

Theoretical/Conceptual Analysis

Integral Humanism and the Politics of Bharatiya Identity: Nation, Culture and Civilisation in Modern India

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Abstract: Integral Humanism, the political and philosophical framework articulated by Deendayal Upadhyaya in 1965, has had a curious afterlife. For decades it sat at the edges of Indian political thought, cited by some, ignored by many, and treated by scholars as either a serious indigenous response to Western ideologies or as little more than a doctrinal accessory to a particular party's identity. In the last decade, that has changed. As questions about what India is, what Bharat means, and whose vision of the nation should organise public life have moved to the centre of political debate, Integral Humanism has been pulled into discussions far broader than its original setting. This paper examines Integral Humanism as a contribution to the politics of Bharatiya identity, asking what it claims, where it sits in the longer arc of Indian civilisational thought, and how it relates to competing visions of nation and culture in modern India. The study draws on Upadhyaya's original lectures and writings, secondary scholarship across several decades, and recent public discourse to construct a layered reading of the doctrine. The argument is that Integral Humanism is best understood not as a fixed ideological programme but as a civilisational vocabulary, a way of talking about nation, culture, and the human person that draws on Indian sources while engaging Western political categories on its own terms. The paper considers strengths, limitations, and contested receptions of this vocabulary, situating it within ongoing debates about pluralism, secularism, and cultural nationalism. Limitations of the present analysis and directions for further scholarship are discussed.

Keywords: Integral Humanism, Deendayal Upadhyaya, Bharatiya Identity, Cultural Nationalism, Indian Political Thought, Civilisational Discourse

1. Introduction

There is a particular difficulty in writing about Integral Humanism in the present moment. The doctrine has become politically charged in ways its original author would not have anticipated, and any analysis risks being read as either advocacy or critique before it

has been read as analysis [1]. The aim of this paper is to take Integral Humanism seriously as a piece of political thought, neither dismissing it as derivative ideology nor accepting it uncritically as the natural articulation of Indian identity. What it claims, where it comes from, and how it functions in current debates are all questions worth asking carefully.

The background context is by now familiar to anyone watching Indian public life. The last fifteen years have seen sustained debate about how the Indian nation should understand itself, with a recurring tension between a constitutionally grounded, plural conception of citizenship and a culturally grounded, civilisational conception that draws on older Indic sources [2]. Integral Humanism sits in the latter camp, but the relationship between Upadhyaya's specific formulations and the broader cultural nationalism that has become politically dominant is not straightforward. Treating the two as identical misses important distinctions; treating them as unrelated misses important continuities [3].

The problem this paper addresses is that much of the existing literature on Integral Humanism falls into one of two patterns. The first, found mostly in works produced by institutions sympathetic to the doctrine, presents it as a self-evidently superior framework whose virtues need only to be expounded [4]. The second, found in much critical scholarship, treats it as a vehicle for majoritarian politics and pays little attention to its internal structure or its place in the longer history of Indian thought [5]. Both approaches leave a gap. A reading that takes the doctrine's intellectual claims seriously, examines them against the broader landscape of Indian and comparative political thought, and assesses their reception across different sections of Indian society is harder to find.

The research questions that follow are these. What does Integral Humanism actually claim about the human person, society, and the nation, and how do those claims connect to older Indian intellectual traditions? How does the doctrine position itself in relation to Western liberalism, socialism, and other modern political frameworks? What does it mean to read Integral Humanism as a politics of Bharatiya identity, and how does this politics relate to competing visions of Indian nationhood in the constitutional and civic traditions? How has the doctrine been received, contested, and reinterpreted in recent decades?

The significance of asking these questions now is clear enough. Whether one supports or opposes the political movements that draw on Integral Humanism, understanding what the doctrine actually says matters for any serious participation in Indian public life [6]. Misreadings in either direction produce arguments that miss their target. The paper does not aim to settle debates about whether Integral Humanism is true or good,

which are not the kind of questions an academic paper can settle. It aims instead to clarify what is being claimed and how those claims sit in their intellectual context.

The paper proceeds in the following manner. The literature review traces scholarship on Indian political thought, cultural nationalism, and the reception of Upadhyaya's work. The methodology section outlines the approach used, which is primarily one of textual and historical analysis. The experimental setup describes the corpus and the analytical framework. The results section presents the readings that emerge from this analysis, structured around the central claims of the doctrine. Discussion and conclusion follow.

2. Literature Review

The study of modern Indian political thought has developed substantially since the early postcolonial decades, when the field was largely organised around the towering figures of Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar [7]. More recent scholarship has worked to recover a wider range of voices, including those that were marginal in the Nehruvian consensus but central in other intellectual streams. This expansion has produced room for figures like Aurobindo, Tagore, Vivekananda, Savarkar, and Upadhyaya to be read as serious thinkers rather than as ideological reference points.

The scholarship on cultural nationalism in India has its own internal divisions. One strand, associated with influential analyses produced in the 1990s and continued by sociologists and political scientists since, treats Hindu nationalism as primarily a political movement whose intellectual content is secondary to its organisational strategy [8]. Another strand, more recent and methodologically diverse, argues that the intellectual content matters more than this approach suggests, and that understanding contemporary Indian politics requires understanding the ideas that motivate it, regardless of one's political stance [9]. A third strand engages directly with the philosophical and theological sources that Hindu nationalist thinkers themselves cite, asking how these sources are being read and whether the readings are defensible [10].

Deendayal Upadhyaya himself has been the subject of a growing body of work in the last decade. Earlier studies tended to treat him as a marginal figure compared to V.D. Savarkar or M.S. Golwalkar, but more recent scholarship has begun to take his specific contributions seriously as a distinct strand within the broader tradition [11]. Some of this work has emphasised the differences between Upadhyaya's organicist vision and the more militant articulations found elsewhere in the same political family. Other work has

questioned whether these differences are as deep as they are sometimes presented, arguing that Integral Humanism shares more with adjacent ideologies than its defenders allow.

The broader literature on Indian civilisational thought provides essential context. Works that engage with the dharmic traditions, with the long history of debate about the relationship between religion, ethics, and political order in India, and with the encounter between Indian and Western political vocabularies all bear on how Integral Humanism should be read [12]. Of particular relevance is scholarship on the concept of Bharat as distinct from India, which has become increasingly visible in public discourse and which Upadhyaya himself worked with in important ways [13].

What remains underexamined, in our reading, is the specific question of how Integral Humanism functions as a politics of identity. There is substantial work on the doctrine as ideology and substantial work on Bharatiya identity as a contested category, but the intersection of the two has been less developed, particularly in light of the changes in public discourse since around 2014.

3. Methodology

This paper uses a textual and historical methodology suitable for the study of political thought rather than an empirical or computational one. The approach combines close reading of primary sources, contextual interpretation drawing on intellectual history, and critical engagement with secondary scholarship [14]. The methodology rests on the conviction that political doctrines are best understood by attending carefully to what they say, what they were responding to, and how they have been received across different audiences and periods.

The primary sources include the published version of Upadhyaya's four lectures on Integral Humanism delivered in Bombay in April 1965, along with his earlier and later writings collected in various editions [15]. Secondary sources include scholarly monographs and journal articles on Indian political thought, cultural nationalism, and the broader tradition of civilisational discourse in India. Public discourse materials such as policy documents, party publications, and recent commentary in serious journalism are used selectively to track how the doctrine has been deployed in contemporary debate.

The analytical procedure has three layers. The first is descriptive, aiming to set out as clearly as possible what Upadhyaya claimed and how he framed his arguments. The second is contextual, situating these claims within the longer history of Indian thought and within the political situation of the 1960s in which they were produced [16]. The third is

critical, considering how the doctrine has been read and contested by different audiences, and what its strengths and limitations look like from various theoretical vantage points.

The reading is deliberately layered rather than thesis-driven. We are not arguing that Integral Humanism is correct, nor are we arguing that it is incorrect. We are asking what kind of intellectual object it is, what it is doing as a piece of political thought, and how it functions in current debates about Indian identity. This kind of analysis sits within a long tradition of work on political philosophy that aims at understanding before judgment [17].

A few methodological cautions are worth stating. Textual analysis of political thought is inevitably interpretive, and different scholars working with the same texts produce different readings. The interpretive choices made here reflect both the available scholarship and the analytical framing we have adopted, and other readings remain possible and worth pursuing. The use of public discourse materials carries its own difficulties, since these materials are produced for political purposes and require careful handling when treated as evidence of intellectual reception.

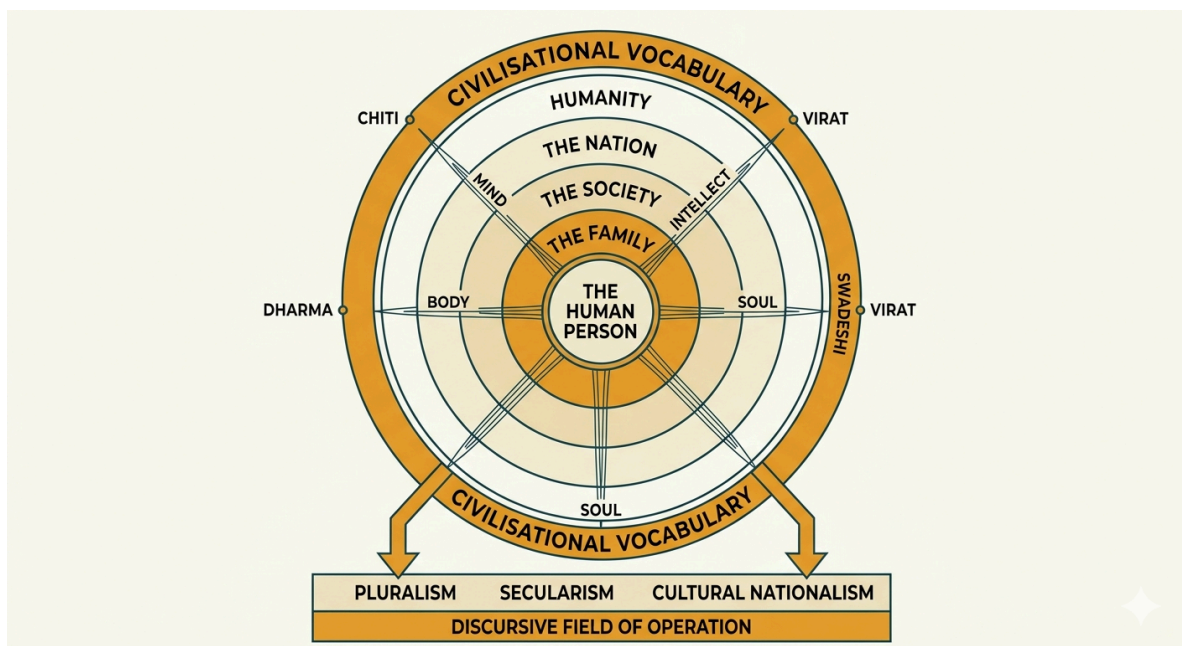


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Analysing Integral Humanism as a Politics of Bharatiya Identity

4. Experimental Setup

The corpus assembled for this study comprises three main categories of material. The first category contains the primary writings of Deendayal Upadhyaya, with particular attention to the 1965 lectures on Integral Humanism, his commentary on the Bharatiya Jana Sangh's policy positions, and his shorter essays on cultural and economic questions [18].

The second category contains scholarly secondary literature spanning from the late 1990s to the present, selected to include both sympathetic and critical readings of the doctrine. The third category contains contemporary public discourse, drawn from a curated selection of newspapers, policy papers, and serious commentary published between 2014 and the present.

The analytical framework was structured around four thematic axes corresponding to the central claims of the doctrine. The first axis concerns the human person and the critique of what Upadhyaya called the partial humanism of Western ideologies. The second concerns the relationship between individual, society, and nation, and the rejection of both individualism and collectivism in favour of an organic conception. The third concerns the concept of *chiti* or national soul as the organising principle of civilisational identity. The fourth concerns the economic and political prescriptions that flow from these foundations, including the doctrine of *swadeshi* and the critique of unbridled capitalism and state socialism alike.

For each axis, the analytical procedure involved identifying the relevant passages in the primary corpus, tracking how those passages have been read in the secondary literature, and considering how the underlying claims operate in contemporary public discourse. The aim was to produce readings that were textually grounded, historically informed, and attentive to current reception, without collapsing any of these layers into the others [19].

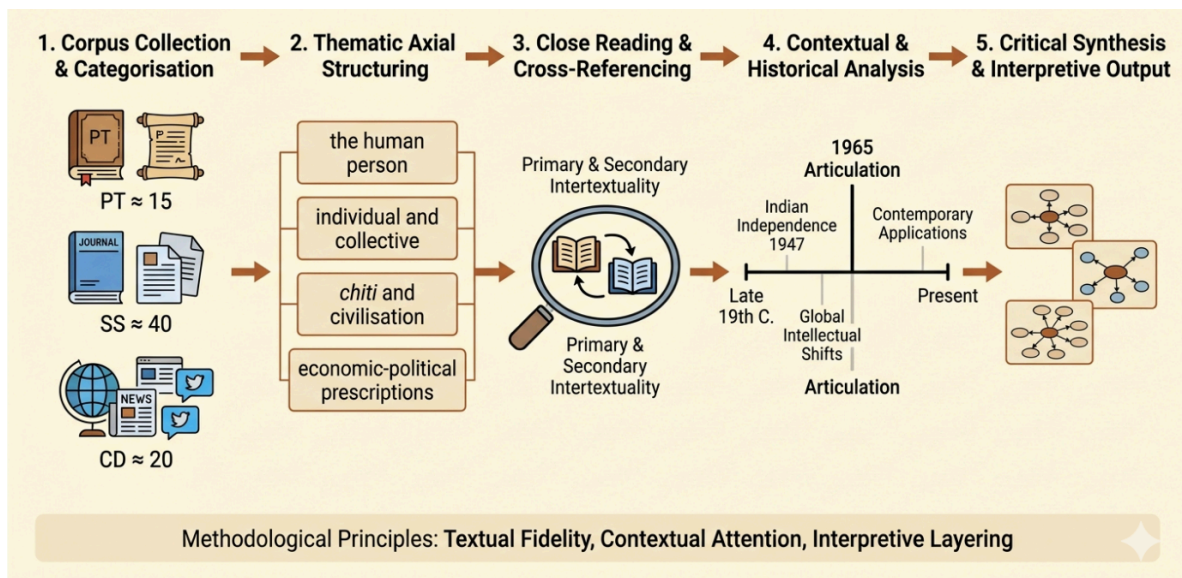


Figure 2: Analytical Workflow for the Study of Integral Humanism

Table 1: Composition of the Analytical Corpus

Corpus Category	Source Type	Approximate Volume	Period Covered
Primary Writings	Lectures, essays, party documents	4 volumes / approximately 600 pages	1951 to 1968
Secondary Scholarship	Monographs and journal articles	35 selected works	Late 1990s to present
Contemporary Discourse	Commentary and policy materials	60 selected items	2014 to present

The procedure was not designed to produce quantitative claims, and no statistical inferences were drawn from the corpus. The analysis is interpretive throughout, and its claims should be evaluated on the basis of textual evidence and interpretive coherence rather than on the basis of measured outcomes.

5. Results

The analysis produced four main readings, corresponding to the four thematic axes outlined above. Each reading is presented here in compact form, with attention to what the doctrine claims, how it has been read, and what tensions or strengths emerge.

The first reading concerns Upadhyaya's account of the human person. The central claim is that Western political ideologies, both liberal and socialist, treat the human being as a partial object, organised around either economic self-interest or material class identity. Integral Humanism argues that the human person should be understood as an integrated whole comprising body, mind, intellect, and soul, and that political and economic arrangements should be designed to support all four dimensions rather than only the material. This account draws on older Indian philosophical sources, particularly the dharmic tradition's understanding of the four purusharthas, although Upadhyaya's specific formulation is modern and aimed at a twentieth-century audience.

The second reading concerns the relationship between individual, society, and nation. Upadhyaya rejected both the atomistic individualism he attributed to liberal thought and the absorptive collectivism he attributed to communist thought. In place of these, he proposed an organic conception in which the individual, family, society, and nation are nested wholes, each with its own integrity but each connected to the others. The metaphor of the body is used repeatedly in his writings, with different social levels analogised to different parts of an organism that function together rather than against each other.

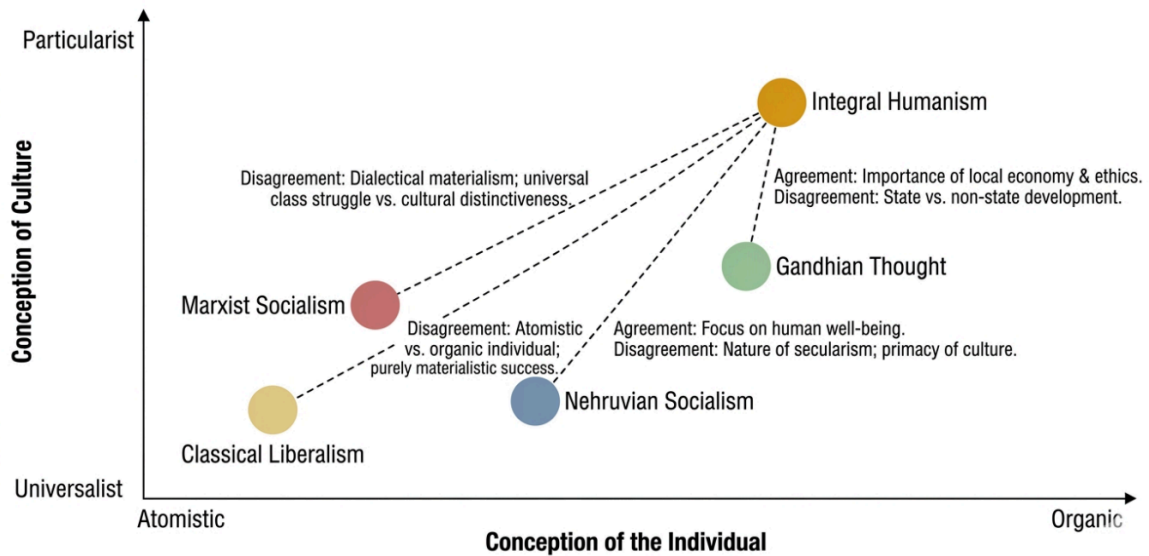


Figure 3: Comparative Positioning of Integral Humanism Among Twentieth-Century Political Frameworks

The third reading concerns the concept of chiti and the broader civilisational vocabulary that Upadhyaya employed. Chiti is presented as the inherent nature or essential soul of a nation, distinct from any particular political regime or constitutional arrangement. In Upadhyaya's account, India's chiti is shaped by the dharmic tradition and is what gives Indian civilisation its continuity across millennia of political change. This is among the most contested claims in the doctrine. Sympathetic readings see it as a way of grounding national identity in cultural depth rather than in passing political arrangements. Critical readings see it as a way of privileging one cultural tradition over others within a plural society. Both readings have textual warrant, and the question of which is more persuasive depends partly on how the term is operationalised in practice.

Table 2: Comparative Readings of Key Concepts in Integral Humanism

Concept	Sympathetic Reading	Critical Reading	Common Ground
Chiti (national soul)	Cultural depth grounding identity	Privileging one tradition over others	National identity has cultural roots
Dharma in politics	Ethical principle, not religion	Implicit religious framing	Politics needs ethical grounding
Swadeshi economics	Civilisational self-reliance	Risk of economic isolationism	Local agency matters in economy

Organic society	Integrated social belonging	Restricts individual autonomy	Society shapes the individual
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The fourth reading concerns the economic and political prescriptions of the doctrine. Upadhyaya was critical of both unregulated capitalism, which he saw as producing inequality and cultural dislocation, and state-led socialism, which he saw as producing bureaucratic domination and the suppression of indigenous traditions. In place of these, he proposed an economic order grounded in swadeshi, decentralised production, and what he called the dignified satisfaction of basic needs rather than indefinite accumulation. These prescriptions have been read in different ways. Some readers see them as anticipating later debates about sustainability and human-centred development. Others see them as economically underspecified and difficult to translate into concrete policy. Both readings find textual support, and Upadhyaya himself acknowledged that the doctrine was meant to be a starting point rather than a complete programme.

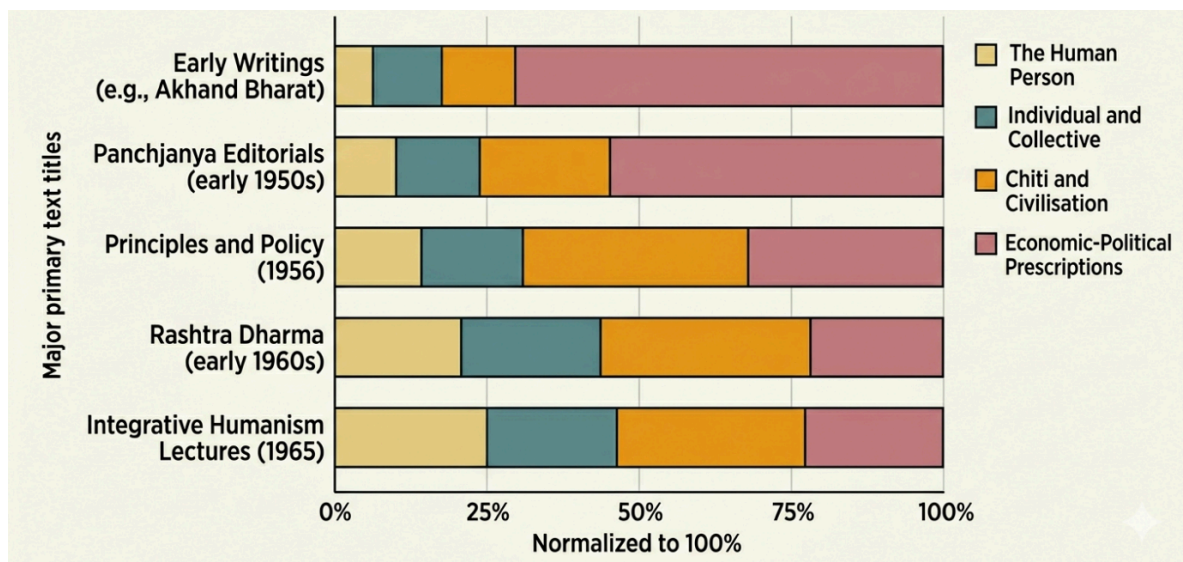


Figure 4: *Thematic Distribution of Concepts Across the Primary Corpus*

The contemporary reception of these readings is itself worth noting. In recent public discourse, the doctrine has been invoked in support of policies ranging from rural employment programmes to civilisational diplomacy, often with limited engagement with the original texts. This pattern reflects a broader tendency for foundational doctrines to function as resources for political argument rather than as strict programmes, and Integral Humanism is no exception.

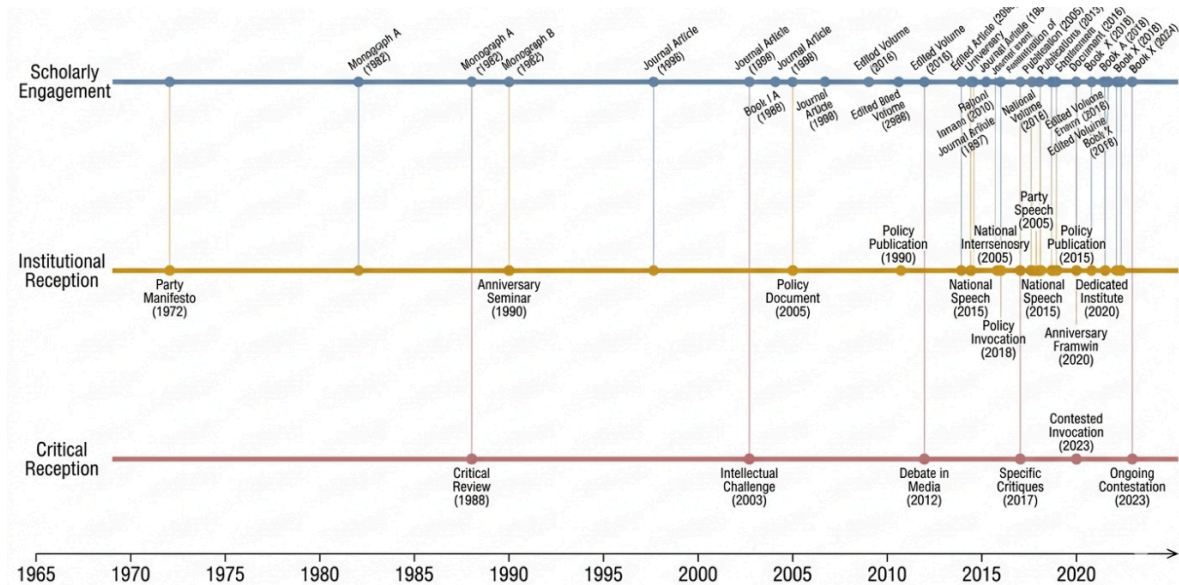


Figure 5: Reception and Reinterpretation of Integral Humanism Across Periods

6. Discussion

The readings developed above suggest that Integral Humanism is best understood as a civilisational vocabulary rather than as a fixed ideological programme. This framing makes sense of several features of the doctrine that have puzzled commentators. It explains why the doctrine seems both philosophically ambitious and politically underspecified, why it can be invoked in support of policies that look quite different from each other, and why it generates such different readings depending on the interpretive lens applied to it.

There are theoretical implications worth drawing out. If the doctrine is understood as vocabulary rather than as programme, then evaluating it requires attention to how the vocabulary is being used in specific contexts rather than only to the underlying texts. This is a familiar move in the history of political thought, where doctrines like liberalism or republicanism are understood as long conversations rather than as fixed positions. Reading Integral Humanism in this way places it within the broader tradition of Indian civilisational discourse, alongside but distinct from the contributions of figures like Gandhi, Aurobindo, and Tagore.

The practical implications are several. For scholars of Indian political thought, the analysis suggests that Integral Humanism deserves serious engagement rather than either celebration or dismissal. For participants in contemporary debate, the analysis suggests that arguments about the doctrine should attend carefully to what is actually claimed, distinguishing between Upadhyaya's specific formulations and later invocations of the doctrine in different contexts. For policy discussion, the analysis is more limited, since the

doctrine itself is too general to settle specific policy questions and was not designed to do so.

The doctrine's relationship to questions of pluralism and inclusion remains the most contested area, and we have not tried to resolve it here. Sympathetic readings find resources in Integral Humanism for an inclusive cultural nationalism that draws on shared civilisational heritage. Critical readings find in the doctrine an organicist framing that struggles to accommodate the genuine plurality of Indian society. Both readings have textual and contextual warrant, and the question of which is more persuasive is, in part, a question about how the vocabulary is operationalised by those who use it in present debates.

The limitations of the present analysis should be stated clearly. The corpus, while purposively chosen, remains limited, and a more exhaustive engagement with Upadhyaya's lesser-known writings might yield additional nuances. The reception analysis focused primarily on English-language sources, although Upadhyaya wrote and was received in multiple Indian languages, and a fuller account would need to engage that wider linguistic field. The contemporary discourse materials reflect a particular moment in Indian political life, and the readings developed here may need revisiting as that discourse evolves.

Future research could productively extend this work in several directions. A comparative analysis of Integral Humanism alongside other twentieth-century civilisational frameworks, such as the African Ujamaa tradition or the Latin American Buen Vivir movement, would illuminate what is distinctive about the Indian articulation. Empirical studies of how the doctrine is actually invoked in policy and political practice would test the framing of the doctrine as vocabulary rather than as programme. And sustained engagement with the doctrine's reception in regional languages would broaden the empirical base substantially.

7. Conclusion

This paper has examined Integral Humanism as a contribution to the politics of Bharatiya identity, drawing on Upadhyaya's original writings, scholarly secondary literature, and contemporary public discourse to construct a layered reading. The central argument has been that Integral Humanism is best understood as a civilisational vocabulary, a way of speaking about nation, culture, and the human person that draws on Indian sources while engaging Western political categories on its own terms. This framing makes sense of features of the doctrine that have puzzled commentators, and it places the doctrine within

the broader tradition of Indian civilisational discourse rather than reducing it to a single political position.

The doctrine's strengths lie in its philosophical ambition, its serious engagement with Indian intellectual traditions, and its attempt to articulate a political vision grounded in something deeper than either market or state. Its limitations lie in its philosophical underspecification, its difficult relationship with the genuine plurality of Indian society, and its vulnerability to invocations that depart substantially from its original texts. Whether the strengths outweigh the limitations is a question we have not tried to answer here, and which probably cannot be answered in the abstract.

What can be said is that any serious engagement with debates about Indian identity in the present moment requires understanding what Integral Humanism actually claims, where it comes from, and how it functions in contemporary discourse. The doctrine is too consequential to be either celebrated uncritically or dismissed unread, and the present paper has tried to clear some space for the kind of careful engagement these debates deserve. The broader implication, beyond the specific case of Integral Humanism, is that the politics of identity in any civilisation depends on the vocabulary available for articulating that identity, and that this vocabulary repays serious study regardless of one's political stance.

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