

**CONCEPT NOTE**  
**NATIONAL SEMINAR**  
**ON**  
**THE IDEA OF INDIA: INTELLECTUAL TRADITIONS IN ‘INDIA STUDIES’**  
**(MARCH 18-19, 2019)**

The proposed seminarians at having an academic discussion involving the scholars from diverse disciplines about the very idea of India, its society, culture and polity as has been articulated by academics from India and abroad belonging to different intellectual traditions/thought frames. Contrary to popular notion, what defines or makes India political/cultural and not merely a geographical entity and how to understand and explain its complex realities has had a very long intellectual tradition of thinking, not confined to modern period but going way back to Vedic times, albeit with interruptions/ruptures, understandable for an ancient land that has been ravaged repeatedly by external aggression and coercive domination. For long, ‘India study’ remained confined mostly to the cultural domain. It is only now with the emergence of a resurgent India leaving behind the burden of centuries of slavery that the nation has witnessed a great degree of interest in taking up the political in increasingly popular ‘India studies’ being taught in Indian and world’s leading universities. Then we found worldwide interest emanates from India emerging as a potential global political power and also because of its impressive economic growth combined with its democratic success against all odds like diversity and low income. India’s democratic exceptionalism/distinctiveness’ from a western perspective is reflected in India studies being offered as a course in many universities in India and abroad of late, ICCR, an Indian government institution has also pitched in by establishing chairs of Indian Studies abroad with the avowed aim to create a better understanding and appreciation of India in its political, economic and cultural forms.

Sifting through scholarly works that engage India even when some among them harp upon her distinctiveness, however, one finds that they show distinct imprint of western intellectual traditions and mode of thinking be it the concepts, theoretical constructs, and analytical frameworks. One can refer here the academic debates that have happened around issues of caste, class, family and gender and also on broader issues of social transformation and social justice. Also intense and often contentious debates have happened in India studies, veering around the concepts of nation and nationalism, religion and politics, issues of social transformation and social and gender justice, on growth versus development and now on globalisation and governance. Reading these important texts, the impression one gets as if there has been not been much linkage between the different phases of the history of ideas in India on these and many other issues. One also get an idea as if the colonial experience and the advent of modernity caused a rupture in the history of ideas and that the modern social and political thinking and writing about India owes much to ‘universalist’ categories of thought and analysis derived from the west and hardly to the indigenous Indian intellectual tradition. Even worse, there is a lurking sense that that there is not much what can be termed as ‘Indian political theory’ to borrow in any case. While Kautilya *Arthshashtra* has been held as an exception, there has been a studied neglect of other significant contributions like *ShantiParva/ AnushasanParva of Mahabharata, Panchatantra* as political text. However, ‘inspired’ academics have gone to the extent of arguing that the ancient political texts are about ‘practice of actual administration, rather than the construction of a complete and consistent system of political theories’. Only a few contemporary academics like Kaviraj have invoked/referred to the Indian tradition of political thinking in their writings but for limited political purposes as the western influence remain dominant. The academic neglect can be attributed to the ancient political/philosophical texts not being taught in the higher educational institutions even in post-colonial India, often relegating the rich body of political and social thought into a few texts and thinkers compressed into an optional course popularly called Ancient Indian political thought (with most of the texts being prepared by non-specialists in the subject for the students) whereas the western modern political thought and theory gets prime space and weight age in the overall syllabus having celebrated authors writing textbooks/handbooks for ready reference to the students. The idea of the proposed seminar is to situate these modern ideas in the context of the traditions of thinking not only in the colonial India but also going back to ancient India. Such an intellectual effort would contribute to a much deeper and nuanced understanding of India’s social, political and economic realities they evolve and undergo the process of rapid transition. With such an approach, India studies researchers would be able to explore the continuity and change in the social and political

thinking in India, something missing in the monistic approaches adhered to by India experts led by theoretical frameworks since the colonial days: Ideology, Orientalise, Marxian, and Gandhian, institutional or cultural.

Relevance of the proposed seminar is not only to revisit the existing theoretical approaches but also to enrich Indian political theory by imparting them with contemporariness as many of the critical issues that recent India faces find resonance and connectivity in the ideas of modern social and political thinkers like Tilak, Vivekananda, Tagore, Gandhi, Ambedkar, Aurobindo, Savarkar, Nehru among many others, who all had deep philosophical engagement with the Indian intellectual traditions. Almost all of these thinkers were engaged in the liberation of the nation as activists. It is difficult to access/comprehend their social and political thought without contextualizing them in the very rich philosophical/intellectual traditions of India from where they drew their ideas and inspiration. Going beyond these modern Indian thinkers, what is needed is to further look for huge reservoir of original concepts and categories used in rich Indian intellectual traditions drawn from the ancient texts to make sense of the contemporary Indian social and political reality. Here the correct way to go about it would be to sift the texts in terms of the themes and concepts, coming from diverse perspectives that compete with each other rather than focusing on individual social and political thinkers. In methodological terms, such an approach would contribute in enabling the researchers engaged in India studies to take up an enriched theoretical framework that would be an amalgamation of both the traditional and modern intellectual traditions and not just heavily inspired by western mode of thinking. This becomes imperative as there is not a singular notion/idea of India but ideas of India. For the purpose, the invited academics who may come from diverse disciplines like History, Cultural Studies, Philosophy and Political Science with their writings on critical social, political and economic issues, some of them mentioned above, may contribute to India studies literature while adhering to a dialogic approach rather than opting for prevalent either-or framework.

#### **About the anchor Institute**

UGC-Human Resource Development Centre, established way back in 1987 as Academic Staff College is situated at Panjab University, the fourth oldest university in India and a nodal centre of learning and research in the north-western India since its inception. The centre has been catering to the academic needs of the faculty coming from not only Panjab University's more than 70 departments and research/teaching centres and more than 90 affiliated colleges but also the neighbourhood Universities and colleges of north India.

#### **Themes of the Proposed Seminar**

- **India: Historical Moorings: State, Society and Politics**  
*Shanti Parva/ Anushasan Parv of Mahabharata, Arthashastra, Panchatantra*
- **Indian National Movement**  
Diverse Traditions of Thought, Making of the Constitution, Prefiguring Democracy
- **Imagination of India as a Nation: Invocation of Tradition**  
Ideas of B. G. Tilak, M. K. Gandhi, V. D. Savarkar and M.S. Golwalkar
- **India's Engagement with Modernity: Imagination of the Democratic Ideal**  
Ideas of R. N. Tagore, J. L. Nehru and B. R. Ambedkar
- **Studying India: Diverse Perspectives on Social and Political Issues of Contemporary India**  
Traditional and Modern Intellectual Traditions
- **Imagination of the Democratic Ideal**  
Equality, Swaraj, Ethics, Representation, Plurality/Diversity, Caste, Community, Gender, Citizenship, Nation, and Development

#### **Anchor Institute:**

**Seminar Convener: Prof. Ashutosh Kumar**

**Seminar Co-Convener: Dr. Jayanti Dutta**

**UGC-Human Resource Development Centre (HRDC)**

**Panjab University, Chandigarh**