Findings reveal that his philosophy not only challenged the ideological dependency on the West but also proposed a vision of governance grounded in ethics, cultural pluralism, and decentralized democracy. However, its translation into policy and legal structures remains partial and contested. The study concludes that Upadhyaya's *Integral Humanism* offers enduring insights into the moral and cultural dimensions of nationhood, making it a vital resource for rethinking Indian political thought in the 21st century.

Keywords: Deendayal Upadhyaya, Integral Humanism, post-colonial India, Indian political thought, cultural nationalism, dharma, Antyodaya.

Introduction

The history of modern India is deeply intertwined with the quest to define a political and moral identity after centuries of colonial domination. The framing of the Indian Constitution in 1950 symbolized the institutional realization of freedom, but the deeper challenge lay in articulating an indigenous political philosophy that could sustain it.

In this historical context, Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya (1916–1968) emerged as a distinctive thinker who sought to reconstruct Indian political thought through a synthesis of cultural values and modern governance. Post-independence India was dominated by two ideological currents—Western liberal democracy and Marxist socialism. Both frameworks offered models of economic and political organization but lacked resonance with India's cultural and ethical traditions. Upadhyaya argued that neither individualism nor collectivism could ensure human welfare unless anchored in moral and spiritual principles. His doctrine of *Integral Humanism* (Ekatma Manavvad), articulated through a series of lectures in 1965, provided an indigenous alternative. It emphasized harmony between material and spiritual dimensions, individual and society, and freedom and responsibility. Historically, Upadhyaya's ideas emerged during the consolidation phase of India's democracy, when the newly independent nation was searching for ideological coherence. He observed that Western models, though successful in their contexts, were ill-suited for a society rooted in dharmic traditions. For Upadhyaya, India's political revival required a philosophical grounding in its own civilizational values. His *Integral Humanism* was thus both a response to the crisis of modernity and an attempt to redefine politics as a moral vocation. Upadhyaya's historical contribution lies in the way he reinterpreted *dharma* not as religion, but as the ethical principle that sustains social and cosmic order. Politics, economics, and education, he insisted, must function under its guidance. He also introduced the idea of *Antyodaya*—the upliftment of the poorest—as the true measure of governance. This integrated worldview reflected the continuity of India's philosophical heritage while addressing modern socio-political challenges. In reconstructing Indian political thought, Upadhyaya bridged tradition and modernity. His emphasis on self-reliance (*Swadeshi*), moral economy, and decentralized democracy paralleled Gandhi's ideals, yet his systematic articulation distinguished him as a philosopher rather than merely a reformer. His thought expanded the horizon of Indian political discourse beyond Western categories, placing ethics and culture at its center. This paper examines Upadhyaya's thought historically and analytically—how it evolved, what intellectual gaps it addressed, and why it remains relevant. It argues that *Integral Humanism* offers a historically grounded framework for ethical governance and national unity. It not only critiques imported ideologies but reconstructs Indian political thinking on indigenous foundations—making Upadhyaya a pivotal figure in post-colonial intellectual history.

Statement of the Problem

After independence, India inherited a Western constitutional and political framework that emphasized procedural democracy but often neglected moral and cultural dimensions of governance. The post-colonial challenge was not merely to govern but to **define the philosophical identity** of the new nation. Deendayal Upadhyaya recognized this vacuum and proposed *Integral Humanism* as a response—a framework that integrates ethical values, socio-economic justice, and spiritual fulfillment. The central problem this study addresses is the **historical and intellectual disconnect** between India's civilizational ethos and its adopted political models. While the Constitution established legal structures, it lacked a native ideological foundation capable of harmonizing rights with duties, freedom with responsibility, and progress with morality. Upadhyaya's doctrine sought to fill this gap, yet its relevance and implementation remain debated. The study explores three interlinked problems:

1. How does Integral Humanism reconstruct Indian political thought in its historical context?
2. What are the philosophical continuities and divergences between Upadhyaya's

vision and India's constitutional principles?

3. To what extent can his thought contribute to the contemporary discourse on ethical and cultural governance?

Historically, the problem lies in translating moral ideals into institutional mechanisms. Though Upadhyaya provided a philosophical blueprint, he did not design detailed administrative models. Thus, his ideas risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative. Additionally, in a plural and secular democracy, applying a culturally rooted philosophy raises concerns about inclusivity. This research therefore seeks to critically analyze *Integral Humanism* not as a political ideology alone, but as a historical project aimed at redefining India's moral and cultural foundation of governance.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze Deendayal Upadhyaya's Integral Humanism in its historical and philosophical context.
2. To evaluate its role in reconstructing Indian political thought during post-colonial nation-building.
3. To examine its compatibility with India's constitutional and democratic values.
4. To explore its continuing relevance for ethical governance and cultural nationalism.
5. To propose ways in which its principles can inform contemporary political discourse and policymaking.

Review of Literature

Scholarly engagement with Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya's political and philosophical thought has developed across multiple disciplines—philosophy, political theory, cultural studies, and history. However, a comprehensive and systematic academic exploration of his work within the framework of legal and institutional analysis remains relatively limited. The existing body of research acknowledges Upadhyaya primarily as a moral and cultural philosopher who responded to the intellectual and ethical crisis of post-colonial India. His doctrine of *Integral Humanism* (*Ekatma Manavvad*), articulated in 1965, is widely regarded as a synthesis of India's spiritual heritage and modern political ideals. Early commentators, such as Kumar (2018), interpret Upadhyaya as a moral philosopher seeking to harmonize India's political system with its ethical and civilizational foundations. Kumar argues that *Integral Humanism* emerged as a corrective to the ideological dependence on Western paradigms that dominated post-independence political discourse. By integrating material and spiritual dimensions of human life, Upadhyaya offered an ethical alternative to both capitalist individualism and socialist collectivism. This integration was not a rejection of modernity but a reinterpretation of it in accordance with *dharma*, the moral law that governs both individual and social conduct. Bhattacharya (2021) expands upon this interpretation, situating Upadhyaya's thought within the broader continuum of classical Indian philosophy. He posits that Upadhyaya revived the ancient conception of *dharma* as the foundational principle that unifies politics, ethics, and culture. Bhattacharya's analysis reveals that Upadhyaya's emphasis on the holistic nature of human existence—body, mind, intellect, and soul—reflects a profound philosophical continuity with Vedantic thought. This anthropological model, according to Bhattacharya, enables a non-dualistic understanding of governance, where economic and political activities must serve the moral and spiritual growth of the individual and society. Sharma (2021) complements this view by asserting that *Integral Humanism* laid the moral foundations for a culturally informed constitutionalism. He interprets Upadhyaya's philosophy as an ethical framework capable of reconciling the

apparent tension between tradition and modernity. Sharma argues that Upadhyaya's insistence on moral governance and social harmony anticipates the concept of *constitutional morality*, as later discussed in Indian jurisprudence. By anchoring politics in ethical principles, Upadhyaya's thought provides a model for a value-based democracy that transcends mere institutional procedures. The political dimension of Upadhyaya's thought is explored by Jha (2020), who focuses on his advocacy for decentralized democracy, *Swadeshi* (self-reliance), and participatory governance. According to Jha, Upadhyaya viewed democracy not merely as a political mechanism but as a cultural expression of the collective will rooted in moral responsibility. Decentralization, in his view, was both a political necessity and a moral imperative. Jha argues that this emphasis on local governance and community autonomy aligns with the Gandhian vision of *Gram Swaraj* (village self-rule) and anticipates the later constitutional recognition of Panchayati Raj institutions. Deshpande (2022) offers an important extension of this discourse by introducing the concept of *cultural constitutionalism* as the framework through which *Integral Humanism* can inform constitutional interpretation and governance. She argues that Upadhyaya's philosophy represents an effort to infuse modern institutions with civilizational values. Deshpande's analysis bridges political philosophy and constitutional theory, suggesting that *Integral Humanism* provides a cultural foundation for understanding constitutional morality. Her work marks a significant development in contemporary scholarship by locating Upadhyaya within ongoing debates about identity, tradition, and the evolution of constitutional norms in India. Verma (2023) takes a comparative approach, contrasting Upadhyaya's vision with that of Mahatma Gandhi. While both thinkers emphasized moral regeneration and self-reliance, Verma observes that Gandhi's method relied on personal moral persuasion and nonviolent activism, whereas Upadhyaya systematized these ethical principles into a coherent philosophical doctrine. According to Verma, this systematization distinguishes Upadhyaya as a political philosopher rather than merely a reformer. His framework of *Integral Humanism* provides not only moral guidance but also an epistemological model for integrating ethics into public life. Mukherjee (2020) situates Upadhyaya among the broader lineage of modern Indian thinkers, including Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, and Sri Aurobindo. He argues that Upadhyaya belongs to the intellectual tradition that sought to redefine nationalism as a moral and spiritual project rather than a purely political enterprise. Mukherjee identifies *Integral Humanism* as a culmination of this trajectory, representing a uniquely Indian response to the challenges of modernity and globalization. His study highlights Upadhyaya's contribution to the evolution of *cultural nationalism*—a form of nationalism grounded in moral and ethical unity rather than ethnic or linguistic homogeneity. Critical voices, however, have pointed out limitations in applying Upadhyaya's ideas to contemporary governance. Mehta (2019) cautions that *Integral Humanism*, while philosophically profound, suffers from a certain operational vagueness. Its broad moral prescriptions, he argues, lack concrete institutional mechanisms for implementation within the structures of modern governance. Mehta acknowledges the doctrine's ethical appeal but warns that without pragmatic policy frameworks, it risks remaining a theoretical ideal. Nonetheless, he concedes that Upadhyaya's critique of moral emptiness in modern politics remains both relevant and necessary. Sen (2009) contributes an external but supportive perspective by acknowledging the importance of integrating ethics into governance. Though not directly writing about Upadhyaya, Sen's reflections on "the idea of justice" resonate with *Integral Humanism*'s emphasis on moral and human-centered politics. He argues that the failure of modern democracies often stems from the absence of moral grounding—a concern that Upadhyaya had identified decades earlier. In this

sense, Sen's broader philosophical argument reinforces the normative validity of Upadhyaya's vision. Additional scholarship has also emerged exploring Upadhyaya's socio-economic ideas. Basu (2020) and Ramaswamy (2020) observe that his notion of *Swadeshi* was not isolationist but aimed at creating an economy that served social welfare rather than capital accumulation. Their analyses suggest that Upadhyaya's economic thought foreshadowed later discourses on sustainable development and inclusive growth. Similarly, Singh (2022) interprets Upadhyaya's ethics of governance as a precursor to modern theories of social responsibility in public administration. Collectively, the literature underscores several main themes:

1. Integral Humanism is both a critique of Western political paradigms and a constructive effort to define an indigenous model of governance.
2. Upadhyaya's philosophy revives the moral dimension of politics by grounding it in dharma.
3. His thought bridges ancient Indian philosophy with modern democratic ideals, promoting ethical governance and cultural unity.
4. Despite its theoretical richness, the doctrine's institutional translation remains an underdeveloped area of study.

In summary, the scholarship on Deendayal Upadhyaya affirms his historical role as a philosopher who reconstructed Indian political thought by reuniting ethics, culture, and governance. Scholars agree that his ideas provided India with a civilizational framework for political and moral renewal in the aftermath of colonialism. However, they also acknowledge the persistent research gap concerning the practical implementation of his principles in constitutional and policy frameworks. Addressing this gap is essential for understanding how *Integral Humanism* can inform contemporary debates on ethical governance, nation-building, and cultural identity. The present study seeks to bridge this gap by situating Upadhyaya's thought within its historical context and exploring its relevance for modern India's evolving democratic and moral landscape.

Research Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative, historical-analytical** methodology combining philosophical interpretation with contextual analysis.

- Primary Sources: Upadhyaya's original writings and speeches, including *Integral Humanism* (1965).
- Secondary Sources: Scholarly works on Indian political thought, post-colonial theory, and constitutional philosophy.

The methodology includes:

1. **Textual Analysis**– to interpret the conceptual structure of Integral Humanism.
2. **Historical Contextualization**– situating Upadhyaya's thought within post-independence debates.
3. **Comparative Analysis**– examining parallels between Upadhyaya, Gandhi, and other contemporary thinkers.
4. **Thematic Synthesis**– integrating findings to highlight its impact on Indian political thought.

Data are analyzed inductively to trace the evolution of ideas rather than to test a hypothesis. The study is theoretical in nature and aims to generate interpretive insights rather than empirical generalizations.

Discussion and Findings

1. Integral Humanism as Historical Reconstruction

Deendayal Upadhyaya's *Integral Humanism* emerged as a profound moral and intellectual response to the ideological and cultural dislocation experienced by India in the post-colonial period. Having inherited Western models of governance, India faced the challenge of integrating democratic institutions with its deeply rooted spiritual and cultural values. Upadhyaya sought to bridge this divide by reintroducing *dharma*—the timeless ethical principle of harmony and righteousness—into the vocabulary of modern politics. His philosophy reconstructed Indian political thought by synthesizing ancient wisdom with contemporary needs, offering an indigenous framework for governance that upheld both individual dignity and social duty. Unlike Western ideologies rooted in materialism or power dynamics, *Integral Humanism* viewed politics as a moral enterprise aimed at the holistic development of humanity—physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. It provided a unifying vision that harmonized freedom with responsibility and economic growth with ethical restraint. As summarized in Table 1, Upadhyaya's doctrine effectively bridges pre-modern *dharmic* thought with modern democratic ideals, reaffirming that sustainable governance must be grounded in moral and cultural continuity. His philosophy thus represents not a rejection of modernity, but its moral reconstruction through India's civilizational consciousness.

Dimension	Traditional Foundation	Integral Interpretation	Humanism	Modern Relevance
Ethics	Dharma (Moral Order)	Universal duty guiding state & citizen	Constitutional morality	
Economy	Self-reliance	Swadeshi model based on local production	Sustainable development	
Governance	Village Republics	Decentralized, participatory democracy	Panchayati Raj Institutions	
Justice	Antyodaya (Welfare of last person)	Inclusive welfare state	Social justice, equality	
Nationalism	Cultural unity	Ethical and civilizational nationalism	Fraternity and pluralism	

2. Ideological Shifts in Post-Colonial India

Post-colonial India witnessed profound ideological transformations as the nation sought to define its political identity amidst competing global and indigenous influences. In the immediate aftermath of independence, **Nehruvian socialism** dominated the national discourse, emphasizing industrialization, central planning, and secular modernity. However, this approach often overlooked cultural rootedness and moral dimensions of governance. By the 1970s, growing disillusionment with state centralization led to the rise of **Gandhian decentralization** and calls for participatory democracy. Later, **liberalization in the 1990s** marked a shift toward market-oriented policies and globalization, bringing economic dynamism but also widening social inequalities. Amid these transitions, **Deendayal Upadhyaya's Integral Humanism** emerged as a distinctive ideological response, advocating balance between material progress and moral order. His philosophy offered a framework for ethical governance and cultural self-reliance, seeking to re-anchor Indian democracy in its civilizational ethos while addressing the human and ethical void left by Western ideological imports.

Ideology	Dominant Phase	Limitation	Upadhyaya's Alternative
Nehruvian Socialism	1950–70	Over-centralization, neglect of ethics	Ethical decentralization
Western Liberalism	1970–90	Excessive individualism	Balance between rights and duties
Globalization	1990–Present	Materialism, inequality	Human-centric moral development

Findings:

The findings of this study reveal that Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya's *Integral Humanism* stands as a distinctive and transformative contribution to Indian political thought, offering a morally grounded and culturally coherent alternative to imported

Western ideologies. Upadhyaya's conceptualization of nationalism, governance, and development reflects not only an ethical philosophy but also a practical vision for reconstructing India's post-colonial political identity. First, Upadhyaya **reframed nationalism as moral responsibility rather than political dominance**. Unlike Western notions of nationalism that often equate national strength with territorial expansion or centralized power, Upadhyaya envisioned the nation (*Rashtra*) as a moral and spiritual organism, sustained by cultural unity and ethical purpose. For him, nationalism was not an assertion of supremacy but a collective commitment to *dharma*—the moral order that ensures justice, harmony, and the welfare of all. This redefinition of nationalism aligned with the civilizational ethos of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (the world is one family), emphasizing that true patriotism must express itself through service, compassion, and inclusivity. In this sense, Upadhyaya's nationalism was pluralistic and moral, seeking unity through shared values rather than uniformity of belief. Second, the study finds that Upadhyaya **anticipated themes that would later dominate global political discourse**, including sustainable development, moral economy, and participatory governance. His emphasis on *Antyodaya*—the upliftment of the last person—prefigured contemporary discussions on inclusive growth and social justice. Likewise, his advocacy of *Swadeshi* (self-reliance) and decentralized economic structures anticipated modern notions of sustainable and community-based development. Upadhyaya envisioned an economy that functioned not for profit but for the fulfillment of human needs, operating within ethical boundaries. He believed that true progress could only occur when material prosperity was harmonized with spiritual well-being and environmental balance—a principle now echoed in global sustainability movements. Third, Upadhyaya's framework remains **deeply relevant for re-grounding democracy in ethics**. His vision of governance, rooted in *dharma* and social responsibility, provides a moral corrective to the procedural and power-centric tendencies of modern politics. Democracy, in his view, must go beyond electoral mechanisms to embody ethical governance, civic virtue, and service-oriented leadership. By emphasizing the relationship between rights and duties, Upadhyaya proposed a model of democracy that promotes accountability, community participation, and moral awareness among both citizens and leaders. However, despite its enduring philosophical appeal, the study identifies that **institutional translation of Integral Humanism remains weak**. Modern governance in India has largely overlooked Upadhyaya's insistence on moral leadership, decentralized decision-making, and cultural grounding. While some of his ideas—such as rural self-reliance, inclusive development, and local democracy—have found partial reflection in policy frameworks like Panchayati Raj and sustainable development programs, the deeper ethical and philosophical dimensions of his thought remain underexplored in institutional practice. In conclusion, the findings affirm that Deendayal Upadhyaya's *Integral Humanism* provides a timeless moral framework for democratic governance. Yet, for its transformative potential to be realized, contemporary political institutions must move beyond rhetoric to embed its ethical principles—justice, harmony, and human dignity—into the structural and operational fabric of governance.

Conclusion

Viewed through a historical lens, Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya's *Integral Humanism* represents one of the most significant intellectual efforts to reconstruct Indian political thought in the post-colonial era. Rooted in India's civilizational ethos yet responsive to the demands of modern governance, it offered a distinctive vision of politics grounded in *dharma* (moral law), *Swadeshi* (self-reliance), and *Antyodaya*

(the upliftment of the last person). By integrating spiritual values with material progress, Upadhyaya sought to restore moral purpose to the political domain—a domain that, in his view, had become detached from ethical consciousness in the wake of Western modernity. His philosophy addressed a profound historical void left by colonial modernity: the separation of governance from ethics and culture. *Integral Humanism* filled this gap by proposing that the true measure of progress lies not merely in economic growth or institutional strength, but in the moral and spiritual well-being of society. This holistic framework redefined the relationship between the individual and the state, emphasizing harmony over hierarchy and service over power. Although primarily conceptual, Upadhyaya's vision provides a durable normative foundation for interpreting contemporary constitutionalism. It reminds modern India that democracy must be guided by moral responsibility, not just by electoral arithmetic or procedural formality. His insistence on balance—between individual freedom and collective welfare, tradition and innovation, rights and duties—continues to resonate amid today's global crises of inequality, cultural alienation, and moral decline. Ultimately, Deendayal Upadhyaya's *Integral Humanism* invites India to rediscover its moral center as a nation. It calls for progress built not on imitation of foreign models but on the enduring strength of India's own civilizational values—compassion, justice, harmony, and human dignity—thereby reaffirming that the true purpose of politics is the ethical and integral development of humankind.

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