

ISSN 2319 - 359X

AN INTERNATIONAL MULTIDISCIPLINARY
HALF YEARLY RESEARCH JOURNAL

IDEAL

Single Blind Review / Double Blind Review

Volume - XIII | Issue - II | March - August 2025

ENGLISH PART - I



ज्ञान-विज्ञान विमुक्तये

Peer Reviewed and
UGC Listed Journal No. 47026

Impact Factor / Indexing

2023 - 7.537

www.sjifactor.com

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CONTENTS OF ENGLISH PART - I

S.No.	Title & Author	Page No.
1	Work-Life Balance and Stress Management Abhishek Rajendra Sangale	1-10
2	Career-Related Teacher Support: A Review of Teacher's Role in Student's Career Planning Mr. Chavan Sujit Baburao Dr. Lokhande Uday Maruti	11-16
3	Transforming Economics Education in Rural India: Opportunities and Challenges under NEP 2020 Dr. Ashwini Sandip Ugale	17-23
4	Role of Non-Government Organization in Economic Development in India Dr. Prabhakar Tanaji Mane	24-31
5	Driving Sustainability: Green Initiatives and Business Practices in India Prof. Rohini Girish Deshpande	32-41
6	The Ethical Implications of AI in Development Abhishek Rajendra Sangale	42-52
7	A Study on Dimensions and Dynamics of Educational Development in Kolhapur District Mr. Kaustubh Murlidhar Gawade Dr. Amardeep D. Jadhav	53-63
8	A Study of Goat Farming for Livelihood Improvement of Farmers of Maharashtra Mr. Ganesh Maruti Zurunge Dr. Gavahale Balu Vaman	64-70
9	Trends and Pattern in Foreign Investment Inflows in India: An Empirical Analysis Dr. Rajkumar K. Gitte	71-75
10	Economic Development of India: Issues and Challenges Shinge Raju Dilip	76-83
11	AI and Development: Innovations, Challenges, and Future Prospects Dr. Sachin S. Rudrawar	84-89

**CONTENTS OF ENGLISH PART - I**

S. No.	Title & Author	Page No.
12	Unlocking Financial Freedom: The Role of Gold Loans in Women's Empowerment in Sangli District Karuna Dilip Anande	90-96
13	Sudipta Kaviraj's Observations on India's Development State Samiksha Annaso Farakate	97-105
14	Impact of Drought on Farmers in Drought Prone Areas of Beed District Dr. Nitin Dhawale	106-114
15	Role of Artificial Intelligence in Sustainable Financial Investment: Opportunities and Challenges Dr. Bilas Sakharam Kale	115-127
16	A Study of Green Growth in Agro-Industries for Sustainable Development in India Dr. Anita Yadav	128-135
17	Globalisation and Political Economy of International Relations Abhinav Auradkar	136-141
18	Next Word Prediction System Miss. Sakshi Sanjay Howal Miss. Megha Sanjay Mane	142-146
19	Globalization and India Development Mr. Saddam Hajaratso Pirjade	147-154
20	Data Privacy and Security in Machine Learning Miss. Aishwarya Prakash Patil Miss. Priyanka Bhivaji Patil	155-158

13. Sudipta Kaviraj's Observations on India's Development State

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Abstract

Sudipta Kaviraj is an important theorist and commentator of Indian State in its different aspects of functioning. He approaches the theorization of Indian State from an amalgam of liberal, Marxist and subaltern perspectives. He looks at the Indian State in a historical perspective. It is intriguing to look at Kaviraj's reading of India's political and politico-economic history. This paper reads and contextualizes Kaviraj's understanding of the development dimension of the Indian State since independence. While doing so, the paper attempts to ask a few questions about Kaviraj's reading of India's developmental State. Kaviraj analyzes the nature of development discourse in India since independence and observes its interaction with electoral politics.

Key Words: Development, Indian State, democracy, capitalism, social character of State.

Introduction

Sudipta Kaviraj presents the political economy of capitalist development in India. He argues that the capitalist state in India is not a hegemonic one. He presents his arguments within the discourse of 'social character' of the Indian State, which the Marxist theorists of the state have espoused. He takes a slightly different position than the other important 'social character' theorists. His main argument is that the non-hegemonic nature of the capitalist class has shaped the nature of capitalist development. The pre-capitalist dominant classes pull the economic policy in a direction wherein the fuller transition to capitalism is blocked. This has characterized the pre-liberalization and liberalization policies adopted in the Indian economy. He also argues that along with these structural factors, the contingent elements in the trajectory of Indian politics have also shaped the direction of economy. This paper summarizes and presents his arguments on India's developmental state in a nutshell.

Kaviraj's assessment of the nature of capitalist state in India

Sudipta Kaviraj's understanding of the capitalist state in India lies with the Marxist framework. Kaviraj says that the social formation in India can be characterized as capitalist ('late', 'backward capitalism'). But pre-capitalist (semi-feudal) forms of production persist (2010b: 103) in India. State plays crucial role in the reproduction of capital 'in countries like India'.ⁱ Indian state is a bourgeois state (Kaviraj 2010b:103). It helps capitalism through its legal system, property structure and institutions of governance and the mechanism of governance. The capitalist class maintains control over society through state-led economic growth process and the redistributive commitments of the state (Kaviraj; 2010b:106), but the Gramscian proposition about the title of universality enjoyed by the capitalist/bourgeois state does not apply to India.

While presenting the social character of the state, i.e. the nature of dominant class coalition that drives the state policy, Kaviraj (2010b:107) says that bourgeoisie is the 'universalizing element' in the ruling coalition and performs 'directive function' whereas the pre-capitalist elements try to pull the policy in retrograde direction for their temporary gains. The pre-capitalist classes could not offer a coherent alternative to the capitalist growth model. Kaviraj (2010b: 108) elaborates why bureaucracy is a distinct class in the ruling coalition. It works as a mediator not only between dominant and subordinate classes but also between members of the dominant coalition.ⁱⁱ According to Kaviraj, some policy initiatives by the state also bring about class realignments. The welfare policies create temporary 'benefit coalitions among sections of the dominant coalition and sections outside it. In such situations class divisions and political divisions do not match. But Kaviraj (2010b;109) differentiates between 'governance', that is the policy-making field, and 'dominance', that is the structure of control over production. Kaviraj concludes that the internal hierarchy and politics of the ruling bloc have considerable effect on economic policy choices.ⁱⁱⁱ

Conception of democracy in India and its impact on capitalist trajectory

Kaviraj discusses the question of the trade-off between democracy and development and its peculiar case in India. He refers to the difference between West European and East European (late capitalist) societies in this respect as discussed in the Marxist theory.^{iv} The classical Marxist theory assumes that the relation between economic growth and democratization is asymmetric.

To explore the peculiar relation of democracy and development in India Kaviraj explains the nature of democratic ideas in India. Democracy acquired a particular vernacular meaning in

India through actual practices. (Kaviraj; 2011: 117-118). Kaviraj states that in Europe theories of democracy were preceded by theories of liberty which sought to put limits on the power of the state; state was understood as a structure providing basic political order for capitalist growth. In India ideas of freedom became ideas of national freedom. In Europe democratic movements emerged in the society that was understood as an aggregation of self-interested individuals. India had not developed this individualist conception of society as democracy became its political language; rights were largely understood as group rights (Kaviraj; 2011:121). This caused the struggles for distributive justice in India take the particular form they did. In the course of its development, the nationalist movement took recourse to more radical and people-oriented conceptions of freedom and democracy. Thus, he says, in India ‘the language of democracy bypassed liberalism’ (Kaviraj; 2011:123). Gandhian critique of modernity and the socialist thought of Nehru and others discredited liberalism. Kaviraj (2011:123) says that the socialist rhetoric that thus overstepped liberalism produced a ‘hasty and hollow’ socialism in India. This, in Kaviraj’s reading, obstructed the establishment and rise of capitalism in India as the hegemonic structure in the initial period.

Nehruvian economic design

Nehruvian economic design prioritized a large public sector for capital goods and infrastructure, bureaucratic control over the private sector, and protectionism (Kaviraj, 2010b:69). Planning ensured autonomy in economic decision-making, which could avert the possibility of excessive influence of peasantry’s choices (Kaviraj, 2011:94-95). Despite socialist inclinations, Nehru’s position in Congress was weak. Bureaucracy became a key implementation tool. The Constitution upheld unequal property rights, limiting state power over private property (Kaviraj, 2011:127). Zamindari abolition, a step toward industrialization, did not dispossess landowning elites due to resistance from regionally dominant political classes. But it contributed to reshaping of rural class structures to some extent (Kaviraj, 2011:92, 127). Community development and Panchayati Raj reinforced elite dominance instead of empowering the poor (Kaviraj, 2011:98). The dominant coalition, including landed elites, constrained development goals (Kaviraj, 2011:96-97). Nehru’s ‘socialism’ coexisted with capitalism and democracy, with redistributive limits due to scarce resources (Kaviraj, 2010b:245, 2011:131). Kaviraj (2011:131) says that the across-the-party socialist rhetoric weakened democratic politics.

Thus, according to Kaviraj, the nature of democratic politics obstructed realization of socialist principles in economy during Nehruvian era on the one hand, and on the other, rhetorical socialism undermined the establishment of liberal ethos that was necessary for the growth of capitalism

Assessment of the Nehru Regime

Kaviraj (2011:95) says that the Planning Commission had sufficient autonomy and authority in the Nehru period which it lost later. In general, the relative distancing of politics and economics was rendered possible by the abundant legitimacy that Nehru and the early Congress leadership enjoyed. Nehru regime did not have to give away resources in patronage for short-term electoral gains and hence could invest in long-term goals (Kaviraj; 2011:95).

Kaviraj (2010b: 249) notes that Nehruvian economic design created a large variegated production base in the country, reduced the dependence on foreign countries for heavy industrial goods, set the stage for independent economic growth. Public sector industries could be rated well on productivity and cost-effectiveness in the initial period.

On the assessment of Nehru's policies Kaviraj takes the middle line of 'mixed judgment'. He says Nehru's policies gained remarkable success in terms of non-economic goods like freedom of decision-making but they still failed at the two main objectives of high economic growth and reduction of poverty (Kaviraj; 2010b: 250).^v Its redistributive commitments were real but slow and insubstantial economic growth^{vi} kept it dependent on the resources of the dominant classes (Kaviraj; 2010b:71). Kaviraj (2010b:71) observes that Nehruvian state 'supervised the rapid growth of a modern middle class', whom it could serve well and derive its legitimacy from. At another place he observes that Nehruvian design should not be judged by terms outside itself – in its own terms it was a success even economically.^{vii}

Kaviraj (2010b: 73) says Nehruvian state should not be seen as an example of failed socialist state – he says that it was 'a poor people's version of the welfare state'. It served the poor through 'desperate mitigation of crisis'.

Indira Gandhi Era

After Nehru, the public sector lost legitimacy, and economic policies gradually shifted, undermining the Nehruvian model by the 1980s (Kaviraj, 2010b). Indira Gandhi, chosen for her ideological flexibility, led Congress through electoral defeats in 1967. Land reforms and the Green Revolution created a rich farmer class (16% by 1971) that demanded subsidies and

support prices (Bardhan, 1985; Kaviraj, 2011:141). The Emergency (1975) secured their return to Congress. Economic burdens fell on excluded classes, leading to repression as negotiation declined (Kaviraj, 2011:141-142). Rich farmers used political power to block lower-class and caste advancement (Kaviraj, 2011:142).

To counter this, she employed populist rhetoric and policies such as bank nationalization and the abolition of privy purses, which, though not structurally transformative, altered public perception and mobilized the poor as political stakeholders (Kaviraj, 2011:100-101). These measures intensified party strife, leading to Congress's split on ideological lines. Her radical promises secured a landslide victory in the 1971 elections, prompting other parties to adopt similar rhetoric. However, elections increasingly became opportunities for voters to extract concessions, leading to a cycle of radical promises and declining government legitimacy due to unfulfilled expectations (Kaviraj, 2011:102, 149). This voter activation heightened awareness of inequality and encouraged the use of democratic mechanisms for empowerment (Kaviraj, 2011:103).

Relation between identity politics, poverty and patronage

Kaviraj argues that India's democratic mobilization diverged from European trajectories, as it was based on traditional group identities rather than individual interests (Kaviraj, 2011:104). Poverty was perceived as discrimination rather than economic deprivation, leading to identity-based politics rather class-based struggles (Kaviraj, 2011:107). These vertical mobilizations undermined class conflict, replacing it with configurations like peasants versus city dwellers. Combining mass numbers with elite resources, such mobilizations fueled majoritarianism, often demanding dominance based on numerical strength (Kaviraj, 2011:149). This shift weakened left politics and resisted liberalization, reinforcing the state's centrality in the economy (Kaviraj, 2011:108). Politicians increasingly viewed the state as a source of patronage rather than development, distributing resources based on bargaining power rather than rational planning, which undermined long-term economic stability (Kaviraj, 2011:109).

Institutionally, Congress weakened as Indira centralized power to counteract internal dissent. The Emergency (1975) was imposed under the pretext of economic discipline but alienated even privileged groups, including the business community (Kaviraj, 2011:143). The Janata government, despite its opposition to authoritarianism, failed to enact decisive economic reforms due to conflicting demands from big peasant and business interests, mirroring pre-

Emergency Congress contradictions (Kaviraj, 2011:145). By the late 1970s, some factions within the ruling coalition considered shifting toward market-led growth, a transition the Janata government might have advanced had it remained in power (Kaviraj, 2011:146).

Understanding of post-Nehruvian developments in economy

Kaviraj (2011:110) argues that post-Nehru, India inherited a degraded version of the Nehruvian model, which failed not because of its original design but due to its inability to adapt to global economic changes. While self-reliance was suitable post-World War II, the 1970s favored export-led growth. This shift, he asserts, nullified Nehruvian achievements. The 1980s saw 5% annual GDP growth, along with reduced poverty (Dreze & Sen, 2013:27). However, fiscal deficits, trade deficits, and foreign debt surged.

Before 1991, economic policy oscillated between liberalization and state control in an "ineffectual cycle" (Kaviraj, 2011:152). These shifts alternately benefited dominant-class factions, while the underprivileged suffered under both—either through market-driven hardships like inflation and indirect taxation or state-imposed constraints like wage freezes and weakened labor rights. Kaviraj (2011:153) contends that economic adjustments always came at the cost of the poor, with delayed effects due to Congress's one-party dominance.

Kaviraj (2011:112) notes that while democracy and growth are not inherently contradictory, populist demands in Third World nations can destabilize economic governance. He argues that India's democracy evolved differently from Europe, with traditional group identities shaping political dynamics. The upper classes sought to preserve inequality, while lower classes used democracy for redistribution, creating tensions. Identity-based democracy reduced inter-group inequality but slowed economic growth.

Pranab Bardhan (1984) has argued that India's political economy struggled to integrate democratic demands due to slow growth and a fragmented ruling coalition. This led to institutional weaknesses and poor policy decisions. Kaviraj (2010b:101) critiques this modernization thesis, arguing that rather than being overwhelmed, the Indian state amassed resources and deliberately created an unequal distribution network, reinforcing economic disparities instead of addressing them.

Transition to liberalization

Kaviraj (2010b:250) argues that by the 1980s, the Nehruvian model lost its legitimacy among elites, not due to inherent flaws but because politics had reshaped the public sector. It

failed to adapt to changing global realities, making fears of neo-colonialism outdated (Kaviraj, 2010b:250-251). Bureaucratic controls faced slow-growing criticism (Kaviraj, 2010b:254). Indira Gandhi prioritized productivity over equality and weakened economic planning (Kaviraj, 2010b:255). Liberalization ideas emerged during the Emergency, gained traction under Rajiv Gandhi, and led to pro-market reforms through technology and entrepreneurship initiatives.

Observations on liberalization and class coalition of the 1990s

Kaviraj (2010b) analyzes how India's shift to economic liberalization in the 1990s occurred despite weak coalition governments. He attributes this to changing class structures, shifting priorities, and international circumstances. The professional middle classes, losing political leverage to rich farmers and lower-caste groups, saw opportunities in the global economy rather than a stagnant domestic market (Kaviraj, 2010b:257).

Although the state sector was unpopular, liberalization was seen as risky. The Rao government's political skill, lack of strong opposition, and fear of BJP's rise helped push reforms forward (Kaviraj, 2010b:259-260). The ambiguity around liberalization's implications also aided its implementation. Business groups responded differently; some industries benefited while others faced risks (Kaviraj, 2010b:262). The managerial class, including private and public bureaucracies, generally supported liberalization, seeing themselves as a unified class.

The democratic political process often obstructed reforms. For instance, farm subsidies—contrary to liberalization principles—remained due to political dominance of rich farmers. Agricultural tax and wage reforms were also sidelined (Kaviraj, 2010b:264). The organized working class opposed liberalization, but left parties had lost their strength by the 1960s (Kaviraj, 2010b:265). Though reforms were triggered by a balance of payments crisis, their selective and slow implementation reflected political considerations (Kaviraj, 2010b:266).

Kaviraj (2011) argues that economic policy succeeds when insulated from electoral pressures. Liberalization in India has moved economic decisions away from democratic uncertainties (Kaviraj, 2011:112, 154)^{viii}. However, reduced state control over resources strains redistribution efforts (Kaviraj, 2011:113, 158). Unlike in Eastern Europe, India's reforms did not align with democratization. In describing the post-Nehru changes in the politics of the dominant classes, Kaviraj happens to overemphasize the role of the rise of the rich farmer class and favours made to them by the state; the reading of Bardhan (1984) suggests that other partners in the dominant coalition were also responsible for diverting resources and eating into development

expenditure. For example, Bardhan mentions that per capita real earnings of the central government employees increased since the beginning of the 1960s (till 1984) at an annual rate that was two and a half times that of per caput income of the country. He also says that money power of the urban lobbies outweighed the organizational strength of the farmers. Huge concessional financing was being made to large industrial sick units.

Conclusion

‘Verancularization of democracy’ element receives extra significance in Kaviraj’s whole analysis. Kaviraj’s thesis happens to underline the role of ‘non-liberal’ nature of politics of democratically risen lower classes in the post-Nehruvian era in economic policy-paralysis. This author has tried to contextualize and question Kaviraj’s thesis by comparing it with the ‘social structure of the state’ thesis put forth by another major theorist, Pranab Bardhan. Kaviraj’s argument is set in liberal rather than Marxist frame of analysis. His insistence on strict adherence to Western conceptions of both ‘democracy’ and ‘socialism’ while understanding Indian developments leads to disregard for ‘historical contextualization’ that he himself claims to uphold as a scholar. But the main issue with Kaviraj’s argument can be the moral-political implications of it. It defies both democratic and socialist considerations in its structuring.

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