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REVISITING DEENDAYAL UPADHYAYA: INTEGRAL HUMANISM AS A FRAMEWORK FOR CONTEMPORARY INDIAN POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the political philosophy of Deendayal Upadhyaya, focusing on his doctrine of Integral Humanism. Using a qualitative research methodology based on secondary source analysis, the paper explores key texts such as Integral Humanism and Rastra Chintan, alongside academic literature, speeches, and BJP policy documents. The research employs thematic content analysis to identify the core constructs of Integral Humanism and trace its influence on Indian political thought. Additionally, the study adopts a comparative political philosophy approach, analysing Integral Humanism in relation to socialism and liberal democracy. This comparative framework highlights Integral Humanism's unique emphasis on the integration of spirituality and morality into political governance, offering a distinctive perspective on modern political and ethical challenges. By exploring the philosophical evolution and practical application of Integral Humanism, the paper aims to assess its relevance in shaping contemporary governance and its potential contribution to addressing the complexities of modern political life in India.

Keywords: Integral Humanism, Deendayal Upadhyaya, Political Philosophy, Ethical Governance, Comparative Political Thought

1. INTRODUCTION

Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya was a distinguished philosopher, sociologist, economist, and political thinker whose idealism and integrity served as a moral compass for Indian political life. His life and work, rooted in ethical values and human dignity, inspired generations of politicians to uphold purity and humanity as foundational principles of governance. Recognized for his exemplary character and intellectual contributions, Upadhyaya earned widespread respect not only from his followers but also from his ideological opponents (Dharamsenan, 2017; Nain, 2019). A profound thinker from an early age, his intellectual pursuits focused on the critical themes shaping Indian society, such as the relationship between the individual and society, the role of dharma and the state, and the dynamics of culture and civilization.

Upadhyaya was also a prolific writer who authored several influential works, including The Two Plans, Political Diary, Devaluation, Integral Humanism, Rashtra Chintan, Bharatiya Arthniti, Rashtra Jeevan Ki Disha, Akhand Bharat Aur Muslim Samasya, Hindu Sanskriti Ki Visheshta, and Samrat Chandragupta, among others. These texts reflect his commitment to developing an indigenous intellectual framework that could guide India's socio-political transformation. He is often regarded as a modern interpreter of ancient Indian wisdom, striving to reconcile traditional values with the

demands of contemporary governance. His objective was to articulate a political philosophy grounded in Indian cultural ethos and natural law—one that could support the holistic development of the nation (Upadhyaya, 2018).

It was with this vision that he introduced the concept of Integral Humanism during the Gwalior session of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh in 1964. This philosophy was formally adopted by the party in the Vijayawada session on April 23, 1965 (Upadhyaya, 1968). In his address, Upadhyaya emphasized that even after 17 years of independence, India lacked a clear ideological direction. He criticized the uncritical imitation of Western political and economic models and noted that Indian society remained divided between those yearning for a return to pre-colonial traditions and those embracing Westernization as the sole path to progress. According to him, both these perspectives were flawed, as they represented only partial truths. Upadhyaya proposed instead a middle path—Integral Humanism—which harmonized modern aspirations with traditional values, individual freedom with social responsibility, and material progress with spiritual grounding (Malkani, 2002; Jaffrelot, 2007).

In the landscape of modern Indian political thought, few ideologues have left as enduring and ideologically coherent a legacy as Deendayal Upadhyaya. A prominent thinker, philosopher, and organizer associated with the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (the predecessor of the Bharatiya Janata Party), Upadhyaya articulated a distinctive ideological framework known as Integral Humanism (Ekatma Manav Darshan) in 1965. Delivered as a series of lectures in Bombay, this philosophy was adopted as the official doctrine of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh and continues to serve as the ideological foundation of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). As India struggles to balance tradition and modernity, liberal democracy and sociocultural rootedness, Integral Humanism offers a uniquely indigenous approach to politics, governance, and development (Upadhyaya, 1965; Thakur, 2009).

In contrast, Integral Humanism emphasizes a holistic vision of the human being, wherein the physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual aspects of life are integrated and nurtured. This integrated view is not only anthropological but also socio-political, aiming to align the purpose of the state and the economy with the organic needs and values of Indian society. Upadhyaya maintained that the primary goal of governance should be the full development of the human personality, rooted in ethical and spiritual values derived from Sanatan Dharma—the eternal moral and cultural order (Upadhyaya, 1965). For him, Dharma was not religion in the narrow Western sense, but a universal code of ethics and harmony guiding individual and collective behaviour (Kumar, 2020).

Central to Integral Humanism is the notion of Cultural Nationalism. Upadhyaya viewed the Indian nation as a living organism with a civilizational continuity that transcends political boundaries and historical ruptures. In his view, India's national identity is anchored not in modern constitutional constructs alone, but in a shared cultural heritage, spiritual worldview, and historical experience. This stands in contrast to the Western notion of nationhood based on contracts or civic institutions. For Upadhyaya, nationalism is not an exclusionary concept but a unifying principle that binds diverse communities through cultural and moral values (Chatterjee, 1993; Jaffrelot, 2007).

Upadhyaya's formulation also challenges both extreme individualism and collectivism. It rejects the atomistic individualism of liberalism and the class-conflict-driven collectivism of Marxism. Instead, it proposes a community-oriented but individual-conscious vision where every person is seen as a part of a larger organic whole. As such, Integral Humanism advocates for decentralization, participatory democracy, and an economic model based on Swadeshi (economic self-reliance) and sustainable development aligned with Indian values and resources (Kumar, 2020).

In the decades following its articulation, Integral Humanism has significantly influenced the ideological and policy discourse of the BJP, especially after it rose to national prominence in the 1990s. Political leaders including Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Narendra Modi have frequently invoked Upadhyaya's ideas in their speeches and policy formulations. The re-emergence of indigenous philosophical frameworks in Indian politics—particularly in reaction to globalized liberalism—underscores the continued relevance of Integral Humanism. Yet, its practical application in a pluralistic democracy also invites critical scrutiny.

This article aims to explore the political dimension of Integral Humanism—how its philosophical tenets translate into political ideology, governance models, policy frameworks, and national identity. It will examine both the theoretical foundations and the practical implications of this philosophy, its contemporary relevance, and the criticisms it has faced in the evolving political discourse of India.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research methodology grounded in secondary source analysis to explore the political philosophy of Deendayal Upadhyaya, with a focus on his doctrine of Integral Humanism. The research primarily involves the critical examination of existing literature, including published and unpublished academic works, journal articles, speeches, official party documents, and archived writings. Key texts such as Integral Humanism and Rastra Chintan by Upadhyaya, along with peer-reviewed journal articles and doctoral dissertations, serve as foundational sources. A thematic content analysis is applied to identify core philosophical constructs and trace their influence on contemporary Indian political discourse. Additionally, manifestos and policy documents from the Bharatiya Janata Party are reviewed to assess the practical application of Integral Humanism.

Furthermore, the study adopts a comparative political philosophy approach, juxtaposing Integral Humanism with socialism and liberal democracy. This comparative analysis engages with debates in ethical theories concerning governance, particularly the integration of spirituality and morality in political practices. The aim is to understand how Integral Humanism differs from, and offers a more comprehensive perspective than, these political frameworks. By adopting this methodology, the study aims to address how Integral Humanism can offer solutions to the challenges of modern governance, and how its philosophical underpinnings can shape contemporary political and ethical agendas. Through this process, the paper seeks to elucidate the potential of Integral Humanism in addressing the modern political landscape while offering a distinct, holistic approach to governance and societal development.

3. INTEGRAL HUMANISM: THE CORE PHILOSOPHY

Integral Humanism, articulated by Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya in a seminal series of lectures delivered in Bombay in 1965, stands as one of the most influential ideological contributions to modern Indian political thought. Later adopted as the official doctrine of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh—the ideological predecessor of the Bharatiya Janata Party—this philosophy presents a distinctively Indian response to the ideological polarities of the Cold War era: Western liberal capitalism and Eastern Marxist socialism (Upadhyaya, 1965). Unlike these materialist ideologies, Integral Humanism envisions a comprehensive and balanced model of human development that integrates physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual aspects of life.

At its core, Integral Humanism rests on four foundational principles that collectively represent a cohesive framework for political, social, and economic governance in India. These principles are not merely theoretical constructs but are deeply embedded in Indian cultural and civilizational values, particularly those derived from Sanatan Dharma, which Upadhyaya interpreted not as organized religion but as an eternal and universal moral order.

• Holistic Vision of the Human Being

Upadhyaya's first and foremost critique is directed at the reductive anthropologies of Western ideologies. Capitalism, in his view, reduces man to a consumer or economic agent, focused on utility and profit. Marxism, conversely, treats the individual as a mere unit of class struggle, subordinated to material conditions and historical determinism. Both perspectives, he argued, ignore the spiritual and moral dimensions of human life. In contrast, Integral Humanism posits a holistic conception of the human being—Ekatma Manav—who is a composite of body, mind, intellect, and soul. Each dimension must be nurtured in harmony for true human flourishing. This vision reflects an Indian understanding of life, where the material and the spiritual are not in conflict but are interdependent. Policies and institutions, therefore, must aim at the full development of the human personality rather than mere economic output.

• Dharma-Centric Polity

The second pillar of Integral Humanism is its emphasis on Dharma as the ethical foundation of politics and governance. Upadhyaya did not advocate a theocratic state; rather, he proposed a polity guided by moral order. Dharma, in this context, signifies a universal code of righteousness that upholds justice, harmony, and collective well-being. This concept challenges the secular liberal separation of religion and politics, which often leads to moral relativism and policy vacuums in the name of neutrality. For Upadhyaya, political decisions should not be value-neutral but ought to reflect deeper civilizational values rooted in truth, compassion, and responsibility. Political leaders and institutions, therefore, bear the responsibility of ensuring that governance aligns with ethical principles that are culturally resonant and socially sustainable.

Decentralization and Swadeshi

Integral Humanism also proposes a model of economic and political decentralization. Upadhyaya opposed centralization of power, whether in the form of state socialism or corporate monopolies. He favoured a participatory democracy grounded in Gram Swaraj—village self-rule—as envisioned by Mahatma Gandhi. Economic self-reliance (Swadeshi) was a critical component of this framework. Rather than importing foreign models of development, Upadhyaya advocated for indigenous economic practices that draw upon local resources, traditional knowledge, and community-based entrepreneurship. In doing so, he emphasized sustainability, human dignity, and cultural appropriateness. Swadeshi, as conceptualized here, was not merely a boycott of foreign goods but a philosophy of self-respect, resilience, and rootedness in Indian social realities.

• Nation as a Living Organism

Perhaps the most distinctive and philosophically rich idea in Integral Humanism is the concept of the nation as a living organism. Rejecting both the contractual notion of nationhood found in Western liberal thought and the mechanistic collectivism of Marxism, Upadhyaya envisioned the nation as an organic unity with a soul (Chiti), a shared cultural memory, and a spiritual destiny. In his view, India is not just a geographical territory or a constitutional construct but a civilizational entity that has evolved over millennia. This perspective fosters a sense of national identity that is inclusive, spiritual, and historical rather than narrowly ethnic or linguistic. It promotes a form of cultural nationalism that seeks unity in diversity and harmony among communities based on shared moral values.

Together, these principles form the ideological bedrock of Integral Humanism—a philosophy that critiques the materialism of both capitalist and socialist paradigms while offering an alternative rooted in India's cultural and spiritual heritage. It calls for a synthesis of ancient wisdom and modern necessities, balancing individual aspirations with social duties, and economic development with moral responsibility.

As India continues to navigate complex challenges related to development, identity, and governance, Integral Humanism remains a relevant framework for envisioning a path that is not only pragmatic but also culturally authentic and ethically grounded. It invites both policymakers and citizens to rethink the goals of politics—not merely as a mechanism of power but as an instrument for realizing the highest human potential in harmony with collective good.

4. POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF INTEGRAL HUMANISM

Deendayal Upadhyaya's Integral Humanism, while primarily a philosophical doctrine, carries profound political implications. It offers a distinct paradigm for understanding the role of the state, the nature of nationalism, the structure of the economy, and approaches to social justice. Grounded in Indian cultural and spiritual traditions, Integral Humanism presents a model of governance and development that diverges sharply from both Western liberal democracy and socialist central planning.

• Reimagining the State and Governance

At the heart of Integral Humanism is a redefinition of the state's role—not as a coercive apparatus or a welfare provider, but as a moral and cultural facilitator of human flourishing. For Upadhyaya, governance should nurture all dimensions of human life—spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical (Upadhyaya, 1965). The state must act in accordance with Dharma, promoting policies that are ethical, culturally resonant, and spiritually informed.

Two key implications arise from this vision:

- **Policy rooted in civilizational values:** Public policy must reflect India's indigenous ethos rather than being guided purely by economic or utilitarian concerns. This includes aligning legislation and institutional structures with moral and cultural principles that resonate with Indian traditions (Thakur, 2009).
- **Decentralization of power:** Upadhyaya's emphasis on Gram Swaraj—borrowed from Gandhian thought—supports the idea of devolving authority to local units of governance. Centralized control, in his view, alienates citizens from decision-making and disrupts organic community life (Malkani, 2002). This political decentralization supports participatory democracy and strengthens local self-governance.

• Cultural Nationalism and Identity Politics

One of the most debated aspects of Integral Humanism is its conception of Rashtra Dharma or cultural nationalism. Upadhyaya envisioned the Indian nation not as a product of colonial legacy or constitutional engineering, but as a civilizational entity with deep historical roots. This form of nationalism emphasizes shared culture, history, and moral values rather than ethnic or religious homogeneity (Upadhyaya, 1968). However, critics have noted the risks associated with such a model. While Upadhyaya emphasized that Indian identity transcends religious and linguistic divisions, some argue that cultural nationalism, when interpreted through a majoritarian lens, may lead to the marginalization of religious minorities (Jaffrelot, 2007). Upadhyaya, however, clarified that "Bharatiyata" includes all inhabitants of the land who identify with its cultural legacy, irrespective of their religious background.

• Economy and Development: The Swadeshi Model

Integral Humanism articulates an alternative economic vision rooted in Swadeshi—self-reliance and indigenous production. Upadhyaya rejected both laissez-faire capitalism, which he saw as exploitative, and state socialism, which he viewed as overly centralized and impersonal. Instead, he advocated:

- Promotion of indigenous and small-scale industries
- Decentralized and cooperative models of production
- Economic sustainability aligned with nature and culture

This model is not merely a nostalgic return to pre-industrial forms of production but an ethical and ecological critique of modern developmentalism. Its contemporary relevance can be seen in initiatives like Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India), which echo the call for localized, resilient, and environmentally sustainable development (Kumar, 2020).

Social Justice and Caste

Integral Humanism also touches on social justice, though Upadhyaya did not provide an elaborate framework on caste. He promoted Samajik Samarasata (social harmony), advocating social cohesion rather than confrontation. He rejected Marxist class conflict and emphasized upliftment through integration rather than revolution (Upadhyaya, 1965). While this approach encourages peaceful reform and mutual respect, it has its critics. Scholars argue that it does not confront entrenched hierarchies like casteism or patriarchy directly. Instead of structural reform, it emphasizes moral awakening and spiritual oneness, which, though idealistic, may be inadequate for addressing deep-rooted social inequities (Aloysius, 1998).

5. INTEGRAL HUMANISM AND CONTEMPORARY INDIAN POLITICS

Since the 1990s, the political philosophy of Integral Humanism has gained renewed prominence, particularly with the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party as a dominant force in Indian politics. Deendayal Upadhyaya's ideas, once primarily philosophical and ideological, have increasingly informed public discourse, electoral strategies, and policy decisions at the national level. The philosophy's emphasis on holistic human development, cultural rootedness, and decentralized governance has found expression in both rhetoric and policy, though not without contradictions.

• BJP and the Political Institutionalization of Integral Humanism

The BJP has formally adopted Integral Humanism as its ideological foundation. It remains the official guiding principle of the party, influencing its vision of governance, nationalism, and development. Party documents, including election manifestos, parliamentary speeches, and ideological training materials, often invoke Upadhyaya's vision (BJP, 2014; 2019). Prime Minister Narendra Modi has frequently cited Upadhyaya's teachings as a source of moral and philosophical guidance for contemporary governance. His emphasis on Antyodaya—uplifting the poorest of the poor—directly draws from Integral Humanism's concern for social equity within a dharmic framework. The institutionalization of Integral Humanism has also occurred through think tanks, educational programs, and the dissemination of Upadhyaya's works, particularly through the Deendayal Research Institute and affiliated organizations.

• Key Government Programs Reflecting Integral Humanism

Several flagship initiatives launched by BJP-led governments have drawn inspiration—implicitly or explicitly—from Integral Humanism. These include:

- **Jan Dhan Yojana (2014):** Focused on financial inclusion, this scheme seeks to restore economic dignity and accessibility to all citizens, aligning with Integral Humanism's idea of socio-economic harmony.
- **Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (2014):** A national sanitation campaign promoting cleanliness as both a civic responsibility and a cultural value, echoing Upadhyaya's emphasis on moral and physical well-being.
- **Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan (2020):** Advocating for self-reliant development and indigenous industries, this campaign directly channels the Swadeshi principle that Upadhyaya championed.
- **Digital India and Startup India:** While these programs leverage global technologies, they are framed as Indian solutions to Indian problems, seeking to empower local communities and entrepreneurs in alignment with the dharmic-nationalist framework.

These policies aim to synthesize modernity with tradition—a hallmark of Integral Humanism that advocates for development without cultural alienation.

• Critiques and Limitations in Practice

Despite its philosophical promise, the political application of Integral Humanism has encountered substantial criticism and internal contradictions.

- Majoritarianism and Identity Politics: Critics argue that the notion of cultural nationalism underpinning Integral Humanism has, in practice, facilitated Hindu majoritarianism. These risks undermining India's secular foundations and marginalizing religious minorities (Chatterjee, 1995; Jaffrelot, 2007). While Upadhyaya called for unity through cultural inclusivity, opponents contend that current interpretations often conflate Indian culture exclusively with Hindu traditions.
- **Economic Inconsistencies:** Integral Humanism calls for economic self-reliance through Swadeshi, decentralized production, and local enterprise. However, BJP governments since the 1990s have embraced economic liberalization and global capital, often encouraging foreign direct investment and market-based reforms. These policies, while aimed at growth, appear to conflict with the inward-looking, self-reliant economic philosophy of Integral Humanism (Kumar, 2020).
- **Centralized Governance:** Upadhyaya envisioned governance rooted in local autonomy and Gram Swaraj. Yet, in practice, several central schemes such as Digital India and Ayushman Bharat have been criticized for top-down implementation with limited grassroots input. This raises questions about the genuine decentralization of power in a federal democracy.

These critiques suggest that while Integral Humanism remains a potent ideological reference point, its practical application faces challenges in maintaining fidelity to its core values amidst political expediency and governance complexities.

6. INTEGRAL HUMANISM AND COMPARATIVE POLITICAL THOUGHT

Integral Humanism, as articulated by Deendayal Upadhyaya in the 1960s, offers a distinct philosophical alternative to dominant Western ideologies like secular liberalism and Marxism. While rooted in Indian cultural and spiritual traditions, it resonates with several global ideological frameworks that also emphasize ethical governance, community well-being, and holistic human development. By situating Integral Humanism within a comparative political framework, we can better appreciate its philosophical relevance and distinctiveness in the global context.

• Integral Humanism and Gandhian Philosophy

Integral Humanism bears a deep philosophical kinship with the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi. Both emphasize Swadeshi (economic self-reliance), Sarvodaya (welfare of all), and the centrality of ethical conduct in politics. Gandhi's concept of Gram Swaraj—autonomous, self-sufficient village communities—finds strong resonance in Upadhyaya's advocacy for decentralized governance and local empowerment (Parel, 2006). Moreover, both reject materialism as the foundation of progress, placing instead moral and spiritual development at the center of human well-being.

However, there are distinctions. Gandhi's philosophy is grounded in non-violence (Ahimsa) as an absolute moral principle, whereas Integral Humanism is more flexible in its approach to political action, rooted in Dharma—a broader moral order that can accommodate firmness in defense of national integrity (Malkani, 2002). Nevertheless, the two philosophies converge in their shared critique of Western modernity and industrialism.

• Integral Humanism and Christian Democracy

In post-war Europe, Christian Democracy emerged as a centrist political philosophy that combined democratic values with Christian ethics. It emphasizes the dignity of the individual, social justice, subsidiarity (local decision-making), and the importance of family and community—values that closely parallel those in Integral Humanism (Kalyvas & van Kersbergen, 2010).

Both ideologies affirm the moral foundation of politics and the need for governance to serve the holistic development of individuals—spiritually, socially, and economically. Moreover, Christian Democracy, like Integral Humanism, often promotes welfare policies not as entitlements but as duties of a morally accountable state grounded in civilizational values.

The major distinction lies in their metaphysical sources: Christian Democracy is explicitly grounded in Christian theology, particularly Catholic social thought, while Integral Humanism draws from Sanatan Dharma, the moral and spiritual foundation of Indian civilization. Despite theological differences, both reject ideological materialism and embrace a communitarian ethos.

Integral Humanism and Islamic Humanism

Islamic Humanism, a concept advanced by thinkers such as Muhammad Iqbal and Ali Shariati, emphasizes the spiritual dimension of human existence and the pursuit of justice and dignity within an Islamic moral framework. Like Integral Humanism, it challenges secular liberalism's emphasis on individualism and economic materialism, seeking instead a spiritual and communal basis for governance and social order (Nasr, 2002).

Islamic Humanism and Integral Humanism both advocate for justice, social harmony, and the spiritual development of humanity. Both philosophies also stress that society and governance should reflect divine or moral principles rather than purely secular or materialist objectives. However, Islamic Humanism often envisions a stronger role for religious institutions and law in the political domain, while Integral Humanism, though rooted in Dharma, does not call for a theocratic state but rather for a dharmic moral order that guides both state and society (Thakur, 2009).

• Challenging Secular Liberalism and Marxism

By drawing on indigenous values and spiritual traditions, Integral Humanism joins a global constellation of non-materialist political philosophies that challenge the ideological hegemony of both secular liberalism and Marxism. Where liberalism elevates individual autonomy and markets, and Marxism focuses on class struggle and economic determinism, Integral Humanism proposes a synthesis: individual and community, economy and morality, tradition and progress.

In this sense, Integral Humanism is not isolationist or anti-modern but seeks an alternative modernity—rooted in India's civilizational ethos, yet capable of dialogue with other ethical-political frameworks. Its relevance grows in a world increasingly aware of the limitations of hyper-individualism, ecological degradation, and cultural alienation caused by global capitalism and statist socialism.

7. CONCLUSION

Deendayal Upadhyaya's Integral Humanism presents a unique political philosophy that seeks to harmonize spiritual values, cultural identity, and ethical governance. Distinct from both capitalist individualism and Marxist materialism, it envisions a polity grounded in Dharma—not as religious dogma, but as a moral order governing society and state alike (Upadhyaya, 1965). Central to this vision is a holistic understanding of the human being as an integration of body, mind, intellect, and soul, as well as the nation as a living cultural organism rather than a mere legal construct (Malkani, 2002).

While Integral Humanism offers a compelling ideological alternative to dominant Western paradigms, its political application in a pluralistic and constitutional democracy like India is complex. Critics have noted that, in practice, the ideology can sometimes veer toward majoritarian cultural nationalism, which may risk marginalizing minority voices (Jaffrelot, 2007). Additionally, there are tensions between the ideal of decentralization and the centralized nature of many recent policy initiatives (Chatterjee, 1995).

Despite these challenges, Integral Humanism remains deeply influential, especially through the Bharatiya Janata Party, which has institutionalized its principles in key policy domains—from financial inclusion to Swadeshi-inspired economic self-reliance (BJP, 2014; Kumar, 2020). Its enduring appeal lies not in doctrinaire rigidity but in its emphasis on culturally rooted, ethically grounded, and spiritually informed development.

As India aspires to global leadership, Integral Humanism offers a philosophical anchor that can guide policy with indigenous wisdom. However, for it to remain relevant, it must adapt to contemporary values of constitutional morality, democratic pluralism, and inclusive governance.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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