



Buddhist Political Thought

Bhikhu Parekh on Buddhism

According to **Bhikhu Parekh**, **Buddhism** can best be described as the “**rebel child of Hinduism**.”

Why rebel? Because while it broke away from certain orthodox traditions, it still carried the **same philosophical DNA** — especially the shared belief in **karma** (the moral law of cause and effect) and **rebirth** (the cycle of existence).

So, when we talk about **Indian political thought**, we should not think in terms of rupture or revolution — but in terms of **continuity**. Both **Hinduism and Buddhism** represent **ancient traditions** that evolved side by side, enriching each other.

Parekh beautifully puts it — Indian philosophy doesn't believe in sudden breaks or absolute rejection. It believes in **refinement through continuity**. Buddhism didn't discard Hindu ideas; it **refined** them — turning ritual into ethics, hierarchy into compassion, and salvation into human welfare.

The Essence

In short, Bhikhu Parekh helps us see **Buddhism not as a departure from Indian tradition**, but as a **creative reform within it** — one that tried to preserve the moral essence of Hinduism while challenging its rigid forms.

Basic Principles of Buddhism

At its heart, **Buddhism** is a philosophy of **awakening**, not worship — a path to freedom through understanding. It rests on the **Four Noble Truths**, which form the backbone of Buddhist political and moral thought.

First, the Buddha began with a simple but profound observation — “**Life is full of sorrows**.” Not because life is evil, but because

everything we cling to — pleasure, power, possessions — is **temporary**. This sense of dissatisfaction is called **Dukkha** — the universal unsatisfactoriness of existence.

Second, the **cause of this suffering** lies within us — in **ignorance, greed, and hatred**. We suffer not because of what the world does to us, but because of how *we* respond to it.

Third, liberation from sorrow comes only through **liberation from ignorance** — the cloud that blinds us to reality. When we see clearly, we act rightly.

Fourth, the **Eightfold Path** is the solution — a practical moral code for daily life. It guides us through **right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration**. This is not a list of rules, but a way of transforming consciousness — a discipline of mind and character.

Buddhism also advocates the **Middle Path** — avoiding both self-indulgence and extreme asceticism. It teaches **balance**, because truth lies between extremes.

And most importantly, it is **inherently egalitarian**. The Buddha opened his Sangha to **everyone** — kings and servants, rich and poor, men and women. In a world defined by caste and privilege, this was a radical statement of **social equality**.

The **Buddha Dhamma** was not about creating new political institutions or laws. It was about something deeper — **transforming the human mind**. For the Buddha, no system, however perfect, can bring freedom if minds remain enslaved to craving and ignorance. **Complete freedom exists only in minds that are free**.

Finally, to understand life, one must realise the **Three Universal Truths**:



- **Dukkha** – unsatisfactoriness is part of existence.
- **Anicca** – everything is impermanent.
- **Anatta** – there is no permanent self or ego.

The Essence

Buddhism is not just a religion — it's a **moral-political philosophy of humanism**, teaching that **the reform of society begins with the reform of the self** — a journey from ignorance to enlightenment, from power to compassion, and from hierarchy to harmony.

Buddhist Society

Buddhist Society – A Moral and Democratic Order

When we step into the idea of a **Buddhist society**, we're not entering a social system built on birth, caste, or privilege.

Instead, we find a community where **classification is based purely on the quality of moral conduct**. Your worth is not determined by your lineage but by your **character**, by how you live.

This makes Buddhism one of the earliest voices in India to clearly say:

"A good society is a moral society, not a hierarchical one."

A Buddhist society also emphasised **social cooperation** — not competition — and **active participation**, because human progress is collective. Liberation is personal, but welfare is shared.

A Unique Political Insight: No Successor, Only Rule of Law

The Buddha did something extraordinary.

Instead of appointing a successor — a king-like figure — he deliberately left **no personal**

authority behind.

He established an **order of power guided by the rule of law**, ensuring that authority rested in **Dhamma**, not in individuals.

This was revolutionary for its time.

It meant:

- No cult of personality.
- No hereditary leadership.
- No priestly monopoly.

Power belonged to principles, not people.

Sangha – The World's Earliest Democratic Assembly

The **sangha** wasn't just a religious community — it was a model of **consultative and democratic process**.

Inside the sangha, you can see the **rudiments of parliamentary systems** emerging centuries before modern democracies.

The sangha had:

- A **speaker** to conduct discussions,
- A **whip** to maintain discipline,
- A **quorum** to validly begin proceedings,
- A **vote of majority** to settle debates.

This was democracy rooted not in numbers, but in **moral seriousness and collective wisdom**.

So when scholars talk about India's democratic heritage, Buddhism stands tall as a powerful example:

A society driven by **ethical conduct**, guided by **rule of law**, sustained by **deliberation**, and nurtured through **cooperation**.

Buddhist Polity

Buddhist Polity – A Political Vision Rooted in Peace



When we talk about **Buddhist polity**, we are stepping into one of the most ethically charged political visions in world history.

At its core was a simple but transformative conviction:

non-violence and peace are universal messages, not optional virtues.

Unlike other ancient traditions that debated the conditions of a “just war,” Buddhism refused to sanctify violence in any form. There was **no “just war”** in Buddhist thought. The Buddha’s warning is unforgettable:

“The victor breeds hatred, the defeated lives in misery.

He who renounces both is happy and peaceful.”

In those two lines, he dismantles the entire logic of glory through conquest. Victory produces arrogance; defeat produces resentment. Only renunciation produces peace.

The Buddha as a Man of Action, Not Passive Moralist

It is easy to mistake the Buddha as merely a spiritual teacher. But in reality, he was a **man of action**, deeply aware that political decisions shape human suffering.

Whenever violence threatened to break out, he intervened **directly**, not through sermons but through presence.

Two famous interventions show the political courage of the Buddha:

1. Conflict between the Sakyas and Koliyas

When these clans were ready to fight over water from the Rohini river, the Buddha went to the battlefield himself.

By appealing to reason, compassion, and the futility of violence, he stopped a war that could have destroyed both communities.

2. Conflict between King Ajatasatru and the Vajjis

Here again, the Buddha’s political wisdom became guidance for the rulers. He didn’t pick sides; he counselled restraint, negotiation, and respect for the welfare of the people.

These were not philosophical gestures.

They were **practical, political interventions** rooted in a belief that the **first duty of any polity is to reduce suffering**, not expand empires.

The Heart of Buddhist Political Thought

A Buddhist polity is therefore defined by:

- **Non-violence as the highest political principle**
- **Peace as the basis of governance**
- **Moral persuasion, not coercion**
- **Active intervention to prevent war**
- **Politics aligned with human welfare, not power**

It was a vision ahead of its time — a polity where ethical conduct, compassion, and restraint were not just personal virtues but **political imperatives**.

Buddhist Social Contract & the Rise of MahaSammatta – A Political Vision Rooted in Moral Authority

One of the most beautiful and underrated parts of **Buddhist political thought** is how it explains the origin of the state.

Unlike the Dharmashastra or Kautilya, Buddhism doesn’t begin with gods, curses, or divine kingship.

It begins with **human behaviour**.

The Buddha linked **economic development with reduction of crime** — a remarkably modern idea. He understood that when people have security, livelihood, and dignity, crime naturally declines.



But when resources shrink and greed increases, societies begin to fracture.

This forms the backdrop for the **Buddhist version of the social contract**.

The Rise of Private Property — And the Rise of Disorder

Buddhism narrates that in ancient times, as **private property** gradually emerged, **natural resources became scarce**, and with scarcity came **greed, stealing, and conflict**.

People became anxious, suspicious, and divided — just like societies today struggling with inequality.

And so, faced with growing disorder, the people united and made a conscious choice:

They chose a ruler *themselves*.

Enter MahaSammatta — The First Ruler by Consent

They selected **MahaSammatta**, literally *the Great Elect*, the first ruler **chosen and approved by the people**.

His authority did **not** come from:

- divine origin
- supernatural claims
- heredity
- coercion

Instead, it arose from a **genuine political need** — the need for order, fairness, and justice.

He was chosen because he was **the one who makes others happy by righteousness**.

This is striking: Buddhism grounds political authority not in fear but in **moral legitimacy**.

A Ruler Unlike the Chakravarti Samrat

MahaSammatta was everything the **lion-like Chakravarti Samrat** was not.

The Chakravarti conquers lands by force, expands empires, and turns the **wheel of the chariot of conquest**.

But MahaSammatta rules in a radically different way:

- gentle
- noble
- modest
- selfless
- devoted to **righteousness**
- wins **hearts, not territories**

He turns the **Dhamma Chakra**, the wheel of righteousness — not the wheel of aggression.

In other words, the Buddhist ruler does not dominate; he **uplifts**.

The Heart of the Buddhist Social Contract

The Buddhist political vision is crystal clear:

- The state arises from **people's consent**, not divine sanction.
- Authority is **moral**, not coercive.
- The ruler leads by **love, righteousness, and compassion**.
- Governance is meant to reduce suffering, not increase power.

This was one of humanity's earliest expressions of **democratic legitimacy** — and it came from a tradition rooted in ethics and humanism.

Republic Tradition

The Republic Tradition in Buddhism — Democracy Before Democracy

One of the most inspiring aspects of **Buddhist political life** is how naturally it nurtured a **republic tradition** long before the world even imagined modern democracy.

Unlike kingdoms built on hierarchy and command, many early Buddhist communities —



especially the *ganas* and *sanghas* — organised themselves around **consensus**, not coercion.

This is extraordinary.

Consensus as the Heart of Politics

Consensus was not simply a voting technique. It was a way of honouring the **collective will** of the community.

The idea was:

A decision gains strength not when one side wins, but when **everyone feels heard**.

And so Buddhist republics encouraged:

- **deliberation**
- **collective decision-making**
- patience in discussion
- willingness to reconsider
- genuine respect for dissent

This created a political culture where **mutual respect** was the norm, not the exception.

Consultation as a Daily Practice

These republics did not function through orders issued from the top.

They functioned through **consultation** — members meeting, speaking, discussing, persuading.

This mirrored the spirit of the **sangha**, where rules were framed collectively, violations were debated openly, and even the Buddha insisted decisions be taken through assemblies.

It was democracy grounded in ethics.

A Political Life Rooted in Human Dignity

This **republic tradition** was not merely a system — it was a moral choice.

It reflected the belief that each individual carried wisdom, that truth emerged from dialogue, and that leadership meant **service, not domination**.

Modern democracy often struggles to reach this level of harmony.

But Buddhist political life did it centuries ago — choosing **consensus, collective will, consultation, and mutual respect** as the pillars of political life.

PYQ

1. Buddhist thought on Dhamma facilitates the emancipation of political action. Explain. 2023, 20
2. Do you think that the Buddhist traditions have lent greater ethical foundation to the ancient Indian political thought? Give your arguments. 2021, 15
3. Evaluate the contributions of Buddhist tradition to Indian political thought. 2014, 15
4. Write a note on the Buddhist tradition in Indian political thought. 2012, 15