

# Democracy Beyond Borders: Lala Lajpat Rai's International Vision

**RAJ KUMAR**

Assistant Professor

Department of History, DAV College, Jalandhar (Punjab) India

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines Lala Lajpat Rai's conception of international order and argues that his political thought extended beyond anti-colonial nationalism toward a broader theory of democratic internationalism. Using a historical and intellectual-historical approach, the study analyzes Lajpat Rai's major writings, including *The Man and His Ideas*, *Young India: An interpretation and a history of the nationalist movement from within*, *England's Debt to India*, *The Political Future of India*, *Unhappy India* and articles in journal *Young India* (mouth piece of India Home Rule League of America). The paper demonstrates that Lajpat Rai viewed imperialism not only as political domination but also as a moral and economic structure based on inequality and exploitation. His engagement with Wilsonian self-determination transformed it into a universal principle applicable to all nations, including colonized societies. The study further argues that Lajpat Rai anticipated a rebalancing of world power through Asia's political awakening and envisioned India as central to a democratic international order. The paper concludes that Lajpat Rai's critique of inequality, selective democracy, and economic dependency remains highly relevant in contemporary international politics.

**Keywords:** Lala Lajpat Rai, Democratic internationalism, World order, Anti-imperialism, Self-determination, International democracy, Global governance, Nationalism, Wilsonian internationalism, Colonialism, Asia, International political thought

## Introduction

Lala Lajpat Rai's reflections on global politics articulate a coherent and forward-looking vision of a democratic international order founded on justice, equality, and liberty. His political thought did not remain confined to India's struggle against British colonial rule; rather, it expanded to address the broader question of how the international system ought to be reorganized after the decline of imperial domination. Lajpat Rai viewed India's struggle for self-rule not as an isolated national ambition but as part of a wider ethical transformation in relations among nations, aimed at establishing a more balanced global order. Although he recognized the historical significance of anti-imperialist movements of his time, he remained firmly committed to democratic principles and cooperation among nations. Even while acknowledging that movements such as Bolshevism challenged imperial domination, he did not endorse authoritarian methods. Instead, he emphasized democracy, national self-

determination, and equality in international relations as the foundation of a just world order (Rai, 1916, pp. 15–17).

## Evolution of Lajpat Rai's Thought: From Ethics to Internationalism

The idea of world democracy in Lajpat Rai's thought developed gradually rather than appearing in a fixed form. In *The Man and His Ideas* (1907), he laid the ethical foundation of his political philosophy by emphasizing liberty, moral responsibility, and opposition to domination, arguing that political authority must be justified through justice and human dignity (Rai, 1907, pp. 5–18). This ethical base was later expanded in *Young India* (1916), where he critically examined imperial systems and argued for a democratic reordering of international relations (Rai, 1916, pp. 120–165). During his stay in the United States, his articles in *Young India* (Journal published by the Home Rule League of America) further extended this

perspective by presenting India's freedom struggle as part of a broader global democratic question, linking anti-colonial nationalism with equality and self-determination (Rai, 1916, pp. 45–78). His later writings broadened this outlook further by addressing economic justice, post-war global restructuring, and the role of Asian nations in shaping a more balanced international order (Rai, 1917, pp. 10–90, 1928, 140–210). Taken together, these stages demonstrate the gradual expansion of Lajpat Rai's thought from ethical opposition to domination toward a comprehensive vision of democratic internationalism.

### Research Gap

Despite growing scholarly interest in Lala Lajpat Rai, existing studies continue to locate him primarily within nationalist historiography. There remains limited systematic analysis of his contribution to international political thought, particularly his implicit theory of democratic internationalism. A close reading of his texts suggests that his intellectual project extends beyond anti-colonial nationalism toward a normative framework of global democracy grounded in justice, equality, and opposition to domination. This study addresses this gap by interpreting Lajpat Rai's writings as a coherent and evolving theory of international order rather than as isolated nationalist interventions.

### Methodology

This paper uses a combined historical and intellectual-historical approach to examine Lajpat Rai's ideas on world order. It relies mainly on a close reading of Lajpat Rai's primary texts, especially his collected speeches and essays, to reconstruct his political and international thought. Primary sources form the core of the analysis as they provide direct evidence of Lajpat Rai's arguments and concepts. Secondary literature is used to contextualize and interpret these ideas within broader debates on nationalism, anti-imperialism, and international political thought. The study applies a thematic and interpretive framework, focusing on key ideas such as democracy, anti-imperialism, self-determination, international cooperation, and equality among nations. These themes are treated as interconnected parts of a broader vision rather than isolated concepts. This analysis is placed within the historical context of the First World War, imperial decline, and early twentieth-century discussions on global order, allowing Lajpat Rai's ideas to be understood in their proper historical setting.

### Moral Critique of Empire

This rejection of imperial legitimacy is rooted in Lajpat Rai's earlier ethical framework developed in *The Man and His Ideas*, where political authority is justified only through justice and human dignity (Rai, 1907, pp. 5–18). Lajpat Rai's vision of world democracy is fundamentally grounded in a sustained critique of imperial domination and a strong assertion of equality among nations. In his political writings, particularly *Young India*, Lajpat Rai consistently challenges imperial rule as an unjust system that violates the principle of national self-determination and political consent (Rai, 1916, pp. 120–165). He argues that imperialism is not merely a political structure but a moral distortion of international relations that denies subject peoples their natural right to self-government (Rai, 1916, pp. 130–145).

Lajpat Rai identifies a fundamental moral contradiction at the heart of imperial modernity: political systems that claim legitimacy through consent within Europe simultaneously deny that very principle to colonized societies.

### Self-Determination and Wilsonian Influence

Lala Lajpat Rai's international writings reflect a strategic and intellectual engagement with the emerging global discourse on self-determination during the First World War and its aftermath. In the publications associated with the India Home Rule League of America and *Young India* (American edition), Lajpat Rai consistently framed India's demand for self-government within the language of constitutional democracy, world peace, and political legitimacy. This positioning was not accidental but represented a deliberate attempt to align Indian nationalism with the dominant liberal internationalist vocabulary of the Wilsonian moment.

Building upon his moral critique of empire, Lajpat Rai strategically engaged the Wilsonian language of self-determination to internationalize India's claim to political legitimacy. This critique is evident in his communication to President Woodrow Wilson during the Paris Peace Conference period, where he questioned the universality of democratic principles by highlighting that "democracy at home without democracy abroad" remains incomplete (Rai, 1919, p. 3). This intervention illustrates how Lajpat Rai attempted to internationalize the Indian question by appealing directly to the moral authority of Wilsonian rhetoric.

The *Young India* journal, published by the India Home Rule League of America, functioned as a transnational platform that transformed Indian nationalism into an issue of global political ethics rather than a colonial administrative concern. The League's editorial strategy emphasized constitutional persuasion rather than revolutionary agitation, thereby presenting India's demand for self-rule as compatible with liberal democratic traditions (America, 1919, p. 1).

Lajpat Rai's approach demonstrates a clear differentiation from Bolshevik revolutionary internationalism. While acknowledging global anti-imperial currents, he rejected authoritarian methods and instead positioned India's struggle within a constitutional-democratic paradigm. His strategy was to secure legitimacy for Indian nationalism by embedding it within the intellectual structure of Western liberalism, particularly the Wilsonian language of national rights and global peace (League, 1918, p. 1).

At the same time, Lajpat Rai critically exposed the selective application of self-determination in Western diplomacy. While Wilsonian principles were being applied to European nationalities after the First World War, colonial regions such as India remained excluded from this framework. This contradiction allowed Lajpat Rai to reframe self-determination not as a discretionary political concession but as a universal principle of international justice applicable to all nations without exception (Rai, 1920, pp. 18–22).

Thus, Lajpat Rai's contribution lies in transforming self-determination from a Eurocentric diplomatic principle into a universal normative claim grounded in equality and moral consistency. His intervention during the Paris Peace Conference era represents an early attempt to globalize democratic legitimacy and challenge the structural exclusions of liberal internationalism.

### **Economic Structure of Empire**

Lala Lajpat Rai's critique of imperialism is most systematically developed in his economic writings, particularly in *England's Debt to India* (1917), where he presents colonial rule as a structured system of economic extraction rather than merely political governance. In this work, Lajpat Rai elaborates what is broadly understood as the "drain of wealth," arguing that British rule resulted in a continuous transfer of resources from India to Britain through taxation, administrative expenditure, and profit repatriation. This economic drain,

according to Lajpat Rai, prevented capital formation within India and systematically weakened indigenous economic structures, thereby producing long-term underdevelopment (Rai, 1917, pp. 45–52).

Building upon this argument, Lajpat Rai further clarifies that the so-called "drain" is not simply a matter of fiscal imbalance but a sustained mechanism embedded within the very structure of colonial administration. India's revenues, instead of being reinvested in local development, are systematically redirected to sustain the machinery of empire. This includes the payment of salaries to British officials, military expenditure for imperial defense, pensions for colonial personnel, and profits accrued by British enterprises operating within India. In this sense, the colonial economy functions as an outward-flowing system of wealth transfer, where India generates surplus value but is structurally denied its retention or reinvestment (Rai, 1917, pp. 60–68). Lajpat Rai's economic critique gives material depth to his theory of international democracy by showing that political domination is sustained through economic dependency (Rai, 1918, Vol. 1, No. 4, pp. 1–3).

Crucially, this political vision is inseparable from Lajpat Rai's critique of imperial economic structures. Within the same intellectual framework of *Young India*, he identifies imperialism not only as a political system but also as an economic mechanism of extraction and inequality. Colonial economies, in his view, are structured to benefit metropolitan powers while systematically restricting industrial and financial development in colonized regions. This produces a global economic order characterized by dependency, unequal exchange, and structural underdevelopment of subject nations (Rai, 1918, Vol. 1, No. 4, pp. 2–3).

### **Asia and the Rebalancing of World Order**

An explicit example of Lajpat Rai's engagement with larger global questions is found in his contribution to the November 1919 issue of *Young India*, subtitled "*Burdens of Civilization*", where he addresses the multiple ways that Western-centric ideas of progress and civilization place unequal burdens on non-Western societies (Rai, 1919, Nov). This underscores his belief that the organization of the post-war world must acknowledge the historical weight of non-European civilizations – not as obstacles to modernity, but as foundational partners in a just global order.

Lala Lajpat Rai's international writings in *Young*

*India* (India Home Rule League of America) present Asia not as a passive recipient of Western modernity but as an emerging political force in the reconstruction of the post–First World War international order. In the April 1918 issue of *Young India*, particularly in essays such as *The International Importance of India*, Lajpat Rai situates India within a broader global transformation in which the center of political gravity is gradually shifting away from Europe. This shift is not merely geopolitical but also moral and civilizational, as the legitimacy of imperial domination is increasingly questioned in the aftermath of the war (Rai, 1918, Vol. 1, No. 4, pp. 1–3). Within this wider Asian frame, Japan functions as an implicit comparative reference for non-Western modernity and political assertion, demonstrating that Asian societies are capable of engaging Western modernity on equal terms rather than remaining permanently subordinated. This comparative dimension strengthens Lajpat Rai’s broader argument that Asia is already participating in shaping global political change rather than merely awaiting inclusion within it.

Within this framework, India is represented as a key site of global political transformation. Lajpat Rai argues that the “importance of India” extends beyond its colonial condition, as its political awakening directly influences the balance of world powers. The rise of nationalist consciousness in India signals, in his interpretation, the weakening of imperial hierarchies and the emergence of a new international order based on equality among nations. This positions India not as an isolated colony but as an active participant in reshaping global political structures (Rai, 1918, Vol. 1, No. 4, pp. 1–3). A central nuance in Lajpat Rai’s argument is that Asia’s resurgence is not limited to cultural revival but represents a structural shift in global political consciousness. The post-war world, in his view, cannot return to pre-war imperial stability because the First World War has fundamentally disrupted the legitimacy of European dominance, thereby opening space for Asian societies to assert political agency. India, as the largest colony under British rule, becomes symbolically central to this transformation and to the broader reconfiguration of world power.

This rebalancing is closely linked to Lajpat Rai’s broader conception of international democracy, in which global order must be reconstructed on the principle of equality among nations rather than hierarchical imperial control. For Lajpat Rai, the growing political awakening of Asia exposes the historical instability of an international

system built on European dominance and signals an impending redistribution of global political influence. By exposing this contradiction, Lajpat Rai extends the logic of self-determination into a global critique of Eurocentric power structures (Rai, 1918, Vol. 1, No. 4, pp. 1–3). At the same time, he carefully distances this transformation of world order from revolutionary upheaval, rejecting Bolshevik-style class revolution in favor of constitutional nationalism and democratic reform. This positions Asia’s rise within a normative framework of international cooperation rather than violent systemic collapse. The resulting “rebalancing” of world order is therefore conceived as a moral and political transformation rather than an exclusively revolutionary rupture.

Thus, Lajpat Rai’s writings in *Young India* construct Asia—particularly India—as a foundational agent in the emerging global order. Lajpat Rai’s idea of transforming the British Empire into a voluntary Commonwealth of equal nations is especially significant because it represents an early attempt to imagine how an imperial structure could be democratically reconstituted without violent rupture. Rather than advocating isolation or revenge, Lajpat Rai envisioned a gradual moral transformation of imperial relations into a partnership of equals. This anticipates later twentieth-century discussions on post-imperial associations, multilateralism, and cooperative internationalism (Gandhi, 1998, pp. 484-88). The significance of Asia lies not only in its demographic or geographic weight but in its capacity to redefine the principles of international legitimacy, shifting the world from imperial hierarchy toward a more plural and increasingly multipolar system grounded in democratic equality among nations.

### **Democracy as International Principle**

Lala Lajpat Rai’s international writings ultimately converge toward a broader normative vision in which democracy is not confined to the territorial boundaries of the nation-state but is elevated into a universal principle governing international relations. What makes Lajpat Rai’s conception of world order intellectually significant is that he was not merely advocating India’s political freedom but was implicitly questioning the very basis on which international authority was considered legitimate. For Lajpat Rai, the problem of empire was not only that it denied freedom to subject peoples, but that it corrupted the moral foundation of the international system itself. A world divided between ruling and subject nations could

never produce lasting peace because it rested on inequality, coercion, and economic exploitation. Therefore, his demand for the end of imperialism was simultaneously a demand for redefining the principles of international legitimacy on the basis of consent, equality, and justice among nations. In this sense, Lajpat Rai was formulating an early normative theory of international order in which democracy functioned not merely as a domestic system of governance but as the regulating principle of relations between political communities (Gandhi, 1998, pp. 484-488). In *Young India* (India Home Rule League of America), particularly in the April 1918 issue, Lajpat Rai consistently reframes India's political demand not merely as a struggle for constitutional reform within the British Empire but as part of a wider ethical reordering of global politics based on equality, consent, and political legitimacy. In this sense, democracy becomes the foundational criterion through which the legitimacy of the international system itself must be assessed, rather than a principle restricted to select Western political societies (Rai, 1918, Vol. 1, No. 4, pp. 1-3).

Within this framework, Lajpat Rai extends the meaning of democracy beyond the state to the structure of global order. The contradiction between democratic governance in Europe and authoritarian rule in the colonies ultimately leads Lajpat Rai to elevate democracy from a national arrangement to a universal principle regulating relations among nations. A world that claims to uphold democratic ideals cannot, in his view, simultaneously sustain imperial domination over subject peoples. This contradiction transforms democracy from a domestic political arrangement into a global ethical standard that must regulate relations among nations. Thus, the legitimacy of international order depends not on power hierarchies but on the universal application of democratic principles across all political communities (Rai, 1918, Vol. 1, No. 4, pp. 1-3).

Lajpat Rai further reinforces this argument by linking democracy to moral responsibility in international politics. His conception of a just world order rests on the idea that no nation possesses inherent authority to govern another without consent, and that political sovereignty must be grounded in the recognition of equal human dignity. In this sense, democracy becomes the moral foundation of international relations, replacing imperial coercion with mutual recognition among equal political units. This formulation also aligns with his broader rejection of both imperial domination and revolutionary

authoritarianism, as he positions constitutional-democratic ethics as the only legitimate basis for global cooperation (Rai, 1918, Vol. 1, No. 4, pp. 1-3).

Thus, Lajpat Rai's vision of democracy beyond borders transforms international relations into an ethical-political order governed by universal principles of consent, equality, and justice. In doing so, he anticipates later twentieth-century debates on global governance by insisting that democracy must operate not only within states but also between them, thereby establishing a moral framework for a reconstituted international system grounded in democratic legitimacy rather than imperial hierarchy.

Lajpat Rai's conception of international democracy also differs subtly from other major Indian thinkers of his time. Unlike Mahatma Gandhi, whose critique of modern civilization in *Hind Swaraj* moves toward a form of moral localism rather than institutional globalism (Gandhi, 1909/2009, pp. 33-47), Lajpat Rai remained committed to modern political structures and the necessity of international cooperation. Unlike Rabindranath Tagore, whose reflections in *Nationalism* articulate an internationalism rooted primarily in cultural and civilizational dialogue rather than political reorganization (Tagore, 1917/1991, pp. 63-92), Lajpat Rai's internationalism was explicitly political and institutional in orientation. And unlike Jawaharlal Nehru, whose vision of world order in *The Discovery of India* emerges in the context of the Second World War and the later doctrine of non-alignment (Nehru, 1946, pp. 520-545), Lajpat Rai was already articulating a theory of democratic international order during the First World War itself. This temporal and conceptual positioning makes Lajpat Rai one of the earliest Indian thinkers to theorize democracy as a regulating principle of global politics rather than merely a national aspiration.

## Conclusion

More than a century later, although formal colonialism has ended, similar structural asymmetries persist in new forms. First, Lajpat Rai's observation that political equality among nations is not matched by economic equality remains highly relevant. Institutions governing global finance and trade continue to be disproportionately influenced by Western powers, and developing countries often experience constraints in shaping rules that affect their economies. Debates around trade justice, debt dependency, and unequal terms of

exchange echo Lajpat Rai's insistence that political freedom without economic fairness leaves international democracy incomplete.

Second, Lajpat Rai emphasized that the rhetoric of self-determination was selectively applied in 1919. In the present era, the language of human rights and democracy is still unevenly invoked in international relations—strongly defended in some regions while overlooked in others depending on strategic interests. This selective moralism closely mirrors the contradiction Lajpat Rai exposed between Western ideals and imperial practice.

Third, Lajpat Rai's belief that Asia would become central to the rebalancing of world power appears remarkably perceptive. The rise of Asian economies, especially in South and East Asia, the growing geopolitical weight of Asian states, and the emergence of multipolar power structures reflect the very shift in the “center of political gravity” that Lajpat Rai anticipated.

Fourth, Lajpat Rai's call for an international order based on equality rather than hierarchy remains an unfinished project. While the United Nations embodies formal sovereign equality, real influence in global decision-making is still uneven. Ongoing demands for reform in global governance institutions show that Lajpat Rai's vision of genuine international democracy has yet to be realized.

Finally, Lajpat Rai's critique of Western democracies was not a rejection of democracy itself but a demand for its universalization. This remains deeply relevant: contemporary global politics still grapples with the challenge of making democratic norms consistent across borders rather than instruments of selective application. In this sense, Lajpat Rai's argument is not merely of historical interest. It anticipated core tensions of the modern world: the gap between ideals and practice, between political sovereignty and economic dependency,

and between formal equality and real power. His writings thus offer a powerful lens for understanding why the promise of an equitable and democratic international order remains only partially fulfilled in the twenty-first century.

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