



## **Political Correctness: Origin and debate**

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### **Abstract**

Political correctness can be defined as radical views on social matters which rejects discriminatory or offensive language and behaviour. It can be referred to as non-racist, non-ageist and non-sexist in matters pertaining to terminology. Its origin can be traced to the inadequacy of American Universities to intellectually handle the changes in the character of political rights. Political correctness became an instrument to bring the marginalized into the mainstream. In India upliftment and empowerment of the oppressed castes was central to reservations.

**Keywords:** political correctness, multi-culturalism, eurocentrism, pseudo secular politics and liberal orthodoxy

### **Introduction**

The paper is an effort to define business and deal with this term in the present decade and its impact in the political arena-national and international. Political Correctness is a highly controversial and protean word, so much so that it is difficult to define it. But put in simple words, it means: "Conformity to a body of liberal or radical opinion on social matters, characterized by the advocacy of approved views and the rejection of language and behaviour considered discriminatory or offensive." (Oxford Dictionary of New Words, 1997) It has good "intent" behind, nevertheless the "content" has generated acrimonious debates surrounding it- especially in American politics between the political left and right. With the left's egalitarian agenda being expressed through "Political Correctness" appropriately summed up in a definition by Hoover and Howard: "Political Correctness refers to matters of inclusive speech, advocacy of non-racist, non-ageist, non-sexist terminology, an insistence on affirmative action policies, avoidance of Eurocentrism as reflected in a 'traditional' canon of literature, acceptance of multiculturalism as a valued feature of American society and dismantling hierarchy as controlled by a white male power structure"; to the political right condemning it to have promoted new forms of cultural tyranny, dumbing down of educational standards, undermining meritocracy, creating victim's charter and being un-American in nature.

Political correctness, in reality, remains somewhere in middle. Though it is true that American political right's inadequacy to intellectually handle the changes in university campuses led them to give "political correctness" a "political" character by hijacking the term to give it a meaning of their own, as expressed in Trump's following statement: "Obama and Clinton were willing to let ordinary Americans suffer because their first priority was Political Correctness".

Rather, if we have a look around the globe, we see right-wing populist leaders employing the term in a specific manner targeting a particular community to fulfill their vote banks. Trump's above mentioned statement is just one of many that he used menacingly and deplorably in the context of American establishment before coming to power. It was pertinent to him to present himself as the crusading

"outsider" against the corrupt power establishment with its focus on being "politically correct". The public dissatisfaction was trapped in by Trump by becoming a man of direct and blunt words. He said everything in a naked language, robbing it of "politically correct" flair. Trump's administration under him has employed anti-minority, anti-Muslim and anti-black language in order to maintain its set of core voter's i.e the evangelical Christians, xenophobic and economically disadvantaged etc. This explains the acceptance of Trump's non- Political Correctness language such as the wall around Mexico to keep out "rapists" or "Chinese virus" or falsely accusing that "Islam hates us"! This helps him to be seen as an outsider working against the status-quoists and one who is unafraid of speaking the "truth".

This mounted attack on PC culture and its constant derision is an integral part of democratic politics today with the decline of the liberal-left internationally and most of the countries being under right-wing leaders. Russia's President Putin gave an exaggerated account of Political Correctness by misinforming the people of how PC helps develop morally deviant behaviour in the name of liberal faith: "The excesses of political correctness are leading to the point where people are talking seriously about registering parties whose goal is legalizing the propaganda of paedophilia." Putin's acceptability rests on his strong leader image that gets accentuated by giving anti-western inflammatory remarks. Even in India, the ruling Bhartiya Janta Party has constantly employed hate speech and Islamophobic remarks to maintain its set of core supporters the northern middle class upper-caste Hindu community and also tapping in the lower castes around the country. The Congress is subsequently seen as an elitist party with dynastic succession at its core and its secular approach is dubbed as a "pseudo-secular" politics aimed at minority appeasement. Yogi Adityanath's comment: "we aren't the biryani-eating people rather Mr. Modi has been shooting terrorists with bullets rather than giving them biryani" is a case in point. The European radical-right parties have referred to European Union as the "Brussels' politically correct elite". This sense of elitism injected into Political Correctness by the leaders help them cater to the sense of frustration

building in ordinary masses who feels themselves distanced by the establishment. PC has been given an altogether different meaning by the political right, rather an opposite meaning. From being a harbinger of change it is being ridiculed as a form of status-quoism!

Political Correctness has gone too far especially in semantic and linguistic field. Some of the changes proposed are simply 'over the top' and unacceptable. Moreover, what's more problematic about political correctness- over and above the left-right divide- is the "political" and "correctness" in it. How much is "political" content? How much is "correctness"? Who will decide what's correct? The political authorities (as the term originally meant- Mao's regime considered the conformist only the yes-sayers) or the academicians (who, to be honest, are 'unintelligible' to the people at large and who frame their understandings through the idealistic notions sitting in an ivory tower of theirs)? It was the idealistic, decent-minded, certain puritanical intervention in language and behavioural norms in late 1960s and 70s in American universities that led to the term enter the larger public sphere. Following new words come under this category: lookism, phallocratic, significant other, sex worker, herstory, disadvantaged, homophobic, differently-abled, physically challenged, Eurocentric, Afrocentric, glass ceiling etc. With new ethnic cleavages and faultlines emerging in American society in those decades, political correctness became a way forward to engage the marginalized, bring them into the mainstream, to correct the historical wrongs, to accept diversity, to end domination. Affirmative action in the form of quotas in educational institutions helped dismantle white male domination in America. Much like in India where reservations became central to the upliftment and empowerment of those who have been stigmatized because of their castes.

The political left understands man to be located within a social and economic environment with the latter forming consciousness of the former. Hence, special privileges to the erstwhile disadvantaged to empower them is integral to the agenda of the left. But the political right criticizes it saying that these policies proliferate victimization on the part of those who benefit from such policies and it also undermines "merit" considerations. Anti-reservationists in India give a similar argument. Historically, capitalism won over feudalism because of its egalitarian tendency manifested in "equal competition" and "equality of individuality", quite appreciable. What it forgets is this – that people coming from different conditions and circumstances have historical baggage to deal with before entering the arena of "equal competition". Can we expect a slum-dweller or a dalit woman from a rural community to be able to compete with an heir of say a business tycoon? Hardly possible. That is what the intervention of political correctness in the linguistic field and in the public policy aimed to achieve. Political correctness, as already stated, has good intent behind but the over-zealousness to promote "Political Correctness culture" has eroded its spirit and it has become a new form of political orthodoxy- more like "liberal orthodoxy". Political Correctness culture has come up with new standards, terms and behavioural norms that one must adhere to, to be called a liberal; thus acquiring a conformist character itself. No wonder it has become an object of relentless ridicule as Hughes writes: "We do not fail, we underachieve. We are not junkies, but substance abusers;

not handicapped, but differently-abled. And we are mealy-mouthed unto death: a corpse, the New England Journal of Medicine urged in 1988, should be referred to as a 'non-living person'. By extension, a fat corpse is a differently sized nonliving person."

The American right condemns this very 'conformist' tendency which envelops PC today by calling it "un-American". Political Correctness quells the dissent and debate characteristic of an open society- something not just Americans but any democracy would not be proud of- by creating new liberal myths and controlling freedom of speech. Can "herstory" change the fact that women's history has been eroded and undermined given patriarchal domination? Or the use of "differently-abled" in place of "handicapped" "correct"? Because, in reality, every individual is "differently-abled". This is not to deny that offensive remarks should be kept at bay in order to come at a desirable solution to a societal problem as it opens up avenues for a proper dialogue.

According to Choi and Murphy: "What Political Correctness is about...is who will control social life. Will the traditional centers of power be allowed to hide behind the facade of neutrality, or will political discussion expand in such a way that options are not restricted by hierarchy, class antagonisms, racial or sexual discrimination, or other forms of repression? The question is, will democracy finally arrive, or will the current cycle of ineffective reforms will continue?" Political correctness is about being empathetic to the individuals or communities which are disadvantaged, marginalized and kept away from the mainstream. For it to happen, rather than a puritanical, left-leaning agenda, we need to channelize the humanity within us. Multi-culturalism has become a way of life in different countries to recognize, acknowledge and even celebrate the "differences" in order to uplift the deracinated communities and give them a voice in public arena. It has helped them acquire decision-making power which is integral to their empowerment. Even without having a political inclination, people have tended to change themselves for the better and condemn offensive remarks.

Yes, Political Correctness debate has helped in creating a lot of awareness but a "moral-police" is neither desirable nor fruitful for a democracy to grow. People need to have a strong value system imbibing politeness, empathy and a sense of justice not just for themselves but for others equally.

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