



# IPP

## INDIAN POLITICS & POLICY

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## INDIAN POLITICS & POLICY

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# Introduction

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With this issue, *Indian Politics and Policy* (IPP) has spontaneously transitioned from a bi-annual to a tri-annual publication in its second year of continuous publication since 2024. The first issue in 2025 was dedicated to the 2024 Indian Parliamentary elections. The current volume explores Indian foreign policy during the decade of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rule under the stewardship of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The three volumes in 2025 have covered a diversity of topics and engaged with significant scholarship.

Colleagues had warned me regarding the vicissitudes of establishing a journal, especially one that had lain dormant for a couple of years (2021–23) after beginning on a promising note in 2018. These challenges notwithstanding, *IPP* can now claim to be an emerging repository of the highest quality of current research on Indian politics and policy.

We take a broad view of our mandate in areas of “politics” and “policy,” inclusive of disciplines such as economics, history, law and anthropology, as well as comparative research that relates to India. Since its inception, the journal has deeply engaged with Indian politics, economic policy, secularism, demographic change, state-building, and key areas of governance such as constitutional safeguards, social protection and biometrics. The current issue adds depth to our engagement with foreign policy analysis. We aim to expand into many more areas such as environment and gender relations while reinforcing our existing strengths.

This is a collective achievement, and I thank the editorial team, the Editorial Advisory Board and the International Advisory Board for their unstinting support for the project. The encouragement we have received from the scholarly community has surpassed our expectations. The success of a journal, in the end, rests with its contributors and readers. We are hopeful that the current trajectory of *IPP* will fill a gap by generating scholarly knowledge (through rigorously refereed research engaging academic debates) alongside a wide range of perspectives from distinguished scholars and practitioners, and book reviews/review essays that bring the best scholarship to a larger audience.

This special issue on Indian Foreign Policy is guest edited by Professor Rohan Mukherjee from the London School of Economics. Professor Mukherjee has engaged with talented younger and mid-career scholars to reflect on substantial is-

sues of Indian foreign policy during Prime Minister Modi's period of premiership. The scholars presented here have produced excellent scholarship in their areas of expertise and are productively working towards distinguished senior positions. Their approach is both intellectually innovative and scrupulously researched.

The special issue begins with an excellent introduction to the key themes related to how domestic political change with a right-wing Hindu nationalist dispensation in the saddle for over a decade shapes India's foreign security, economic and cultural policies. Various under-researched questions are explored in this volume. How has Hindu nationalism impacted India's relations with other countries? Does Hindu nationalism use Buddhism for soft power but detest it when it comes to conversions in India? Has Hindu nationalism transformed India's conception of sovereignty and "worldmaking"? Does autocratization driven by Hindu nationalism, supported by civilizational arguments for political legitimacy, reduce the need for pragmatic economic management leading to sub-optimal economic growth and development? Has the federal character of India's foreign economic policy been transformed? Does a Hindu nationalist regime seek the diaspora more for political rather than for economic goals with an inclusive understanding of the diasporic community? What difference does it make now that we are living in a world where digital platforms are driven by artificial intelligence? Some papers also interrogate whether India is turning into a revisionist state.

In addition to this menu, we present a book review that debates the importance of the state versus the significance of firm level strategies for commercial success in India and Pakistan. We do hope that you will enjoy the feast.

## **Guest Editor's Introduction: Domestic Change and Foreign Policy in Contemporary India**

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### ABSTRACT

India has experienced over a decade of rule under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This special issue examines how domestic political change during this period has impacted India's foreign policy through four pathways: worldviews, capacities, processes, and international perceptions of India. New Delhi's worldview is increasingly infused with Hindu nationalism and civilizational thinking. State capacity remains a mixed bag, with technological advancement despite suboptimal institutional development. Political processes are more centralized yet still subject to subnational constraints. Finally, although domestic change has hurt India's image abroad, this only marginally affects India's external relations. The articles in this issue collectively show that while BJP rule is undoubtedly transforming India, the impact has been more internal than external. India's foreign policy preferences remain largely unchanged from previous administrations. The difference today lies in the BJP's ability to pursue these preferences more assertively on the global stage.

*Keywords:* India, Domestic Politics, Foreign Policy, Hindu nationalism, Bharatiya Janata Party

## **Introducción del editor invitado: Cambio interno y política exterior en la India contemporánea**

### RESUMEN

India ha experimentado más de una década de gobierno bajo el Partido Bharatiya Janata (BJP), liderado por el primer ministro Narendra Modi. Este número especial examina cómo el cambio político

interno durante este período ha impactado la política exterior de la India a través de cuatro vías: cosmovisiones, capacidades, procesos y percepciones internacionales de la India. La cosmovisión de Nueva Delhi está cada vez más imbuida del nacionalismo hindú y el pensamiento civilizatorio. La capacidad del Estado sigue siendo heterogénea, con avances tecnológicos a pesar de un desarrollo institucional deficiente. Los procesos políticos están más centralizados, pero aún sujetos a restricciones subnacionales. Finalmente, si bien el cambio interno ha dañado la imagen de la India en el exterior, esto solo afecta marginalmente sus relaciones exteriores. Los artículos de este número muestran en conjunto que, si bien el gobierno del BJP está transformando indudablemente a la India, el impacto ha sido más interno que externo. Las preferencias de la India en política exterior se mantienen prácticamente sin cambios con respecto a las administraciones anteriores. La diferencia hoy radica en la capacidad del BJP para promover estas preferencias con mayor asertividad en el escenario global.

**Palabras clave:** India, Política interna, Política exterior, Nacionalismo hindú, Partido Bharatiya Janata

## 特约导论：当代印度的国内变革与外交政策

### 摘要

印度总理纳伦德拉·莫迪领导的印度人民党(BJP)已统治十多年。本期特刊探讨了这一时期的国内政治变革如何通过四个途径影响印度的外交政策：世界观、能力、过程和 International 对印度的看法。新德里方面的世界观越来越融入印度教民族主义和文明思想。尽管技术不断进步、但制度发展不理想，国家能力仍然参差不齐。政治过程更加集中，但仍然受到地方限制。最后，虽然国内变革损害了印度的海外形象，但这对印度的对外关系影响不大。本期文章共同表明，虽然印度人民党的统治无疑正在改变印度，但其影响更多的是内部而非外部。印度的外交政策偏好与前几届政府基本保持不变。今天的不同之处在于印度人民党有能力在全球舞台上更加坚定地追求这些偏好。

**关键词：**印度，国内政治，外交政策，印度教民族主义，印度人民党

## Introduction

India has now experienced more than a decade of rule under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. During this time, scholars have debated the extent to which the party has altered the dynamics of India's society, economy, and politics.<sup>1</sup> Separately, they have debated the extent to which it has altered India's foreign policy and diplomacy.<sup>2</sup> Rarely have these questions been considered together to ask how domestic political change in India might be impacting its foreign policy. The seven research articles in this special issue take on this task. This introductory essay discusses the analytical framework adopted by these articles, which is based on four pathways or "transmission belts" by which domestic change can impact foreign policy: worldviews, capacities, processes, and perceptions.<sup>3</sup> It is assumed therefore that the impact in question is multi-causal and not dependent on a single factor such as the personality or preferences of the prime minister.

A changing official *worldview* based on Hindu nationalism and a concomitant effort to usher in a "new India" centered on a narrow interpretation of Indian civilization are noticeable facets of BJP rule over the last decade.<sup>4</sup> *State capacity* presents a mixed picture. On the one hand, new technologies of governance and control have increased the potentially coercive powers of the state over society.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the institutional capacity required to build the material foundations of great power status is growing at a glacial pace.<sup>6</sup>

Changes in the political *process* have received the greatest attention. Under recent BJP rule, scholars argue that India has experienced a centralization of power in the executive, a weakening of democratic checks and balances, and a broader erosion of civil liberties.<sup>7</sup> Finally, domestic changes in India have affected the *perceptions* of other countries that prioritize democratic norms and human rights in their foreign policies or whose societies are dominated by groups that constitute ethnic minorities in India.<sup>8</sup>

The collective effect of these changes on India's external relations can appear sweeping. India today espouses a civilizational and nationalistic foreign policy that is broader in individual ambition and narrower in its view of international society than in the past.<sup>9</sup> In crises with longstanding rivals such as Pakistan and even China, the Modi government appears to have a greater tolerance for risk and the use of force compared to pre-2014 administrations.<sup>10</sup> Relations with smaller states in India's neighborhood have also turned tumultuous on occasion over perceived slights and the fiery rhetoric that comes with nationalist posturing.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, Indian leaders seek greater recognition for their nation's role as a "leading power" in international affairs and are willing to shoulder global responsibilities to this end.<sup>12</sup>

Yet the Modi government is not fundamentally reinventing India's relationship with the world.<sup>13</sup> As the articles in this special issue show, various facets of India's recent foreign policy such

as economic nationalism, civilizational thinking, territorial sovereigntism, diaspora outreach, soft power diplomacy, and technological optimism have long and deep roots in Indian political and strategic thought, in most cases going back to India's post-independence period under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and even prior. The difference today lies in the BJP's ability to pursue existing Indian preferences more assertively on the global stage. In this, it is aided by its dominance of domestic politics, leading to comfortable electoral majorities or stable coalition governments at both national and state levels. Equally, the party has turned foreign policy into a winning political issue in the eyes of an increasingly confident citizenry that seeks recognition of India's rise in the global hierarchy of power and prestige.<sup>14</sup>

The rest of this essay discusses the four pathways of domestic influence on foreign policy and how they intersect with broader research in international relations. The essay concludes with a discussion of the factors that constrain Indian foreign policy under Modi toward being more evolutionary than revolutionary.

### **Four Pathways of Domestic Impact on Foreign Policy**

**A**s argued by Daniel Markey, there are four principal pathways through which domestic change can impact foreign policy: worldviews, capacities, processes, and perceptions.<sup>15</sup> Each intersects with prominent strands of research in the broader

international relations literature on the domestic politics of foreign policy. The authors in this special issue all explicitly or implicitly apply this framework as a heuristic device. The discussion below summarizes their findings.

#### ***Official Worldview: From Civic to Ethnic Nationalism***

Scholarship from diverse theoretical paradigms in international relations generally agrees that ideas and identity can powerfully shape a state's self-conception, construction of national interest, and foreign policy itself.<sup>16</sup> Changes in national identity can thus alter a state's behavior, and national elites and rulers are often involved in producing and reproducing national identity in ways that align with their own worldviews. In the Indian case, the Cold War era rule of the Congress party was premised on a "secular" or "civic" nationalism that held a territorial and multicultural view of national identity.<sup>17</sup> There is ample evidence now that the BJP since 2014 (at least) has been devoting substantial resources to remaking Indian identity in line with the party's ideological commitment to creating a Hindu nation out of India.<sup>18</sup>

The BJP's turn toward ethnic nationalism manifests both in official discourse as well as policy. It appears in descriptions of India as a civilizational state with a rich and glorious history in the speeches of party leaders and the prime minister, and in the increasingly frequent official use of "Bharat," the Sanskrit word for India originating from sacred Hindu texts. The policy impact is clearest in the domains of citi-

zenship and diaspora relations. Whereas Nehruvian civic nationalism was at best ambivalent toward Indians who had chosen to live and settle abroad, the BJP seeks to build strong ties to people of Indian origin—especially Hindus—living around the world.<sup>19</sup> Shubha Kamala Prasad's article in this special issue demonstrates the rhetorical turn toward civilizational and Hindu nationalist themes under Modi's BJP in speeches given at the annual Pravasi Bharatiya Divas event held to court the Indian diaspora, which began under a previous BJP government in 2003.

Differences are also evident in India's approach to the international order. As Raphaëlle Khan notes in her article, the Nehruvian conception of sovereignty was linked to anti-colonial solidarity and an egalitarian vision of international order. Under Hindutva, sovereignty has become "the prerogative of a civilizational state entitled to exceptions, rather than a shared condition whose expansion benefits all."<sup>20</sup> Pradyumna Jairam, in his article on the co-optation of Buddhism as part of India's soft power projection, similarly argues that the Modi government has gone to great lengths to place India at the centre of the Buddhist civilizational imaginary and, most importantly, to present Hinduism and Buddhism as "an inseparable amalgam" (in Modi's own words).<sup>21</sup> As these works show, when projected onto the global stage, the civilizational exceptionalism at the heart of the BJP's national identity project appears to leave little room for other identities or for mutually emancipatory solidarity across identity groups.

### ***State Capacity: Strengthening Yet Suboptimal***

Nationalism and ideology only give us partial answers to the role of domestic politics in shaping foreign policy. The literature in international relations also highlights the importance of state capacity, or the ability to extract and mobilize societal resources for grand strategic purposes.<sup>22</sup> States that develop the right mix of institutions to cope with their external challenges and opportunities are best able to design policies that propel them toward greater wealth and security in the international system.<sup>23</sup> States that fail to develop the institutional capacity to cope with their challenges are likely to fall behind.<sup>24</sup> In the Indian case, there is general agreement—especially among scholars of India's domestic political economy—that modern India's institutional development has been uneven and often suboptimal due to resource constraints and social cleavages,<sup>25</sup> with significant implications for India's grand strategy and great power ambitions.<sup>26</sup>

Two articles in this special issue address state capacity directly, with conclusions that mirror the consensus in the literature. Anuradha Sajjanhar examines the expansion of India's digital infrastructure in the Modi era, finding that platforms such as Aadhaar, UPI (Unified Payments Interface), and India Stack have strengthened executive power across a range of state functions including social welfare, policing, and education. Over the last decade, the Indian state has enthusiastically rolled out digital governance initia-

tives, leading Sajjanhar to observe, “[U]nlike previous phases where technology supplemented governance, the current moment positions digital systems as governance itself.”<sup>27</sup> This process has weakened democratic checks and balances in ways that undermine accountability and voice in India’s domestic politics and society. Nonetheless, these technologies are central to the narrative of India becoming a modern and efficient state under Modi’s leadership, and New Delhi is exporting India’s digital technology to countries of the Global South in a bid to earn global influence and recognition.

While India’s technological evolution demonstrates strengthening state power relative to society, Rohit Lamba’s broad sweep of India’s political economy suggests a weaker state that is stuck in a “politically stable but developmentally suboptimal equilibrium.”<sup>28</sup> According to Lamba, India faces a governance trilemma between developmental needs, democratic pressures, and civilizational assertions. At any given moment, India can only address two of these three “imperatives” and never all three together. Unlike past Indian governments that combined development and democracy or the East Asian miracle economies that combined development and civilizationism (the basis for nationalist mobilization), India since 2014 has combined democracy and civilizationism to the exclusion of development. Democratic pressures prevent India’s institutional machinery from delivering at the level of its East Asian comparators, while the state deploys nationalism born from civiliza-

tional assertion to compensate for its inability to deliver economic reforms and growth to the extent required for India to become a great power. Taken together, Lamba’s and Sajjanhar’s pieces suggest that successive governments ruled by the BJP have built a state that is slowly centralizing the infrastructural power required for India’s material rise without the ability to fully exercise that power.

### ***Political Process: Centralizing Yet Constrained***

Various bodies of scholarship in international relations suggest that political systems and political change can have significant impact on foreign policy. Three are relevant here. First, research on audience costs shows that domestic audiences—especially in democracies—often punish leaders for making threats and then backing down from them, thus incentivizing leaders to only make threats when they intend to follow through on them.<sup>29</sup> Second, in a similar vein, selectorate theory demonstrates that leaders with larger winning coalitions—which are typically found in democracies—tend to be more risk-averse and will typically only initiate conflicts that they are confident of winning.<sup>30</sup> Third, and finally, research on coalition governments and foreign policy finds, among other things, that coalition governments are less likely to engage in resource-intensive foreign policies and more cautious about making future commitments than single-party governments.<sup>31</sup>

If the claims of democratic decline in the Indian context are correct,

then we should expect to see contemporary Indian leaders less concerned about audience costs and needing a smaller winning coalition from which to buy political support. These mechanisms in turn should produce riskier foreign policy behavior as domestic constraints on such behavior are weaker in less democratic settings. In terms of coalition politics, the dominance of the BJP as a single ruling party until 2024 and as a powerful senior coalition member since then would also suggest that the government would be more likely to engage in resource-intensive policies and more willing to make future commitments (all else equal).<sup>32</sup> While it is beyond the ability of this essay to evaluate causal mechanisms, it is worth noting that since 2014, India under the BJP has in fact engaged in riskier crisis behavior as evidenced by precision strikes in response to an alleged Pakistan-sponsored terrorist attack in 2016, the crossing of an international boundary to deter Chinese roadbuilding in contested territory at Doklam in 2017, airstrikes on Pakistani soil in response to a terrorist attack in 2019, the ongoing standoff with the Chinese military in Ladakh since 2020, and the militarized response to Pakistan after a terrorist attack in May 2025.

Nicolas Blarel's article in this special issue addresses the foreign policy implications of centralized political power under single-party BJP rule in the 2014–2024 period. It is notable that whereas states in India's federal system were known to independently conduct economic diplomacy with foreign governments, early in Modi's first term In-

dia's foreign ministry created the States Division to directly coordinate with states on external relations. Blarel explains foreign policy behavior based on three factors: regional issue salience, the formal or informal bargaining power of states, and the national government's own politicization of specific issues. Using the case study of Tamil Nadu politics and India's policy toward Sri Lanka, he finds that subnational influences can still constrain India's foreign policy on sensitive regional issues despite the overall political centralization of power in the Modi era. This finding accords with existing research on domestic "accountability environments" in India, which suggests that as foreign policy gains salience among the Indian public and as responsibility for foreign policy is clearly identified in a single-party setting, we should expect to see a political leadership that is highly invested in foreign policy and that pays careful attention to domestic constraints (assuming that democracy itself does not dramatically decline over time).<sup>33</sup>

### ***Foreign Perceptions: Tangible Yet Manageable Costs***

Canonical models of domestic politics and foreign policy assume that domestic groups pursue narrow interests that are only tangentially related, if at all, to the national interest.<sup>34</sup> Under certain conditions, domestic preferences can coalesce into expansionist state preferences and policies that trigger counter-balancing coalitions among other states.<sup>35</sup> Audience cost theory also suggests that other states will infer the cred-

ibility of a state's threats from the degree of its domestic audience costs—lower audience costs imply lower credibility because a leader in this setting is incentivized to make empty threats given the higher probability of getting away with it. The leader may then be compelled to send costly signals to truly demonstrate capability or resolve, and these signals in turn can create security dilemmas and competitive dynamics leading to military conflict.<sup>36</sup> The perceptions of other states and societies, therefore, are integral in going from domestic political change to explaining behavior and outcomes in international relations. Perceptions can also matter when the global distribution of power is shifting. Democratic great powers are more likely to be suspicious of an undemocratic rising power because they cannot “see into” its political system to discern its true preferences.<sup>37</sup>

Christopher Clary's contribution to this special issue focuses squarely on how domestic political change in contemporary India may be impacting the perceptions of other states, especially those that value democracy and human rights in their foreign relations and those whose dominant social groups share ethnic ties with minorities internationally perceived to be at risk in India. The BJP's commitment to officially reinventing India as a Hindu nation in which other religious groups possess secondary status makes for frequently rocky relations with populist pan-Islamist governments in countries such as Malaysia and Turkey. Politically charged moments such as the changing of Kashmir's constitutional status

in August 2019 and the India-Pakistan military crisis of May 2025 can be particularly tense in this regard. Similarly, India's neighboring countries may be concerned by the territorially revisionist overtones of the BJP's public initiatives to propagate a narrative of past civilizational greatness in the form of “Akhand Bharat” (Undivided India). Clary concludes that while the BJP's domestic agenda is generating some costs in its external relations, these costs are manageable for now.

Other articles in the special issue hint at how state mediation can alter the valence of specific ideological initiatives. Sajjanhar argues that the export of digital governance technologies is an integral part of India's South-South cooperation strategy, which is premised on a narrative of India as a modern, efficient state. This narrative is likely welcomed in many Global South contexts where competing technologies from alternative providers might carry a higher financial or political price tag. Jairam discusses the extensive soft power diplomacy around India's role in the birth and spread of Buddhism, which has succeeded in bringing tourism and investment to certain parts of India. In both cases, the state propagates a benign narrative that can be sustained so long as foreign audiences do not look too carefully at the other side of the coin—the democratic costs of technology or the ideological hostility toward Buddhism—as it were.

## **Conclusion: An Evolutionary, Not Revolutionary, Foreign Policy**

The articles in this special issue collectively suggest that a changing domestic political landscape in India over the last decade has *not* produced a paradigm shift in India's foreign policy. While there is no doubt that the BJP under Prime Minister Modi is in the process of altering India's national identity, state institutions, and political process, the impact of these changes is more internal than external. This finding accords with recent research on Modi as practicing a type of populist politics based on "anti-elitism and antipluralism" that affects the procedure and communication of foreign policy but not its goals or substance.<sup>38</sup>

The authors in this special issue find substantial continuity in the goals and substance of Indian foreign policy. Khan, for example, argues that while India's worldmaking project under Modi has narrowed to a self-regarding one, the older territorial conception of sovereignty remains alive and well in India's foreign policy (albeit "amplified" under Modi). Prasad finds that while the BJP invokes a great deal more Hindu symbolism and Hindutva ideology in its rhetorical approach to the diaspora, the core goal of promoting economic engagement remains unchanged from previous administrations under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Jairam traces the long history of national governments in India instrumentalizing Buddhism for soft power gains, arguing that the BJP's primary imprint

on this tradition has been to "Hinduise" Buddhism. Blarel notes that the BJP's political dominance has done little to alter the formal and informal channels of influence by which state-level preferences influence foreign policy on regionally salient issues. Sajjanhar observes that core digital initiatives such as Aadhaar and UPI predate the BJP's ascendance and that the ruling party has built on longstanding technocratic traditions to conduct digital diplomacy and centralize power in the executive. Finally, Lamba traces the long arc of India's governance trilemma whereby successive governments have tried and failed to achieve an economic growth trajectory that jointly satisfies the imperatives of democracy, development, and civilizationalism, with the Modi government's approach being the latest and potentially hardest to change due to self-reinforcing dynamics.

The one domain in which there appears to be a clear difference of policy under successive Modi governments has been crisis behavior toward Pakistan and China. However, even here, the change has been more evolutionary than revolutionary. Modi is certainly more willing to move up the escalation ladder—and is increasingly locked into escalatory postures by his own nationalist rhetoric—but much of the crisis behavior between India and Pakistan or China today can be explained by longer-term technological and material changes on both sides.<sup>39</sup> The path dependence of policy choices thus partly explains the substantial degree of continuity between the pre-Modi and Modi eras in various domains.

Domestic and external constraints also explain some portion of this continuity. Sajjanhar points to the various points of resistance that remain active in Indian institutions and civil society despite the weakening of democratic institutions over the last decade. Indeed, on issues of national consequence that do not only impact smaller segments of the population, one can expect robust societal and institutional restraints to continue operating on the Indian state. Beyond the domestic environment, several authors point to the disciplining effects of the international system on Indian foreign policy, especially the considerable and growing gap in capabilities between China and India. China is a major competitor not just in broad geopolitical terms but also in specific domains such as soft power (including Buddhist-inflected soft power) and digital diplomacy. More recently, the souring of US-India relations points to further potential constraints on India's official ambition of becoming a leading power in global affairs. These constraints are not insurmountable, but their persistence certainly affects New Delhi's risk calculus when weighing the possibility of radical departures from longstanding foreign policy positions.

The deeper long-term preferences of India's state and society are also relevant in this context. The BJP did not invent the idea of India as a civilizational state. The latter has deep historical antecedents going back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and later in Jawaharlal Nehru's own writings on India and its place in the world.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, as noted by Jairam in this special issue, the idea of Buddhism

(along with Sikhism and Jainism) as a subsidiary of Hinduism was expressed in the Constitution of India long before the BJP ever came close to political power. Even supremacist notions of Indian culture predate the BJP's rise and dominance. For example, a 2020 Pew survey found 72 percent of Indians agreeing completely that "Indian culture is superior to others," a figure that is indistinguishable from the 74 percent who gave the same answer to a Pew survey in 2002.<sup>41</sup> Rather than entirely altering India's national identity, the BJP has in fact radically amplified one aspect of it—Hinduism—and overlaid this onto virtually every aspect of public life and policymaking. In practical terms, this effort has entailed a strong narrative push to reframe foundational political concepts such as civilization, sovereignty, diaspora, development, governance, and democracy. In terms of India's relations with the world, these changes manifest largely in discourse and rhetoric rather than actual policy.

Nationalist discourse, however, is not costless and in India's case is accompanied by majoritarian politics and policies at home. Other societies and states have responded in ways that have created diplomatic challenges for India, be it via Western assessments of India's democratic health or the occasional diplomatic spat with the populist Islamist leader of a regional power such as Malaysia or Turkey. India's domestic politics and policies are now scrutinized in capitals around the world more than they were in the past. Although this level of scrutiny appears not to have materially impacted India's international

relations, we may be early in the arc of both the BJP's ideological project and the reactions of other states. So long as India's economy continues registering impressive growth and India remains an attractive strategic partner to various countries that are more concerned about China's foreign policy than India's, there will remain a buffer between the domestic and the international. If international structural conditions were to worsen for India or the BJP's Hindu nationalism were to intensify, the gap would be harder to sustain over time.

The Indian case suggests at least three implications for the broader international relations literature. First, when a state is growing in relative capabilities and international prestige, it is possible for its domestic politics to change dra-

matically without causing significant departures in its foreign relations. Second, and relatedly, the rise of populism and nationalism can decisively impact *how* a country goes about achieving its goals without altering *what* goals it pursues at the core of its longer-term grand strategy. Third, and finally, an ideological drive toward global leadership and recognition can only go so far without the state capacity to extract and administer the resources required to build global influence. India's experience thus far under the leadership of the BJP led by Narendra Modi affirms some prior intuitions from the international relations literature while illuminating new avenues for future research into the impact of domestic change on foreign policy.

## Notes

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- 2 For example, Basrur, Rajesh. 2017. "Modi's foreign policy fundamentals: a trajectory unchanged." *International Affairs* 93 (1): 7-26; Hall, Ian. 2022. "India's foreign policy: nationalist aspirations and enduring constraints." *The Round Table* 111 (3): 321-332.
- 3 These categories are adapted from Markey, Daniel. 2022. "The Strategic Implications of India's Illiberalism and Democratic Erosion." *Asia Policy* 17(1): 77-105. Markey's is one of the few works to explicitly interrogate the linkages between domestic change and foreign policy in the Indian case.
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- 13 See Hall, Ian. 2019. *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy*. Bristol University Press.
- 14 Mukherjee, Rohan. 2024. "A Hindu Nationalist Foreign Policy." *Foreign Affairs*, April 4.
- 15 Markey 2022.
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- 32 When a senior coalition partner holds the foreign ministry and the foreign minister has substantial discretion from Cabinet, as has been the case for the BJP since 2024, we should expect a coalition government to approximate single-party government. See Oppermann, Kai, Klaus Brummer, and Niels van Willigen. 2016. "Coalition Governance and Foreign Policy Decision-making." *European Political Science* 16: 489-501.
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# **Provincializing India's Foreign Policy: Unpacking the Local and Regional Origins of India's External Policies**

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how India's foreign policy, traditionally centralized in New Delhi, has become increasingly shaped by regional actors. Using insights from paradiplomacy and coalition politics, it argues that Indian states influence external affairs through both direct economic engagement—such as investment summits, diaspora diplomacy, and trade missions—and indirect political bargaining with the central government. The article aims to clarify when and how regional interests affect foreign policy-making, depending on the local salience of international issues, federal power-sharing dynamics, coalition configurations, and the central government's responsiveness. The discussion of these dynamics in illustrative case-studies shows that state-level engagement has broadened India's international footprint while introducing new political contestation. Ultimately, this study concludes that subnational diplomacy in India is expanding but remains selectively co-opted by the Centre for electoral and strategic purposes rather than becoming a completely de-centralized and inclusive process.

*Keywords:* Indian foreign policy, Subnational diplomacy, Federalism, Regional politics, Paradiplomacy

# **Provincializando la política exterior de la India: desentrañando los orígenes locales y regionales de las políticas externas de la India**

## RESUMEN

Este artículo examina cómo la política exterior de la India, tradicionalmente centralizada en Nueva Delhi, ha sido moldeada cada vez más por actores regionales. Utilizando perspectivas de la paradiplomacia y la política de coalición, se argumenta que los estados

indios influyen en los asuntos externos tanto a través de la participación económica directa —como cumbres de inversión, diplomacia de la diáspora y misiones comerciales— como de la negociación política indirecta con el gobierno central. El artículo busca a aclarar cuándo y cómo los intereses regionales afectan la formulación de políticas exteriores, dependiendo de la relevancia local de los asuntos internacionales, la dinámica de reparto de poder federal, las configuraciones de coalición y la capacidad de respuesta del gobierno central. El análisis de estas dinámicas en estudios de caso ilustrativos muestra que la participación a nivel estatal ha ampliado la presencia internacional de la India, a la vez que ha introducido nuevas contiendas políticas. En definitiva, este estudio concluye que la diplomacia subnacional en la India se está expandiendo, pero sigue siendo cooptada selectivamente por el gobierno central con fines electorales y estratégicos, en lugar de convertirse en un proceso completamente descentralizado e inclusivo.

**Palabras clave:** Política exterior india, diplomacia subnacional, federalismo, política regional, paradiplomacia

## 印度外交政策的地方化：剖析印度对外政策的地方和区域渊源

### 摘要

本文探讨了传统上由新德里方面主导的印度外交政策如何日益受到区域和地方行动者的影响。文章运用准外交和联盟政治的见解，论证了印度各邦如何通过直接的经济参与（例如投资峰会、侨民外交和贸易代表团）以及与中央政府的间接政治博弈来影响对外事务。本文旨在构建一个类型学，阐明区域利益何时以及如何影响外交政策的制定，这取决于国际问题在地方层面的重要性、联邦权力分享动态、联盟结构以及中央政府的响应能力。通过案例研究，对这些动态的探讨表明，邦级参与扩大了印度的国际影响力，同时也引入了新的政治竞争。最终，本文得出结论：印度的地方外交正在扩展，但中央政府出于选举和战略目的对其进行选择性利用，而非成为一个完全去中心化的包容性过程。

关键词：印度外交政策，地方外交，联邦制，区域政治，准外交

Historically, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All-India Anna DMK (AIADMK) have competed for the control of the legislative assembly in Tamil Nadu, a southern Indian state, by emphasizing their traditional support for the welfare of the Tamil minority in neighbouring Sri Lanka (Jones 2012). This has led successive chief ministers of Tamil Nadu to lobby for the “Tamil cause” in New Delhi and, at times, indirectly influencing the central government’s policies towards Sri Lanka. This explains why the case of Tamil Nadu is generally one of the most visible examples in the literature on subnational diplomacy in India (Plagemann and Destradi 2015; Sridharan 2003).

However, this empirical focus on the Tamil case has led this scholarship to overlook the more diverse set of subnational foreign policy issues, as well as other types of direct diplomatic engagement by Indian states, including from those that are not strategically located border states. For instance, the portfolio of Tamil Nadu’s subnational diplomacy has expanded over the last decade to a wide range of international issues like trade, investment, science, medicine, and climate change. Foreign economic interests have directly materialized in the regular organisation of the Tamil Nadu’s Global Investors Meet (*Times of India* 2024), and regular meetings between the state’s chief minister with foreign governments in Chennai or through visits to Dubai, Singapore, Japan, Spain, and the US to attract foreign direct investment to the state (Sivapriyan 2024). This is illustrative

of a broader trend of foreign economic outreach of other states which have regularly organized investor summits to gain foreign investments (Jacob 2016).

These instances of indirect foreign policy making, through bypassing central governments and promoting subnational interests directly on the international arena, or indirectly, through influencing the central government’s foreign policy decisions, are a significant development. Traditionally, Indian foreign policy-making was assumed to be strongly centralized and the preoccupation of a limited group of political and bureaucratic elites in New Delhi. In addition, Indian policymakers have long presumed a lack of interest or knowledge about foreign policy matters of regional politicians.

The economic and diplomatic outreach of Indian states has increased over the last three decades. Paradoxically, this has also been encouraged by the central Indian government through the creation in 2014 of the “States Division” in the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), notably to facilitate states’ international cooperation in coordination with Indian embassies abroad. As India is expected to continue to rise materially, with a polity and society that will be more engaged with the global sphere at all levels, the interplay between diverse domestic—especially regional—politics and foreign policy is set to grow. Yet, the last decade has also coincided with the centralization of policy-making because of the Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) one-party majority in parliament, and its political control in a majority

of Indian states (Kailash 2019; Sharma and Swenden 2022).

Consequently, one can also expect foreign policy-making to become an even more contested political space (Markey 2022). It seems evident that some foreign policy decisions, such as signing trade deals, dealing with illegal and forced migration, or negotiating infrastructure and resource-sharing with neighbouring countries, can disproportionately affect specific Indian states. For instance, as witnessed in India's FTA negotiations with both the US and the EU, India's rural regions have expressed concerns about exposing their agricultural sectors to international competition. Similarly, India's coastal regions have long-term cultural and commercial connections with neighbouring regions which they want to see acknowledged and protected through bilateral and multilateral trade deals.

Despite this local salience of international and transnational issues, we still do not know enough about how *regional actors* influence India's foreign policy decisions. Specifically, we still do not know *when, in which ways, and to what extent* Indian states become involved in foreign policy-making process(es). In other words, when and why do Indian states develop direct diplomatic ties with transnational or international entities? When do they try to shape India's foreign policy decisions at the centre, and if so, through which formal or informal channels?

Building upon insights from the scholarship on federalism and paradiplomacy and the coalition politics of

foreign policy-making, notably in a multinational democratic federation like India, this article aims to theorize the conditions under which Indian states shape foreign policy. The nature of Indian state influence over foreign policy depends mainly on three factors: (a) the regional salience of foreign policy issues; (b) the formal and informal leverage that states hold on the central government; and (c) the central government's own strategies of politicization of foreign policy strategies. The article therefore suggests that the interplay of these factors lead to varying causal paths through which Indian states can affect India's foreign policies.

The remainder of the article is organized in four sections. First, it offers a review of the literature which has looked at how political and economic developments of the past three decades have led to increased regional and local participation in India's foreign policy-making process. In the second section, the paper suggests a theory to account for *when* and *how* some Indian states have gradually shaped Indian foreign policy. The third section briefly presents some case-studies to illustrate the causal dynamics at play. Finally, the article concludes with some discussion of the findings and future research directions.

## **The Path(s) to Decentralization of Indian Foreign Policy**

**H**istorically, foreign policy in India has been heavily centralized. The Indian Constitution envisaged and only made space for a federal structure with a unitary bias.

The Seventh Schedule of the Indian Constitution lists items 10 through 16 pertaining to foreign policy, including “diplomatic, consular and trade representation” and “participation in international conferences and associations,” as falling within the exclusive competence of the central government. The distribution of legislative powers between the Union and the States was envisaged in the Indian Constitution (Article 246), emphasizing that the Union government is competent to legislate in foreign affairs; diplomatic, consular, and trade representation; participation in international conferences; entering into treaties and agreements with foreign countries and implementation of treaties, agreements, and conventions with foreign countries; and foreign jurisdiction and trade and commerce with foreign countries (Tillin 2019). Furthermore, India’s initial partition and conflict with Pakistan, coupled with the initial concerns of internal fragmentation and implosion, led to the crafting of a federal polity with a clear unitary bias, notably when it came to foreign and security policies in the immediate neighborhood.

### ***Federalism and Paradiplomacy***

Despite this apparent clear-cut division of competencies, India’s Union government has faced indirect and direct resistance from states over the last 30 years when trying to push its foreign policies. A first wave of scholars has argued that the process of economic liberalization initiated in the early 1990s had gradually given leverage to Indian states to oppose the central govern-

ment’s foreign economic policies (Jenkins 2003; Sharma and Swenden 2018). Furthermore, since states have engaged in direct economic negotiations with external entities (foreign governments, private economic actors, or international economic organisations) over the last three decades, they have developed economic interests and stakes with specific regions and international partners (Asthana and Jacob 2019).

To better trace these developments at a theoretical level, some insights were gained from scholarship studying the influence of political decentralisation of political power and federal arrangements on foreign policy-making (Cantir 2024; Aldecoa and Keating 1999; Lecours 2002; Michelmann 2009). Some studies have therefore demonstrated that federal units can have an input on foreign economic policies towards neighbouring countries, especially if these are bordering states with strong transborder commercial ties (Barua 2020; Jacob 2016; Chattopadhyay and Debnath 2024). Studies have notably looked at how states which introduced economic reforms to attract foreign investments like Gujarat, Tamil Nadu or West Bengal have become politically more assertive and tried to exercise influence over foreign economic policy decisions (Bajpai and Sachs 1999; Kennedy 2013). These states have managed to develop their own external relations in the context of economic liberalization and globalization over the past three decades, as well as when constitutional arrangements accommodate some power-sharing possibilities and/or remain ambiguous over the distribution

of competences over foreign policy. An important conceptual clarification here is that paradiplomacy refers to the foreign policy activities and diplomatic engagements adopted by subnational entities of a sovereign state *in parallel to* the foreign policy activities of the national governments (Duchacek 1984). As expected by this literature, economic, diaspora, and cultural interests were key motivators for subnational engagement.

In the post-liberalization phase of the 1990s, Indian states have explored economic opportunities to facilitate foreign investments towards their state. These engagements have taken the form of hosting investment summits, leading economic missions to attract foreign investments, and signing Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with foreign governments in the last few decades. The union government still controls foreign economic policies but has generally facilitated these states' activities as long as subnational policies were not perceived to be too divergent from the national policies. The union government has in fact actively encouraged states to compete with each other in attracting and enhancing foreign investments (Jain and Maini 2017).

For instance, the chief ministers of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, Chandra Babu Naidu and SM Krishna, respectively, were pioneers in the field of economic paradiplomacy, initially reaping the benefits of the information technology boom in the mid-1990s (Jain and Maini 2017; Wyatt 2017). State governments have been gradually more proactive in sending and hosting inter-

national delegations from foreign states and intergovernmental organizations (Sharma 2017; Vadlamannati 2012). Chief ministers have also led Indian delegations to bilateral talks and international conferences. Naidu notably led an Indian business delegation to China in 2015 for boosting bilateral cooperation. Similarly, the former Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Prithviraj Chavan, led the Indian delegation to participate in the World Economic Forum in 2014 (Bywalec 2018). Likewise, foreign government officials and private economic actors have also adapted to the federal nature of the country's politics (Stancati 2012). Foreign governments like the US, France, and Israel have begun setting up foreign trade offices across India to directly negotiate with states over trade and investment issues before seeking approval from the Centre (Jha 2014).

The opportunities for states to develop their own economic and development diplomacy strategies were also the result of international developments such as India's World Trade Organization (WTO) commitments, since its accession to the organization in 1995. Some of the rules contained in the WTO agreements related to agriculture and related sectors, which fell within the exclusive executive competence of the states in India (Jha 2014). In the late 1990s, the central Indian government was criticized for not consulting the states before accepting the treaty commitments. Some states, such as West Bengal, Punjab, and Tamil Nadu, even took the central government to court for having made international commitments on issues where it lacks

authority (Jenkins 2003). Consequently, the central government, under the leadership of the then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, convened a “Chief Ministers Conference on the WTO” in 2001 to address the grievances and reservations of Indian states regarding their commitments under the WTO agreement (Natarajan 2019).

However, the scope of paradiplomacy arguments is limited to situations where explicit institutional conditions enable subnational authorities to directly develop their own transnational networks, both bilaterally and multilaterally, with similar political or cultural sub-units in other states (Cantir 2024). In most cases, these transnational opportunities for Indian states have emerged in areas of low politics such as education, healthcare, climate change, waste management, culture, tourism, and transportation. Furthermore, this scholarship cannot adequately explain situations when state interests seem to directly conflict with foreign policy positions held by the central government and does not suggest mechanisms to understand how these conflicts are resolved and translated into specific foreign policy positions (Blarel 2019; Sharma, Destradi, and Plagemann 2020).

### ***Coalition Politics and Regional Parties***

More recent scholarship has looked at the growing importance of regional parties in foreign policy debates because of the emergence of coalition politics. Historically, the literature on partisanship and foreign policy-making in India has concentrated on ideological de-

bates between the national parties—the Indian National Congress (INC) and the BJP—and has not systematically integrated the foreign policy preferences of subnational actors (Friedrichs 2019; Narang and Staniland 2012; Plagemann and Destradi 2019; Sagar 2014). This was mainly due to the assumption that Indian foreign policy was a centralised and exclusive prerogative of the central government. However, after 1989 the INC lost its political majority, and smaller regional parties gained more seats in the national parliament. Some scholars have therefore investigated how regional parties which have joined (or supported) ruling coalitions have been actively involved in foreign policy-making at the national level (Blarel and Van Willigen 2023; Sasikumar and Verniers 2013; Wyatt 2017).

While initial studies assessing the role of coalition politics on Indian foreign policy-making had insisted upon the institutional and political constraints of coalitions, which supposedly led to foreign policy conservatism (Mazumdar 2011; Sridharan 2003), more recent scholarship has demonstrated how particular configurations of federalism and coalition politics can help explain how regional parties, which usually run and control many seats in state assemblies, but are minor players in national parliament, can influence foreign policy decisions (Blarel 2019; Blarel and Van Willigen 2023; Sharma, Destradi, and Plagemann 2020). The regional political parties have gradually realized the importance of their presence in the coalition for the continuity of the government. In such circumstances, states'

bargaining power has begun to increase, and the regional parties have started raising their voices on every issue related to their interest, including foreign policy formulation and implementation, which later enabled them to engage in the issues of cross-border relevance (Chattopadhyay and Debnath 2024).

One key finding has been that political parties, both central and regional, play an important role in the design of foreign policies, in both direct and indirect ways. Depending on institutional and situational conditions, there are varying opportunity structures for skillful state leadership to exploit the weak spots of the governing central government to push their own foreign policy preferences, or to get other policy and/or electoral concessions from the central government. However, some studies also showed that central governments and national parties can also, under specific institutional and regional situations, mobilize wider coalitions, including small state parties that had not traditionally been involved in foreign policy debates, to support their foreign policy agendas, including radical foreign policy change such as the US nuclear deal in 2008 (Blarel and Van Willigen 2023; Sasikumar and Verniers 2013). The central government can therefore garner approval for its own foreign policy preferences by building *quid pro quo* (or logrolling) coalitions and offering policy and electoral support in state assembly elections for regional parties in return for their vote on a foreign policy decision.

As a result, one recommendation from the scholarship has been to

further tease out whether the chances of a central government pushing its own foreign policy preferences can be actually increased by the existence of large pool of potential regional party partners with limited foreign policy interest, as one would expect in the context of political fragmentation. Counter-intuitively, while we would expect a strong central government to be able to push its own foreign policy initiatives, irrespective of states' opposition, there seem to be conditions under which a weak central government can proactively engage and co-opt states through building and changing its political coalition in exchange for electoral payoffs.

Thereby, given these gaps in the paradiplomacy and coalition scholarships, this paper offers to integrate the findings discussed here into a comprehensive theoretical framework accounting for *when and how* Indian states can have an influence on the central government's foreign policy decisions.

## **The Different Opportunities for Indian States to Shape Foreign Policy**

**G**iven the developments discussed earlier, this article teases out the conditions under which Indian states are more likely to influence or shape Indian foreign policy. This section theorizes that state influence on Indian foreign policy is determined by the interplay of three concurrent dynamics: the regional salience of foreign policy, the degree of coalitional pressures, and central government agency (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Regional Preferences, Coalition Politics, Central government strategies, and Foreign Policy Outcomes in India

	<i>Coalitional Pressure: Low</i>	<i>Coalitional Pressure: High</i>
<i>Regional salience: Low</i>	<p><i>I – Centralized Control</i></p> <p>Low political and electoral salience + stable coalition dominated by a national party.</p> <p>No concessions to regional party in a state.</p>	<p><i>III – Logrolling</i></p> <p>Low political and electoral salience + coalitional fragility.</p> <p>Side-payments or concessions (such as electoral agreement for state assembly elections) made to a regional party in a state in exchange for support on a central government foreign policy initiative.</p>
<i>Regional salience: High</i>	<p><i>II – Symbolic Inclusion</i></p> <p>High political and electoral salience + stable national coalition dominated by a national party.</p> <p>No or limited concessions to regional parties in one state. Concessions motivated by long-term electoral considerations in a state, not because of immediate coalitional pressure.</p>	<p><i>IV – Substantive Concessions</i></p> <p>High political and electoral salience + coalition fragility</p> <p>Strong policy shifts to appease the concerns of a regional in a state.</p>

Source: Author

### ***Regional Salience of Foreign Policy***

A growing scholarship has begun to scrutinize how public opinion, public salience, institutional differences, and diversity of institutional representation can affect India's foreign policy decision-making (Hinton and Vaishnav 2023; Kapur 2009; Milliff et al. 2019). However, most of these studies have focused on urban elite circles to make broader claims about the national salience of some foreign policy issues.

This paper argues that some small, but spatially concentrated, constituencies have held informed and committed preferences—often expressed through the intermediary of various state-level representatives, whether regional parties or Chief Ministers—over time and over specific foreign policy issues. Variation in regional preferences on foreign policy can be explained through the geographical distribution of economic and/or cultural interests relative to for-

eign policy issues. States have therefore been more likely to engage with foreign policy when external issues have had a direct local impact, notably over issues of border security, diaspora ties, culture/ethnic links, but also when these state governments perceive economic opportunities abroad. States, notably bordering states like West Bengal, the Northeastern states, or coastal states like Tamil Nadu and Kerala, are more likely to assert influence when foreign policy issues directly affect their economy or security, such as trade with neighboring states, issues of cross-border legal and illegal migration, maritime or fishing access, or access to shared resources like river basins.

Other regional political actors have had societal, economic and electoral pressures and incentives to engage with diaspora connections, like Kerala and Punjab with their substantial expatriate communities based respectively in the Gulf states and Canada. Some other states' or territories' interests abroad intersect with transnational ethnic politics, like Tamil Nadu with Sri Lanka, West Bengal and Bangladesh, Jammu and Kashmir with Pakistan, or Northeastern states with Myanmar or China. For instance, two regional parties in India (DMK and AIADMK) have held consistent and enduring preferences over India's relationship with Sri Lanka, notably over transnational ethnic solidarity with the Tamil minority. Finally, some central government policies have a direct impact on states' economies and become a salient issue regionally. For instance, Northeastern states have tried to benefit from con-

nectivity opportunities emerging from India's participation in various trans-regional initiatives like the Look East and Act East policies and the "Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation" (BIM-STEAC) (Ray Chaudhury and Ghosh 2022). However, strongly expressed and enduring preferences by regional political actors are not sufficient to shape the central government's foreign policy. For states to shape foreign policy, directly or indirectly, institutional opportunities and reactions from the central government are also necessary.

### ***Multi-level Coalitions and Foreign Policy-making***

Building on insights from the scholarship on the coalition politics of foreign policy-making and the study of regional and coalition politics in India cited in the earlier sections, this article argues that the combination of the interest of regional representation in specific foreign policy issues and the prevailing coalitional configuration in place (whether the national government is engaged in coalitional power-sharing arrangements with regional parties at the national and/or state-levels) can also determine the extent to which regional parties are able to shape foreign policy decisions in India.

This study builds on recent foreign policy analysis scholarship which has explained variation in foreign policy outcomes between different types of coalition governments (Kaarbo 2012). Some scholars notably demonstrated that coalition-building configurations facilitate the inclusion of concerns of

small parties in foreign policy decisions (Easley and Kaarbo 2014). For instance, small parties can sometimes threaten to withdraw their support (and possibly to defect from the coalition) to disproportionately shape foreign policy. Following on these theorized mechanisms, this article suggests concentrating on the specific patterns of political bargaining in multi-party coalitions.

Strong regional salience on a foreign policy issue is not a sufficient condition to observe state influence on foreign policy. Strong foreign policy preferences and opposition from state parties only lead to a reaction from the Central government if these disagreements are likely to bring electoral costs. Narang and Staniland have argued that the shifting electoral salience of foreign policy issues and the clarity of responsibility for policy outcomes combined in various ways to generate different accountability environments in which Indian politicians operate (Narang and Staniland 2019). In accordance with this insight, the argument here is that regionally concentrated parties can pressure the national leadership and thereby influence foreign policy decisions through specific coalitional configurations.

Building on the extensive scholarship on the effects of India's experience with coalitions on its domestic politics (Adeney and Saez 2015; Chakrabarty 2014; Kailash 2014; Nooruddin 2010; Ruparelia 2015; Sridharan 2012, 2014), one can observe the growing influence at the national level of a multitude of state-level political parties which have

virtually performed as kingmakers in the tenuous coalition governments that were formed at the national level from 1989 to 2014 (Sridharan 2014; Ziegfeld 2016; Wyatt 2019). The two largest national parties, the INC, and since 1998, the BJP, have had to build large coalitions which included many smaller parties. These coalitions were also further cemented if one of these two national parties has also established electoral alliances at the state-level with regional parties. In effect, this creates what Sridharan has coined "mutual electoral interdependencies" between the national and state parties, making it difficult for either of them to withdraw backing without running the risk of losing their electoral support in national- or state-level assembly polls (Sridharan 2014).

Therefore, coalition-building arrangements following both national and regional elections (visible in federal settings) create locked-in alliances between national and state parties. Unlike traditional West European cases of intra-coalitional bargaining, it is important in the Indian context to not exclusively concentrate on the number of seats in the national parliament for each party present in cabinet but to also look at electoral arrangements negotiated at the state level with regional parties. Coalitions are not only formed in national parliaments but also within state assemblies, creating multi-level coalitions, thereby making it necessary for national parties to consider the concerns of a wider number of electoral partners when designing policies, and under some conditions, foreign policies.

Consequently, the particular institutional features of the Indian federal political system have created the phenomenon of mutual electoral interdependencies or “locked-in supporters,” which have led to specific structural constraints and opportunities for national and regional parties to shape the policy agenda of a governing coalition at the center (Sridharan 2014). As national parties build coalitions or electoral alliances with regional parties both within the national and state assemblies, they are bound by agreements that might give a disproportionate amount of leverage to regional parties to shape foreign policy. Depending on salience of specific foreign policy issues, we can also determine how varying levels of coalitional pressures are used by state parties. Within these centre–state negotiation dynamics, it is therefore important to distinguish substantial foreign policy concessions—direct input on the nature of the foreign policy issue—from “side-payments,” i.e., concessions that are not directly related to the substance of the foreign policy decision, such as promises of policy benefits for state parties’ local constituencies or of electoral support at the state assembly level. Four possible outcomes result from different combinations of regional preference and coalitional configuration as summarized in Table 1.

However, as shown by Blarel and Willigen (2021), the interlocking multi-level coalitional mechanisms can work in both directions. In some cases, regional parties might depend on support from the national parties in their state assembly elections and have there-

fore been constrained in their capacity to pressure the agenda of the national government, even if they had the seats in the national parliament to be a pivotal coalition player. The center–state coalition dynamics are therefore complicated by the central government’s own strategies.

### ***Central Government’s Response(s) and Agency***

The central government’s foreign policy doctrine and leadership style play a crucial role in either enabling or constraining state influence. Most of the time, the central government can use constitutional authority and sideline states’ views. This centralized approach was visible until the early 1990s. However, given the twin pressures of decentralized foreign economic power and coalitional politics, the central government has had to increasingly delegate or collaborate with state governments as discussed in the previous sections. This has led to reluctant and selective accommodation of states if there are electoral costs, or when the central government sees practical benefits to coordinate policies. One possible instance of accommodation is the Modi government’s coordination and consultation in 2018 with the state government of Punjab—led by a political opponent, Chief Minister Amarinder Singh—over the establishment of the Kartarpur corridor, despite the BJP holding a strong single-party majority in the national parliament. The corridor was intended to facilitate the travel of Sikh pilgrims from the Kartarpur Sahib Gurdwara in Pakistan, the final resting place of Guru

Nanak Dev, to Dera Baba Nanak in India (Dhaliwal 2025).

However, central governments and national parties can also use various strategies to partly accommodate regional concerns and mobilize coalitions to support their own foreign policy agendas, notably by including small regional parties that had not traditionally been involved in foreign policy debates. This can be done through inclusive federal diplomacy, where the Centre consults or co-opts states formally or informally. For example, Narendra Modi's own success in conducting paradiplomacy as Chief Minister of Gujarat also prompted him to promote subnational economic diplomacy in his 2014 national election campaign, where he repeatedly underlined the need for greater involvement of states in India's foreign policy (Bywalec 2018). After Modi became prime minister, the Ministry of External Affairs created the "States Division" in 2014 to facilitate direct coordination between the ministry and subnational units on matters relating to external relations and diplomacy (Tewari 2017). The objective of the new division was to "promote exports, tourism and attract more overseas investment and expertise," notably through the provision of training and capacity building assistance to states and Union Territories in areas relating to external linkages such as trade and investments (PTI 2014). The States Division has also assisted Indian states in identifying target states and regions to engage in commercial and cultural diplomacy (Jacob 2016).

Another important strategy used by the center is the offer of side-payments as mentioned in the previous section. These are concessions from the central government to regional parties that are not directly related to the substance of the foreign policy debate. For instance, in the context of the US–India nuclear debate in 2008 as discussed by Blarel and Willignen (2021), the central government was able to garner approval at the central level for its foreign policy preferences by offering policy and electoral support to a state party in return for its support on a foreign policy decision in the national parliament. The INC-led central government in New Delhi offered electoral support to the Samajwadi Party (SP) in the following regional elections in the state of Uttar Pradesh to secure its key vote in the contested nuclear deal vote in 2008. This case also proved to be a scenario with more than one regional coalition partner that the INC could negotiate with to maintain its national coalition. In this particular case and institutional configuration, the inherent weaknesses of the central government enabled it to proactively seek outside support and rebuild its coalition in exchange for policy and electoral payoffs. As a result, the combined effect of low local salience, high coalitional pressure, and strong political willingness of the central government to push a foreign policy initiative gave it an upper hand in shaping and implementing the policy agenda.

## **Foreign Policy Influence of Tamil Nadu before and after 2014**

One of the scope conditions of the arguments on coalition politics and India's foreign policy is that this mechanism is solely visible in multiparty governance. Therefore, it remains an empirical question whether the interactive effects of regional salience and coalitional arrangements are useful to explain Indian foreign policy decisions both before and after the 1989–2014 period of coalition governance. Can this framework for instance help explain India's external behavior from 2014 to 2024, when India has been ruled *de facto* by a single party central government, the BJP? To test the causal dynamics developed above, this article looks at the influence from one state, Tamil Nadu, over India's policies towards Sri Lanka over time and varying configurations of coalitional pressure. As mentioned above, the Tamil Nadu case is an oft-cited example of subnational influence but most of the evidence of Tamil Nadu pressure on the foreign policy of the central government remains based on anecdotal evidence or is overdetermined. The political pressure from Tamil Nadu is taken as a constant and there is little indication of *when* and *why* this pressure does impact Indian foreign policy. Specifically, the two selected case studies look at India's stance over the Tamil minority in neighboring Sri Lanka before and after 2014 and focus more explicitly on India's United Nations Human Right Council (UNHRC) votes on Sri Lanka

in 2012, 2013, 2014, and in 2021. In the two cases, there is a strong regional salience of the issue of the treatment of Tamils in Sri Lanka, but there were varying levels of coalitional pressures and central government strategies.

As mentioned above, India's relations with Sri Lanka have long been politically sensitive in Tamil Nadu, where public opinion strongly supports Sri Lankan Tamil rights and is critical of Colombo's treatment of Tamil civilians during and after the civil war. The two major regional parties competing for the control of the regional assembly in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, the DMK and the AIADMK, have historically been also competing to pose as the most ardent champion of the welfare of the neighboring Indian-origin Tamil population in Sri Lanka. This foreign policy issue of ethnic solidarity has been salient for successive state elections since the 1970s.

This issue has also influenced coalition-building discussions between national and Tamil Nadu parties since 1989. The growing need for political support of Tamil parties in national coalitions have led the Indian governments to opt for a more interventionist policy in Sri Lankan affairs. In 2012, the US brought to vote a resolution at the UNHCR, encouraging Sri Lanka to conduct an independent and credible investigation into alleged war crimes in the final stages of the Sri Lankan offensives to quell the LTTE insurgency (Cumming-Bruce 2012). At that time, and based on the theoretical conditions cited above, the coalitional configura-

tion and pressure was in favor of the ruling DMK in Tamil Nadu as it did not need to court the INC for electoral support in state elections and could leverage its parliamentary support at the national level. The DMK therefore directly threatened to withdraw its support to the central government coalition if it did not vote against Sri Lanka (NDTV 2012). As a result, the central Indian government chose to break with its traditional practice of not voting for country-specific motions, especially with regard to interference in domestic politics, and it voted in favor of the resolution (Narain 2017). Nevertheless, given Indian concerns over China's growing economic and political influence in Sri Lanka, it also qualified its support by suggesting that the Sri Lankan government had to give its prior approval to international inspections.

The US sponsored a stronger UNHCR resolution in 2013 and the DMK demanded this time that India amend the resolution to explicitly condemn the Sri Lankan government of genocide and war crimes. The DMK was pressured to act by its local rival at the regional level, the AIDMK, which had passed a resolution in the state assembly requesting the central government to break ties with Sri Lanka. No agreement was reached within the national coalition over an appropriate response on the part of the Indian government, but a series of central government ministers condemned Sri Lanka's treatment of the Tamil population and India voted for the resolution. These rhetorical accusations failed to satisfy the DMK, which chose to follow up this

time on its threats to withdraw from the national coalition in March 2013 without, however, destabilizing the coalition. The DMK effectively maintained its external parliamentary support to the national coalition (Sivani 2013). The coalitional configuration, therefore, pressured the Indian government to make key concessions such as the vote at the UNHCR and the decision of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to skip the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting organized in 2013 in Colombo.

However, by 2014, conscious that relations with the Sri Lankan government were deteriorating and encouraging China's push for more influence in Colombo, the central government decided to again modify its voting policy. This was made possible by a shift in the coalitional configuration—the DMK had effectively withdrawn its support from the coalition and the INC had actively been looking for other coalitional allies. Freed from the pressures of any electoral agreement with the DMK, the central government was less concerned about pro-Tamil demands and tried to mend ties with the Sri Lankan government. India therefore abstained from voting against Sri Lanka in the UNHRC vote in 2014 (Asthana and Jacob 2019).

Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's tenure, emboldened by a stable single majority in the national parliament which could effectively insulate it from Tamil parties' pressures, the central government signaled a willingness to rebuild ties with the Mahinda Rajapaksa government, and later with

President Maithripala Sirisena, emphasizing connectivity, security cooperation, and regional diplomacy. In a 2021 UNHRC vote, India abstained and used blended diplomatic language rather than an outright vote condemning Colombo (Srinivasan 2021). At the time of the vote, the BJP was in a formal electoral alliance with the AIADMK, the ruling party in Tamil Nadu, and state elections in Tamil Nadu were only weeks away. The AIADMK has historically taken strong positions defending Sri Lankan Tamils. For the BJP—which had a comfortable majority at the center and has limited electoral traction in the state—the alliance made it crucial not to alienate Tamil Nadu voters or undermine AIADMK’s political standing. This political context shaped the content and tone of India’s diplomatic messaging. In its explanation of vote at the UNHRC, India emphasized the need for Sri Lanka to ensure “meaningful devolution” and “credible commitments to reconciliation”—language aligned with long-standing Tamil Nadu demands. At the same time, New Delhi avoided a direct vote against Sri Lanka, which could have strained strategic relations and counterterrorism cooperation.

The abstention thus functioned as a balancing act, designed to preserve bilateral ties with Colombo while signaling responsiveness to Tamil concerns important for the AIADMK alliance. The AIDMK urged the central government to vote in favor of the UNHRC resolution, calling it a “moral duty” to support Sri Lankan Tamils, but did not explicitly India’s abstention

(*New Indian Express* 2021). By contrast, the DMK condemned India’s abstention and claimed India had failed Sri Lankan Tamils. Even a former INC Finance Minister P. Chidambaram, representing a Tamil Nadu constituency, called the abstention a “betrayal of Tamils everywhere,” criticized the central government for prioritizing strategic concerns over justice for Sri Lankan Tamils, and urged voters to “punish the AIADMK–BJP alliance” in the 2021 Assembly elections (*Financial Express* 2021).

Tamil Nadu’s opposition also affected implementation of foreign policy decisions on the ground. For example, the central government had to take a more careful stance on fisheries negotiations between India and Sri Lanka, as Tamil Nadu fishermen regularly clashed with the Sri Lankan Navy (Moorthy 2024). State-level protests and political pressure pushed the Modi government to adopt a more hardline rhetorical position towards Sri Lanka and offer additional welfare and legal support to the fishermen. This slowed or complicated New Delhi’s efforts to negotiate a long-term bilateral solution favored by Sri Lanka.

While in a favorable coalitional configuration, the Modi government was nevertheless aware of the regional salience of these issues and the potential repercussions ahead of national and state elections, especially for coalitional partners in the state in the AIDMK. This led the central government to only symbolically support the positions of its partner in Tamil Nadu (as expected

in outcome II in Table 1). In addition, another consideration (also expected in Table 1) was the BJP's long term electoral aims in Tamil Nadu in both national and state assembly seats. Given this other state-level electoral consideration, it was important for the BJP to avoid appearing too indifferent to Tamil concerns about Sri Lankan Tamil rights. This created a strong incentive for policy sensitivity, even if the party's actual electoral prospects remain modest, and that it still pursued a rapprochement with Sri Lanka.

The BJP's calibrated approach—such as India's abstentions at the UNHCR, repeated calls for Tamil reconciliation in Sri Lanka, and public pressure on Colombo regarding arrests of Tamil Nadu fishermen—reflects the party's need to avoid alienating voters in Tamil Nadu. Overall, the Tamil Nadu–Sri Lanka case shows how subnational politics meaningfully shaped Indian foreign policy under Modi despite the absence of formal state-level authority in external affairs. Domestic political pressures, particularly in electorally significant states with strong identity-based foreign policy preferences, can force New Delhi to recalibrate, delay, soften, or even at times break with its diplomatic stance as with the 2012 UNHCR vote. This demonstrates that India's foreign policy—while centralized—remains embedded in decentralized political dynamics that can constrain, influence, or redirect central decision-making on sensitive regional issues.

## **Conclusion**

**T**his article demonstrates that Indian states can shape the country's foreign policy in several ways. In the case studies above, the three dimensions (local salience, coalition dynamics, and central government agency) interact in complex ways to explain the varying success of Tamil parties' pressures on the central governments over time. The study of coalitional configurations shows that even in votes in multilateral forums like the UNHCR, long an unfettered function of the national government, are increasingly politicized and contested. Another recent example of traditional core task of the national government of defending national security, state sovereignty, and of pursuing the "national interest," which saw pushback from states was the implementation of the National Register of Citizens, which was criticized by 11 states. While the National Register of Citizens is a legislation passed by the central government, the Indian states of Assam and West Bengal found themselves at odds over the shared common boundary and the issue of illegal and/or non-Indian citizens. It remains to be carefully studied how this national policy has affected the BJP's electoral fate in some of these bordering states.

Moving forward, the case studies also show some dynamics which might not be explicitly visible in the 2x2 framework summarized in Table 1. For instance, the coalitional bargaining strategies of the central government to support its foreign policy initiatives or to counter state-led pressures need to be

further theorized. As shown in the case studies, the INC and the BJP found ways to insulate their coalitions from pressures coming from state parties. Also, the case studies seemed to show that timing matters. We should notably expect to see possible bargaining processes between the BJP and coalition allies, notably as we approach national and state elections, when multi-level coalitional pressure opens up leverage possibilities for junior partners and regional parties. This is an implicit assumption in the current theoretical argument which would need to be clearly hypothesized and tested in further works.

Similarly, in these electoral contexts, the impact of Indian states on foreign policy can also run both ways. Electoral considerations at the state level can also push the central government to politicize foreign policy issues which were only salient at a state level, even when these seem to contradict national security interests. The increasing politicization of foreign policy issues in regional politics can help explain why Prime Minister Modi criticized in 2024 the INC for ceding the Katchatheevu Island to Sri Lanka in 1974. For many observers and former diplomats, this long negotiated development was politicized by the governing BJP to gain votes in Tamil Nadu where it had previously failed to make any electoral gains (see the discussion in the previous section) (Haidar 2024). As a result, it seems that the inclusion of states' interests is more likely when it serves the central government's domestic political objectives (e.g., electoral gains in a state), and that other efforts to include states in foreign

policy practices, as for instance the selective invitation in bilateral visit delegations or the creation of the States Division, are more performative than sincere.

Finally, this article theorized regional salience to be a critical factor to explain variation in willingness from states to influence the central government's foreign policy, but also as a potential opportunity for national parties to politicize foreign policy issues for potential electoral gains. Further research could develop a more detailed typology of issue-areas which help distinguish when states choose to shape foreign policy via coalition building and pressure or engage alternatively in parallel paradiplomatic channels. This mainly depends on whether the issue has tangible but not critical regional implications (e.g., trade sectors, migrants, cultural ties), and where states can leverage constitutional paradiplomatic powers (economic and cultural diplomacy), or, instead, whether these are issues where national economic and security interests directly contradict core state identity or economic interests (protecting co-ethnic populations, sharing of natural resources across borders).

One societal implication of this study is that subnational diplomacy is not institutionalized but seemingly co-opted in an ad-hoc fashion for electoral purposes. This politicization by the central government or by state governments with opposing views on how to deal with neighbors could notably limit India's ability to leverage subnational diplomacy in strategies towards

the region, as with Nepal, Sri Lanka, or Bangladesh. As a result, these centre–state electoral dynamics and their implications for national and subnational diplomacy are an important avenue of future research and key to foster better and predictable institutional capacity-building in Indian foreign policy, especially at the interface with states.

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## **Hindu Nationalism, Akhand Bharat, and Foreign Perceptions of India**

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### ABSTRACT

How might changing perceptions of Indian identity affect international politics? This essay considers two ideological initiatives closely associated with the government of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. First, it examines how Indian efforts to cultivate a Hindu nationalist identity domestically and globally might lead to growing foreign concerns over the status of Indian Muslims. Second, it assesses how India's public memory of past civilizational greatness and expressed ambitions to recapture prior glories can be perceived as revisionist intentions by India's neighbors. These ideological initiatives are considered through short case studies of reactions in states neighboring India as well as states with populist pan-Islamist leaders, such as Turkey and Malaysia. Together, the evidence presented here suggests these perceived identity changes have generated tangible but manageable costs that complicate India's foreign policy as New Delhi pursues great power aspirations.

*Keywords:* India; Narendra Modi; Hindu nationalism; Hindutva; civilizational state; nationalism; rising powers

## **El nacionalismo hindú, Akhand Bharat y las percepciones extranjeras de la India**

### RESUMEN

¿Cómo podrían afectar la cambiante percepción de la identidad india a la política internacional? Este ensayo analiza dos iniciativas ideológicas estrechamente relacionadas con el gobierno del primer ministro indio, Narendra Modi. En primer lugar, examina cómo los esfuerzos de la India por cultivar una identidad nacionalista hindú a nivel nacional e internacional podrían generar una creciente preocupación en el extranjero por la situación de los musulmanes indios. En segundo lugar, evalúa cómo la memoria pública de la India sobre la grandeza de su civilización pasada y sus ambicio-

nes expresadas de recuperar glorias pasadas pueden ser percibidas como intenciones revisionistas por sus vecinos. Estas iniciativas ideológicas se analizan mediante breves estudios de caso sobre las reacciones en estados vecinos de la India, así como en estados con líderes populistas panislamistas, como Turquía y Malasia. En conjunto, la evidencia presentada aquí sugiere que estos cambios de identidad percibidos han generado costos tangibles, pero manejables, que complican la política exterior de la India, mientras Nueva Delhi persigue sus aspiraciones de gran potencia.

**Palabras clave:** India; Narendra Modi; nacionalismo hindú; Hindutva; Estado civilizacional; nacionalismo; potencias en ascenso

## 印度教民族主义、大印度以及外国对印度的感知

### 摘要

对印度身份认同的感知转变将如何影响国际政治？本文探讨了与印度总理纳伦德拉·莫迪政府密切相关的两项意识形态举措。首先，本文分析了印度在国内和国际上培育印度教民族主义身份的举措如何可能引发越来越多国际社会对印度穆斯林地位的关切。其次，本文评估了“印度公众对昔日文明辉煌的记忆以及重现昔日荣光的雄心壮志”如何可能被印度邻国视为修正主义意图。通过对印度邻国以及土耳其和马来西亚等拥有民粹主义泛伊斯兰领导人的国家的反应进行简短的案例研究，本文考察了这些意识形态举措。本文提供的证据表明，这些感知的身份认同转变已经产生了切实但可控的代价，使新德里方面在追求大国地位的过程中面临复杂的外交政策。

关键词：印度，纳伦德拉·莫迪，印度教民族主义，印度教特性，文明国家，民族主义，新兴国家

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### Introduction

While other articles in this special issue focus on how domestic trends will directly change India, its economy, and its behavior at home and abroad, this article focuses on the consequences of those

changes for India's national security. It does so by tracing how changes to India's identity and worldview are perceived by foreign actors, which in turn shapes the foreign policy landscape that New Delhi must navigate.

In a society as vast and variegated as India, there are countless changes

that might be given emphasis. For analytic tractability, I focus on two ideological projects closely associated with the Modi government. The first is an anti-secular effort designed to create a Hindu *rashtra* (polity) even if that has the effect of alienating minorities broadly and Muslims specifically (see, e.g., Ganguly, Mistree, and Diamond 2024, 9–12). The second is a greater willingness by contemporary India to proclaim revisionist preferences even if there has not been a demonstrated willingness to act upon them. This has been especially evident in discourse surrounding an “undivided India” or *Akhand Bharat*. These ideological projects are primarily domestic in terms of their intended audience, but in the modern era even domestic discourse can be and is observed externally. These external perceptions trigger changes in attitudes and behavior in the observing state, and this article seeks to assess the direction and magnitude of those external reactions.

I argue that both ideological projects have begun to generate meaningful costs for India through this mechanism of changing foreign perceptions and the policy shifts that flow from those perceptions. This finding may appear to be in tension with prior scholarship, which largely found the impact of Hindu nationalism on India’s foreign policy under Modi to be “minimal,” “weak,” and “relatively insignificant” (Gupta et al. 2019, 5, 7). Such apparently contrasting findings arise for two reasons: (1) the ideological projects highlighted here became more salient externally only in recent years, especially since

2019, and (2) the consequences of these ideological efforts may be less evident in Indian foreign policy and more evident in how India is perceived. Those changing external perceptions and the consequences that flow from them are thus the focus of this study and not so much the diplomatic or national security initiatives emitting from New Delhi as deliberate foreign policy.

I argue that the resulting external costs to domestic changes have been clearest in India’s near abroad and, to a lesser extent, in certain Muslim-majority societies farther afield. Since India is a rising power with substantial and growing material resources at its disposal, these initial costs have been bearable even if they have made India’s rise harder than it might have otherwise been. If and when these ideological projects intensify further, the associated costs from changing foreign perceptions may also intensify. Alternatively, if India’s rise falters, then previously bearable costs may become less tolerable.

This article foregrounds the question whether domestic ideological change is associated with international relations consequences. While prior work has looked at whether ideological changes within a state cause the state in question to alter its foreign policy (e.g., Haas 2005) or whether ideological similarity between states alters their relations with one another (Walt 1987), this article is different because the nature of the Indian ideological change is different.

India’s ideological change is particularist, hierarchical, and revisionist.

This change is not located primarily in India's worldview but does have profound consequences for that worldview. India's embrace of Hindu nationalism is particularist because it is not shared by any of India's neighbors—of which, only one (Nepal) has a Hindu majority—and as such activates identity dissimilarities more than similarities. It is hierarchical because the ideological project views India as one of just a handful of civilizational states that have more durable status than their nation-state peers, while also viewing the division of the Indian subcontinent into separate nation-states as being contrary to this civilizational logic. It is revisionist because the boundaries of an imagined Indian civilization include territories far beyond India's present border, even though the ideology is vague about the means necessary to reconcile India's civilizational boundaries with its legal borders.

Both comparative political scientists and international relations scholars have studied changes in India's institutions and behavior over the last decade, but they have largely done so in separate analytical silos. As Huju (2023, 279) has argued, "the scholarly community that works on Indian IR has so far largely evaded *Hindutva* in favor of more conventional foreign-policy analysis under Modi's Premiership." Thus international relations scholars have noticed Indian domestic trends, but have largely analyzed them to assess changes to Indian power potential (in so doing focusing on Modi's economic reforms) or the grand strategic choices that India selects in employing those capabilities (in so doing focusing on Modi's relative

skepticism of India's non-alignment tradition and greater comfort with the use of force). These were and remain worthwhile objects of study, but they are not the only potential consequences of changes to the Indian polity that are unfolding. While dismantling the silos may be too ambitious, this article seeks to build connections between the siloed components with a hope of gaining a fuller picture of this evolving reality.

### Change, Identity, and International Images

The ideological project of *Hindutva* is to reify a certain conception of Indian identity. Identity is a vast and fuzzy analytic concept widely employed across different social science disciplines. In discussing it, there is omnipresent danger of getting lost in philosophical excursions. This essay is concerned with a narrow subset of problems that are analytically more tractable. Namely, I seek to understand the politics of identity and how they spill over into the perceptions of others.

By the politics of identity, I mean a broad constellation of efforts "to persuade people that they are one; that they comprise a bounded, distinctive, solidary group; [and] that their internal differences do not matter, at least for the purpose at hand." (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 34) These efforts include some attempt to draw on shared cultural symbols and a narrative of a shared history (see Deutsch 1966 [1953]). These stories and appeals do not necessarily require—but very often include—some set of "others" that help delineate

what makes “us” different from “them” (Lebow 2008). In any society, there are many potential narratives of a common past that could be employed, meaning political entrepreneurs have considerable—though not unlimited—flexibility in reinterpreting, reimagining, and redeploying shared cultural understandings for new identity purposes (Samuels 2003).

These identity reification efforts, which are primarily but not exclusively domestic in their orientation, spill over national borders. Appeals made within and by one society are heard by others who consider them alongside the behavior of the observed society. Outsiders, in turn, develop and carry with them images of other societies that often differ from the identities intended to be broadcast by national leaders. There may be meaningful and lasting disjunctures between the desired images and those held by others; moreover, those images are distinct from objective indices of national capability since reality is always mediated through perception. This potential for divergence brings opportunities and dangers for those practicing identity politics. “A desired image ... can often be of greater use than a significant increment of military or economic power. An undesired image can involve costs for which almost no amount of the usual kinds of power can compensate and can be a handicap almost impossible to overcome.” (Jervis 1970, 6)

This essay proposes that there have been real costs incurred as a consequence of changing outside images of

India’s identity, though these costs are still modest. While such images could change for many reasons, I propose that in the case of contemporary India those changes are attributable in substantial part to conscious, identity-defining efforts by the government of Narendra Modi and his political allies.

To understand this ideological project, it is important to distinguish three separate but related concepts.

The first is Hindu nationalism, which is the idea that the Hindu people are not merely a community of believers but also share ethno-racial traits (such as common descent) and a common sacred land, and consequently are entitled rights of self-determination (Jaffrelot 2021, 11–13). Hinduism is not just one of India’s many religious traditions, but rather it is central to Indian civilization (Varshney 1993). Hindu nationalism arose in the context of distinguishing itself from both European colonialism, Muslim nationalism (especially in the form of the Pakistan movement), and official secularism.

The second concept is *Hindutva*, or “Hindu-ness,” which goes beyond arguing that there exist a Hindu people with certain political rights but also delineates what constitutive norms apply in determining membership and proper behavior within that group identity. In so doing, it articulates a vision for a Hindu *rashtra*. *Hindutva* might be considered one type of many potential Hindu nationalisms, though it is the currently dominant strain, which is closely associated with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (Sullivan de Estrada

2023, 435; Haug and Roychoudhury 2023, 534).

The final idea is that of India represents a “civilizational state.” This category is perhaps the trickiest of the terms to define, in part because it is the newest. The notion of civilizational states as a distinct international actor gained support from (often state-supported) discourse in China, Russia, India, and Turkey. The idea conveys a state that is the inheritor of a cultural tradition older, deeper, and broader than mere national identity (see Zhang 2012, 53). Similar to Hindu nationalism, this discourse developed as a reaction against the dominance of (primarily Western) liberal internationalism and instead grounds legitimacy in what supporters argue is a culturally unique and superior civilizational tradition. Importantly, contemporary Hindu nationalist conceptions represent only one of the civilizational narratives available to Indian political elites; another, emphasizing pluralism and syncretism, has likewise been articulated from India’s multifaceted history (Srivastava 2023).

With these concepts in hand, this essay now turns to how the politics of identity in India are perceived by others.

### Is Indian Identity Changing?

While images and realities can diverge, it is reasonable to begin an analysis of whether perceived Indian identity shifts are generating foreign policy consequences by assessing if there are discernable identity shifts. The evidence demonstrates unequivocally that Indian leaders em-

phasize repeatedly and consciously that an identity transformation is underway. In multiple forums over many years, these leaders stress that a new India is emerging that seeks to reclaim a rich and temporarily lost historical tradition of greatness (Chacko 2023, 556).

Such messaging is recurrent in Prime Minister Modi’s speeches. When Modi went to the ramparts of the Red Fort on Independence Day in 2023, addressing his “beloved 140 crore [1.4 billion] family members” he wanted his audience to know “this is a new India, this is an India full of self-confidence..., this India is unstoppable, this India is tireless, this India does not gasp and this India does not give up” (Press Information Bureau 2023). Yet this identity shift is also demonstrated in countless other ways. Less than a month after Modi’s address, Indian officials made a point of using the Hindi name, *Bharat* instead of India, on G-20 invitations to underscore one way this new India was different than staler, more constrained conceptions of Indian identity (Jain 2023).

Indian officials said they are emphasizing this New India, this *Naya Bharat*, consciously for international audiences as much as domestic ones. External affairs minister S. Jaishankar waxed at length in 2024 about how he sought to broadcast a “brand Bharat” to the world. He thought the shift in naming conventions was apt because the “very term captures the civilisational aspect [of Indian identity], while underlining how much more rooted we have become.” He stressed that civilizational

point, “Our history, tradition, culture and heritage make us stand out. We are one of the rare ancient civilizations that have made a successful transition to a nation-state. In the past, when our overall standing was less, perhaps this did not count for that much. But when juxtaposed with our achievements in so many fields, it now assumes [a] very different connotation.” This idea of rootedness comes up often in discussions of why embracing Bharat and heritage is important and Jaishankar viewed it as an integral part of larger trend of “asserting ... independence from a globalized elite” (Ministry of External Affairs 2024).

Part of *Naya Bharat* entails an India more forceful against its foes. “This is a New India—we will answer terrorists in a language they understand and with interest!” Modi had stressed on Twitter (now X) in 2019 when airstrikes he authorized against Pakistan received mild criticism from members of the political opposition (Narendra Modi [@narendramodi], X (formerly Twitter), March 22, 2019, <https://x.com/narendramodi/status/1108964963190628352>). A few years later, Modi returned to the theme in 2024: “The headlines in *Naya Bharat* are ... India punishes Pakistan through surgical strikes” (Press Trust of India 2024). Indeed, some Indian diplomats anonymously lament that it is hard to project a more Hindutva-oriented foreign policy “without jingoism” (quoted in Huju 2023, 262).

Indian senior officials stress that the branding of a new India is not merely a domestic exercise. They argue

international perceptions are changing, though in their retelling those perceptual changes are exclusively to India’s benefit. Jaishankar wrote a book in 2024 to explain *Why Bharat Matters* and emphasized, “New India may be a message at home; it is equally an image abroad. It is not simply a more powerful and capable India that the world perceives; it is a more authentic and participative one, at ease as much with its nationalist spirit as with its international contributions” (Jaishankar 2024, 69).

While not the focus of this essay, it is interesting to contrast this brand profile of confidence, assertiveness, and willingness to use force to that public profile which China adopted under Deng Xiaoping during a similar period of rapid international ascent. Deng advocated that China must “observe calmly, secure our position, cope with affairs calmly, hide our capabilities and bide our time, maintain a low profile, never claim leadership, and accomplish something” (Quoted in Doshi 2021, 58–59). Modi’s India has sought to showcase India’s capabilities, heighten India’s profile on the world stage and claim global leadership. The divergence in desired images cultivated by two rising Asian powers helps to illustrate that identity creation efforts are not merely epiphenomenal to material power shifts.

What does it mean that Bharat is more “authentic” and “rooted”? What are the elements of the civilizational aspects of Indian identity? Here Jaishankar’s 2024 book is largely silent, mentioning neither the words “Hindu” nor “Muslim” in its more than two hundred

pages of text. It is implicit that the civilization is Hindu-centered since Jaishankar's book uses a rhetorical scaffold of interlacing contemporary analysis with lessons drawn from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Indeed, survey experimental work suggests that the term, Bharat, evokes more Hindu nationalist conceptions and weakens attachments to older secular visions of Indian identity among Indian respondents, than the name India did (Lindstam and Haas 2025).

Other national Indian political figures have been clearer about what Bharat ought to convey. In 2023, just days before the Modi government made headlines by issuing diplomatic invitations as "Bharat" rather than "India," Mohan Bhagwat had called for just such a move. Bhagwat serves as the head of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist umbrella organization. Bhagwat argued, "The name of our country has been Bharat for ages. Whatever may be the language, the name remains the same ... We will have to stop using the word 'India' and start using 'Bharat' in all practical fields. Only then will a change happen." What does it mean to be a citizen of Bharat? Well, here too the RSS chief offered a clear vision: "Ideologically, all Bharatiyas [Indians] are Hindus and Hindus mean all Bharatiyas. All those who are in Bharat today are related to the Hindu culture, Hindu ancestors, and the Hindu land," he explained. Rather than a pluralist society of separate entities this was a "Hindu *rashtra*," Bhagwat stressed (quoted in Thakur 2023).

Bhagwat's call to use Bharat happening less than a week before a publicized move to do that in a diplomatic setting suggests two possibilities: either Bhagwat was informed in advance such a move would happen, or the move happened because Bhagwat had called for it. Either possibility suggests a level of policy coordination between the RSS and the Modi government that then gives his words on what Bharat means more weight. (Modi's long tenure earlier in his life working in the RSS provides further weight to RSS pronouncements.)

Having established that there has been a concerted effort to project a new Indian identity at home and abroad, what negative baggage might this new Bharat carry that the old India did not?

### ***India as Anti-Muslim***

The first possible change involves the foreign perception that Indian Muslims are treated as second-class citizens in this new India. One criticism of the idea of a Hindu *rashtra* going back to at least B. R. Ambedkar's reading of V. D. Savarkar is that Hindu nationalists seek to create a society where "the Hindu nation will be enabled to occupy a predominant position that is due to it and the Muslim nation made to live in the position of subordinate co-operation with the Hindu nation." Hindu nationalism seeks hierarchy, rather than equality. Or as Ambedkar more forcefully puts it, "Savarkar will give the Hindus an empire over the Muslims and thereby satisfy their vanity and their pride in being an imperial race" (Ambedkar 2014 [1946], 142–145). If

anything, Ambedkar's criticism of Savarkar is even more valid for other Hindu nationalist thinkers of that era—M. S. Golwalkar (1939, 104–105) most clearly (Guha 2013, 338–345).

Many contemporary Hindu nationalists—including Bhagwat—argue that India is sufficiently capacious—after all Hinduism has thousands of gods—that it can accept any religion so long as Muslims don't insist on cultural or religious superiority (Press Trust of India 2023). They hint that the problem is Muslim chauvinism, not Hindu supremacism. Yet in other strands of contemporary Hindu nationalist rhetoric the sense of Muslim otherness is also clear.

In 2023, on India's Independence Day, Modi emphasized that India stood at the end of 1,000 years of slavery and was transitioning to 1,000 years of greatness (Press Information Bureau 2023). That arithmetic necessarily includes Mughal rule alongside colonialism in Modi's public historicizing of when Indian slavery began and ended. This accounting, consistent with an earlier generation of Hindu nationalist writers such as Savarkar, indicates a separateness and potential source of danger from Islam. It appears to consciously reject a more syncretic narrative of Indian identity proposed by Jawaharlal Nehru and other Congress leaders (e.g., Nehru 1994 [1946], 241).

Such a recasting of history promotes—indeed, necessitates—action and assertiveness against potential threats. As Bhagwat argued a few weeks after Modi's 2023 Independence Day

address, drawing on a similar chronology, "Hindu society has been at war for over 1,000 years—this fight has been going on against foreign aggressions, foreign influences, and foreign conspiracies ... Hindu society has awakened. It is but natural for those at war to be aggressive" (Press Trust of India 2023). Again, since the recounting of foreign threat includes the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire as being "foreign" and a source of Indian "slavery," aggression is merited not just to repel threats now distant and far away, but rather to root out "foreign" influences that earlier Indian thinkers viewed as Indian in some important way.

If this were merely rhetorical, the effect on outsiders might be negligible. After all, certainly this is an age of heightened global rhetoric. Yet there are signs that this Hindu nationalist awakening may not secure outcomes that Indian Muslims perceive as just—or importantly, for this article's argument, that outside observers perceive as just. It is not mere rhetoric.

Indian Muslims have long-struggled to secure proportionate political and bureaucratic power—much before Modi emerged on the scene, it should be emphasized. Yet the Muslim share of elite government institutions has continued to decline in the Modi era even as the Muslim share of the population grows. Today Muslims are roughly 15 percent of India's population, up from less than 10 percent at the time of the first Indian census in 1951. Muslims make up just 4.4 percent of the lower house of parliament, 3.3 percent of

the Indian Administrative Service, and 3 percent of the Indian Police Service. While Modi-era numbers are not available, neither the Indian military nor Indian intelligence agencies seem to fare any better. Estimates of the Indian military officer corps suggest perhaps 2 percent are Muslim while anecdotal evidence suggests equivalently small (or smaller) numbers in the Intelligence Bureau and Research and Analysis Wing (Jaffrelot 2021, 408-412).

While this lack of representation predates Modi and the BJP, none of these trends have improved and many have worsened in the Modi era. Notably, there are no Muslim members of the BJP or the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance coalition in the Lok Sabha, nor are there any Muslim cabinet ministers in the current Modi government (cabinet ministers can also come from the upper house, Rajya Sabha).

This is hardly the only problem. Indian Muslims have been subject to vigilante violence and human rights groups allege that Muslims face higher rates of arbitrary and extrajudicial punishments, such as home demolition and public corporal punishment (Human Rights Watch 2022). There are widespread reports that Muslims face barriers (and in many cases, outright exclusion) from portions of the urban real estate market, and audit experiments by social scientists affirm Muslims receive callbacks from landlords at a substantively and statistically lower rate than Hindus (Datta and Pathania 2016). Hindu nationalist politicians accuse Muslim migrants to Indian cities creat-

ing “mini-Pakistans” (Mishra 2022) or “Palestines” (Sharma 2024) that threaten India from within. Interfaith and interethnic marriages are controversial for many different groups in India, but Muslims in particular have been singled out as waging a “love jihad” to lure non-Muslims into marriages (Malji and Raza 2021). Polling shows large majorities of Hindus believe the Muslim population is growing too fast and pluralities of Hindus say they do not desire a Muslim neighbor (Clary et al. 2024). In recent years, undocumented Muslim migrants from neighboring states, especially Bangladesh, have been subject to extraordinary bigotry, with senior Indian cabinet member Amit Shah likening them to “termites” (Ghoshal 2019).

In this context, when news stories raise the salience of the Hindu-Muslim divide in India, international observers notice and express concern. It is hard to pursue a policy domestically that affects a group with even modest international salience, like Indian Muslims, without that policy being noticed abroad. This is not a new problem, of course. In the aftermath of the 1992 destruction during a BJP rally of the Babri Masjid—a centuries-old mosque alleged by some to be at the site of the Hindu God Ram’s birthplace—the elderly former diplomat Arthur Lall wrote to his retired diplomatic colleague B.K. Nehru. What a “stupid lack of civilized restraint” had been displayed at Ayodhya, Lall lamented. Had the BJP “taken into account the regional and international consequences of its actions[;] not just its actions, but the interpretation that M[uslim]s around the world will give to them?”

(quoted in Huju 2023, 258).

When high-profile events happen to heighten the Hindu–Muslim divide in India, such concern in recent years has been voiced the loudest not from the autocratic states of the Middle East, but rather Muslim societies with some elements of electoral democracy, especially in places with Muslim populist leaders. In these instances, the particularism of Hindu nationalism appears to react especially poorly with populist pan-Islamic identities cultivated elsewhere. Such leaders may be on the lookout for anti-Muslim animus and hence Indian steps—rhetorical or tangible—in that regard take on heightened salience to them.

Two Modi-era episodes in 2019 and 2020 provide instructive data in this regard. In 2019, India decided to strip the Muslim-majority area of Jammu and Kashmir of its special status within the Indian constitution and downgrade the region to a union territory rather than a state within the Indian federal setup. The move drew widespread international attention and considerable criticism. Four countries elevated the issue to the most prominent international forum: speeches by national leaders at the annual UN General Assembly meeting in New York. Of the four that raised the matter at the UN gathering in September 2019: two were Indian rivals (China and Pakistan) but the other two were large Muslim-majority states, Malaysia and Turkey.

Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad was perhaps the most critical: “Despite [the] UN resolution

on Jammu and Kashmir, the country has been invaded and occupied,” he told the assembled diplomats and leaders. “There may be reasons for this action, but it is still wrong” (Prime Minister’s Office of Malaysia 2019). Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdoğan focused his criticism on the harsh lockdown that New Delhi imposed in Kashmir to prevent protests and riots following the constitutional change. The Turkish leader lamented the “blockade” where “8 million people” were “unable to step outside” and called for India-Pakistan dialogue to solve the dispute (Düz 2019). On the sidelines of the gathering, Erdoğan made it clear that he perceived a broader problem of anti-Muslim animus in contemporary India that demanded outside observers to speak up. Referencing vigilantes who targeted Muslims for cow slaughter, Erdoğan asked, “In India, how will we defend Muslim youth who are being whipped, beaten by machetes and even sentenced to death just for eating beef?” (Gunerigok and Hamit 2019).

The following year other events raised the salience of these problems again. In 2019, in addition to the Kashmir policy changes, the Modi government had pushed separately for legislation that would make it easier for non-Muslims to become Indian citizens but notably excluded this fast-track for foreign Muslims. Simmering tensions over the citizenship issue eventually caused Hindu-Muslim riots to break out in Delhi in 2020. The salience of the event was heightened internationally because the violence coincided with a visit to India by U.S. President Donald Trump.

Erdoğan linked the 2020 riots with India's great power aspirations. Erdoğan exaggerated the one-sidedness of the Delhi violence to a Turkish audience, saying contemporaneously, "India right now has become a country where massacres are widespread. What massacres? Massacres of Muslims. By who? Hindus." He went on to argue, "How will these people [Indians] make global peace possible? It is impossible. When making speeches—since they have a large population—they say 'we are strong' but that is not strength" (Agence France Presse 2020). In Indonesia, Vice President Ma'ruf Amin responded to non-governmental and clerical pressure to express concern and sadness about the Delhi riots amid comments on the dangers of religious radicalism (Antara Indonesian News Agency 2020). Closer to home, the Delhi riots led to protests in Bangladesh in February 2020 and appeals for the Sheikh Hasina government to cancel a planned visit by Modi to Dhaka that March (Associated Press 2020).

Some of these Modi-era criticisms passed quickly with only mild turbulence. Mahathir's comments led to a boycott movement against Malaysian palm oil, but Mahathir's tenure as prime minister ended in February 2020. Subsequent Malaysian governments have sought to turn the page with India (Das 2024). Malaysia has continued to support Pakistan, however, including publicly backing Islamabad becoming a full dialogue partner with the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) compared to Pakistan's current status as a more limited sectoral

partner (Sajjad 2025).

Some external criticisms pre-saged more troubled bilateral tie with India. Erdoğan's criticisms were more vocal and recurrent, but their tone and volume were not immune to incentives. After five years of raising Kashmir at the United Nations, in 2024 the Turkish leader refrained from doing so. This was widely hypothesized as a concession Erdoğan was making in order to reduce Indian resistance to Turkish membership of an expanded BRICS grouping (Singh 2024).

Yet because of pan-Islamic unity or some other more mercantile driver, Turkey-Pakistan defense cooperation has deepened during the Erdoğan era. When a crisis broke out in 2025 between India and Pakistan following an attack in Kashmir on April 22, Turkey sent a naval vessel to Karachi port in early May despite heightened Indo-Pakistani tensions. When fighting eventually erupted, Pakistan allegedly used Turkish defense hardware against India in the short conflict from May 7 to 10 (Roy 2025). Turkey has since found itself subject to Indian ire following those India-Pakistan clashes in 2025. There have been calls in India for a consumer boycott (Pandya 2025), moves to cut ties with Turkish companies in logistics (Chaturvedi and Kalra 2025) and aviation (Ahuja 2025), and efforts to curtail links between educational establishments (Press Trust of India 2025a). At the UN in the fall of 2025, after a one-year hiatus, Erdoğan again raised Kashmir in his address the assembled leaders.

In Bangladesh, anti-India sentiment also has the potential to cause long-term damage to the bilateral relationship. Here Bangladesh's Islam-inflected nationalism reacts poorly with Hindu nationalism. By the end of Sheikh Hasina's tenure, the former Bangladeshi leader was widely perceived as being too subservient to India (Mustafa 2024). Unlike other cases involving distant powers, in Bangladesh, it is difficult to disentangle discontent with Sheikh Hasina from discontent with India, since to an extent Hasina and Indian reputations became tarnished in the eyes of some in Bangladesh because of their close interdependent relationships. In Bangladesh the concerns were not primarily about India as an anti-Muslim force but rather India as a hegemonic force in Bangladeshi life.

It remains to be seen whether the post-Hasina government will succeed or fail, and whether that success or failure will lead to a durable shift in Bangladeshi public opinion of India. So far, there are signs that Bangladesh's more assertive turn as an independent, Muslim-majority sovereign state has interacted poorly with India's more assertive Hindu nationalism. Concerns—some organic and some stoked by political and media entrepreneurs—about the fate of Bangladeshi Hindus have led to a sharp rise in anti-Bangladesh sentiment in India. While Bangladeshi Hindus have been caught up in the sometimes-violent political turmoil associated with Hasina's fall from power, many international observers have concluded that evidence of widespread anti-Hindu violence are overstated. In-

ternational media investigations have concluded that several videos and associated claims in India and elsewhere of an ongoing "Hindu genocide" in Bangladesh are false (Wakefield and Menon 2024).

Whether sincere or manufactured, these concerns have led to aggressive Indian rhetoric. The BJP leader of the opposition in neighboring West Bengal, Suwendu Adhikari compared the Yunus-led government to the Taliban and went so far as to threaten the neighboring state. "There are 40 Rafale aircraft stationed at Hasimara [in West Bengal]. Just sending two planes will do the job" of stopping persecution against Hindus. The BJP leader further argued that Bangladesh should remember it is dependent on India for many commodities, including electricity (*The Wire* 2024).

Interim Bangladeshi president Muhammad Yunus has blamed the Indian media for widespread misinformation about conditions in Bangladesh, especially for its Hindu minority (Rachman 2025). While Yunus generally has sought to disassociate the Government of India from the effort, other Bangladeshi activists in his coalition have been quicker to perceive a conscious effort by the BJP "to turn Bangladesh into an internal political issue for India" (Baruah 2024). Indeed, there does appear to be a concerted effort by the BJP to instrumentalize Bangladesh concerns as the party works to weaken the hold of the opposition Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal, especially ahead of planned state elec-

tions in 2026. “The Bangladesh turmoil, where Hindu minorities have been at the receiving end, has accelerated the [BJP party] membership drive, as people see the BJP as the only party capable of ensuring stability and are afraid of similar events under TMC’s rule, which is known for its minority appeasement,” state BJP president Sukanta Majumdar told the media in January 2025 (Press Trust of India 2025b).

For its part, Yunus’s interim government has strengthened previously anemic ties with Pakistan to India’s displeasure (Ethirajan 2025). Yunus’s attempt to garner foreign investment from China by pointing out that portions of India’s northeast are landlocked and dependent on Bangladesh for connectivity were perceived as threatening by some Indian observers. In turn, politicians from northeast India called Yunus’s remarks provocative and offensive. One such local party official from Tripura state in India went so far as to encourage India to forego the circuitous and costly effort to build infrastructure around Bangladesh and instead seize a route to Chittagong port just 70 kilometers from the southernmost tip of Tripura (Barman 2025). What might have begun as an identity divergence, then, has spiraled into security threats and revisionist territorial claims.

This leads to a second set of concerns in a more Hindu nationalist India that merits consideration.

### ***How Do Neighbors Perceive Akhand Bharat?***

“The homeland of the Hindus through millennia [sic] of their history has been nothing short of the whole of India stretching in its continental expanse from Kashmir to the Cape, from Nanga Parvat [in Gilgit-Baltistan] and Amarnath [Jammu and Kashmir] to Madura [Madurai] and Rameshwaram [Tamil Nadu] and from Dwarka [Gujarat] to Puri [Odisha]. The Hindus through the ages have built up the whole of this continent as their sacred, inviolable, and indivisible Mother Country and infused into it their very blood” (Mookerji 1945, 4). Thus began R. K. Mookerji in his address to the Akhand Bharat conference in New Delhi in October 1944, fighting unsuccessfully against the vivisection of Mother India to make a separate Pakistan. His pamphlet endures in the modern BJP’s online library of important reference materials.

Partition when it occurred in 1947 consequently led to a *khandit* (divided or fragmented) India. The goal for Hindu nationalists was and remains an *akhand* (undivided or unfragmented) India. How to achieve this objective is a frequent point of discussion in Hindu nationalist writings.

Sri Aurobindo ([1947] 2007), in a message written at the time of Independence, lamented,

India is free but she has not achieved unity, only a fissured and broken freedom ... the old communal division into Hindu and Muslim seems to have

hardened into the figure of a permanent political division of the country. It is to be hoped that the [Indian National] Congress [political party] and the nation will not accept the settled fact as for ever [*sic*] settled or as anything more than a temporary expedient. For if it lasts, India may be seriously weakened, even crippled: civil strife may remain always possible, possible even a new invasion and foreign conquest ... But by whatever means, the division must and will go.

Writing several years after independence, V. D. Savarkar (1971 [1963], 474) counsels patience in pursuit of an undivided Bharat. “[T]he real strategy for the Hindus from the point of view of their own benefit and the greater glory of Hindutwa [*sic*] is first to make the newly won Bharat wholly their own. The fragments that were left in the foreign hands could be attended to later on!” In Savarkar’s calculation winning back a Bharat from Muslim and Christian conquerors was no small feat and, with time, *Akhand Bharat* would also emerge.

This cursory intellectual history should suggest why it is hard to know what to make of Indian political figures who seek Akhand Bharat. Is this some distant goal or something more urgently felt? If Akhand Bharat is almost spiritually inevitable, then it may not require purposive politics or military force to bring it about now. The fragments of India will wither without the core and come back to it. This is how

the BJP chief minister of Uttar Pradesh Yogi Adityanath spoke about the issue in February 2023, “Pakistan is not a reality in the spiritual world. If something is not reality, it is fortunate that they survived for so long. It is in their interest to quickly amalgamate into India” (quoted in Kumar 2023). This idea that India has a spiritual core and perhaps other states do not would be consistent with civilizational rhetoric used in Russia and elsewhere (see Coker 2019).

Others have implied more volition by India. In 2022, RSS chief Bhagwat caused headlines by saying that at India’s current pace Akhand Bharat would become realized by India’s hundredth year of independent (2047) at the latest. With some effort, however, an undivided India might come into being as early as 2032. The analogy he offered alongside this timeline implied inevitability mixed with agency. “Our car is on its way. It has no brakes and only the accelerator. Anyone who comes in the way will be destroyed. Those who want can come join us in the car. This car won’t stop” (quoted in Das 2022).

RSS materials sometimes offered visualizations of what the boundaries of undivided India would mean: Akhand Bharat would stretch from Afghanistan in the west to Myanmar in the east, capturing all of Kashmir, Ladakh, and Tibet in the north and stretch down to encompass Sri Lanka in the south (Singh 2022). When a new parliament building was inaugurated in the summer of 2023, it also had a similar map in mural form. Many took the exhibit in the new complex to signify an expansive

vision of Akhand Bharat. The new map highlighted an area that stretched from Afghanistan, covering Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. (It refrained from including Tibet.) The mural was, India's Ministry of External Affairs clarified, merely a memorialization of the spread of the Mauryan Empire under Ashoka and a reminder of "the idea of responsible and people-oriented governance that [Ashoka] adopted and propagated." Yet many in the neighborhood saw the map as an active goal not merely nostalgia. Some in India, too. A BJP cabinet minister (and longtime RSS member), Pralhad Joshi, shared the map on social media and said, "The resolve is clear - Akhand Bharat." Another BJP member of parliament, Manoj Kotak, also shared the map saying "Akhand Bharat in the new parliament building," showcasing in his view a "powerful and self-reliant India" (Reed 2023).

The reaction was immediate. In Bangladesh, parties from around the political spectrum condemned the map as an "insult" and a "threat to the country's independence and sovereignty." The India-friendly Awami League acknowledged popular anger and said it would seek clarification. Awami League allies asked for the map's amendment. Opposition parties demanded its immediate removal (*Prothom Alo* 2023).

The map angered many in Nepal, as well, despite the Nepalese government's explanations that the Indians had assured them that it was merely a cultural map. A publicity-seeking mayor in Kathmandu asked his aides

to install a map in his office of Greater Nepal, showing the territory Nepal possessed prior to the Treaty of Sugauli of 1816—slightly more than double Nepal's current territory. Even within the governing coalition there were public complaints of a too accommodative stand by the government in Kathmandu. Gagan Thapa, a senior leader of the largest party in the governing coalition, the Nepali Congress, encouraged the government to publish its own cultural map to counter the Indian one. Former Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli encouraged his successor, Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, to ask for the new Indian map's removal from the parliament exhibit and to correct the cartographic mistake. Oli referenced a recent trip of Dahal's to India and argued, "There is no point in visiting India if you can't do that" (Giri 2023; *Al Jazeera* 2023).

Pakistan unsurprisingly was "appalled" and expressed "grave concern." The map was just another "manifestation," the Pakistan foreign office explained, of an "expansionist mindset that seek to subjugate the ideology and culture not only of India's neighbors but also its religious minorities" (Radio Pakistan 2023).

This storm largely passed in India's near abroad, but it is a reminder that even benign remembrances of past historical greatness can signal potentially revisionist intentions—to one's own populace and elites, as Pralhad Joshi's reaction indicates, as well as to international observers. Conceptualizing India as being a civilizational state

has often involved discussing boundaries outside of India's current borders. It is difficult to articulate that vision without trespassing on the national visions of India's neighbors. This is true despite the fact that the more expansive cultural project exists alongside an official policy of good neighborliness. The Akhand Bharat mural episode is an instructive example of how easy an undesired image can supplant the image cultivated by formal government policy. As Chatterjee and Das (2023, 494) stress, "[D]espite the continuity of India's official stance in the neighbourhood, its increasingly jingoistic domestic rhetoric about south Asia under the present political dispensation has elicited reactions from other south Asian states, ranging from criticism to imitation."

One final challenge bears emphasis which is the difficulty of narrow-casting to multiple audiences. While this challenge was and is present with regards to the perception of Indian Muslims (an issue abroad as much as at home) and cultural nostalgia for past civilizational greatness, sometimes domestic moves for mostly domestic consumption can signal revisionist intent. The prime example of this was India's changes to the status of Jammu and Kashmir in 2019. This policy shift entailed not just the downgrading of the erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir state within the Indian union but also the separation from that state of a new, separate Ladakh union territory as well. A new union territory necessitated a new map of its boundaries, which necessarily included republicizing India's long-standing claim of Aksai Chin.

During his explanation of the Modi government's decision, when questioned in parliament, Home Minister Amit Shah stressed that in his view both Pakistan-administered Kashmir and the disputed Aksai Chin plateau in Ladakh were part of India. When asked if the government's stance was too aggressive, Shah shouted down the questioner. "I am ready to give my life for this. You are talking about getting aggressive? I am ready to give my life for this" (Yadav 2020).

Several China watchers have argued that the Ladakh policy shift troubled the Chinese. Officially, China viewed the policy shift as an Indian effort "to undermine China's territorial sovereignty by unilaterally changing its domestic law" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2019). Such a statement might accompany any new map covering an area with a territorial dispute. There were other signs the complaints were not merely pro forma. Ashley Tellis, based on his conversations with Chinese interlocutors in late 2019 and early 2020, concludes, the Chinese "were reading the [2019 Kashmir] decision almost as if India was signaling an initiation of revanchism." Tellis tried to convince his Chinese counterparts that India's goals were domestic in nature, but he "was struck by the fact that [the decision] seems to have lodged in Chinese consciousness" (*Interpreting India* 2020). Ananth Krishnan, arguably the Indian journalist today who knows China best, said in 2020, "what I strongly believe did not help assuage Chinese anxieties [about India] was Amit Shah's

statement in Parliament, which I think was entirely needless, saying that India would die to get Aksai Chin back. And I think that even if that didn't really worry Chinese leaders, it gave them a great reason to do something to send a message to India, and I think it really was counterproductive" (*Grand Tamasha* 2020).

Since Chinese motives for the 2020 border clashes along the disputed Sino-Indian frontier are still poorly understood, these fears and concerns expressed in the months immediately before the clashes are one of the few pieces of evidence available of a possible Chinese motive. (India's long-term effort to build additional infrastructure along the border being the other important possible explanation.) Such a Chinese decision calculus to use force in the face of perceived greater Indian revisionism would be consistent with long-existing view in Western scholarship of China that concludes Beijing is most likely to escalate violence when it fears its position on a disputed frontier is worsening, especially if the Chinese domestic situation appears troubled (Whiting 1975; Fravel 2008).

It is of course possible that China's calculus did not involve a serious consideration of India's domestically oriented changes to Ladakh. Yet the potential for external misperception of rhetoric broadcast to and policies enacted for domestic audiences represents at least a potential challenge for a New India. If these Indian moves did help push China to escalation, then that escalation would be the costliest observed

consequence thus far for these ideological changes underway in Modi's India. China has agency as well and is hardly blameless in the escalation of hostilities, but this case—alongside territorial murmurs in the India-Bangladesh relationship discussed above—helps sketch out a way that these ideological shifts could worsen security dilemmas in international politics by causing outside states to believe India is revisionist—perhaps more revisionist than it truly is.

## Conclusion

The current government of India has sought to broadcast that there is a "new India" to domestic and international audiences. What that means for India and what that implies for other states is still uncertain. The ideological changes discussed here may be the overstated ambitions of merely some in the Indian elite. These changes are unlikely to be fully realized any time soon and the trajectory of ideological change is unlikely to be constant. Yet it is at least possible the ideological ambitions of some Indian elites will become widely shared societal ambitions. Even if some of this ideological vision is insincere, it is possible that rhetoric designed by elites to mobilize voters today becomes internalized by the next generation of elites tomorrow.

As such it is worth taking these ideological visions and their contestation within Indian society seriously. There has long been a tendency in international relations scholarship especially to treat India unproblematically as a status quo power facing revisionist threats

from Pakistan and China. This may have been an accurate diagnosis in the past and it may even be an accurate diagnosis today. But it is worth laying the groundwork that would permit a changing diagnosis in the event of a stark change in India's foreign policy preferences going forward. At a minimum, more widespread recognition is likely merited among external scholars that the image of India as a status quo actor was never held widely among India's neighbors and that view has become less common still over the last decade.

While this essay has focused on changes associated with India's Hindu nationalist identity, these are not the only shifts ongoing in Indian society and governance. Other scholars have foregrounded how the growing perception of Indian illiberalism might complicate and restrain how other liberal democratic regimes, primarily but not exclusively in the West, opt to cooperate with New Delhi (Markey 2022). The argument advanced above is that changes in India's identity toward a more forceful Hindu nationalist vision may also serve to discourage international cooperation with New Delhi for reasons related but distinct from concerns over illiberalism or procedural democracy.

Moreover, while this essay has focused on the consequences in India's near abroad and in certain Muslim societies with greater pan-Islamist populist movements, these examples are hardly exhaustive of potential future costs. Despite India's growing economic clout and adroit diplomacy in the Middle East, already there have been recent

episodes where alleged Islamophobia has spilled out of India's domestic discourse and into the international arena in those societies as well. Political and economic realism by autocratic leaders in those societies worked to quiet popular displeasure. Scholars have expressed concerns, however, that India's diplomatic gains in the Gulf may be fragile to unfavorable shifts in popular sentiment (Blarel 2022: 104; Ganguly and Blarel 2020). Such future shifts in Arab public opinion or changes in governing structures that might make those societies more beholden to popular will could stress India-Middle East ties going forward. India's perceived closeness to Israel over the last decade, including during the post-October 7, 2023, war in Gaza, may have made renewed Saudi-Pakistan defense cooperation more attractive to Riyadh, to take one concrete example from the recent period. Assessing the potential of such identity strains—as well as comparing these popular stressors against commercial, diplomatic, and national security interests that may favor cooperation—bears close watching.

Additionally, while the focus of this essay has been on the direct international consequences there may also be important indirect ones that deserve more scrutiny. Much of the ideological and political resistance to the Hindutva project as a reordering effort for Indian society has come from sub-national polities along India's peripheries. In the south and east, linguistic minorities in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal have resisted BJP's efforts to secure national political dominance. These state

governments in turn have had distinct views on the preferred approaches toward nearby neighbors in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Even more notably, Hindutva sits uneasily at best with religious minorities that are majorities or pluralities in Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh, and many Northeast Indian states. Social movements based on these anti-Hindutva sentiments merge and co-mingle with other, older grievances against the Indian state. When these grievances generate non-state violence, as they have repeatedly, the need to quell such violence can divert military and paramilitary troops from other defense tasks for which resources are already scarce (Clary 2025). If these grievances persist, indigenous social movements may be the target for opportunistic assistance by India's contig-

uous rivals in China and Pakistan.

India offers a valuable case study into the consequences of evolving societal preferences, the reciprocal relationship between those preferences and shifting ideational worldviews, and how external actors perceive such preferences. It also illustrates how these largely ideational—rather than material—forces can influence foreign policy and international politics. This interplay is especially salient in a rising power like India, where changing material capabilities both reflect and reinforce national ambitions and the societal expressions of those ambitions. India, therefore, deserves urgent and focused scholarly attention, particularly from those willing to revisit long-standing assumptions about its role as an international actor.

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# **Between Soft Power and Hard Ideology: Buddhism in the Imagery of the Indian State and Hindu Right**

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi has spear-headed efforts to promote Buddhism as part of his diplomatic overtures in Asia. Heralding this to be the Asian Century, he has been instrumental in crafting an Indian vision of Buddhism, that has been successful in making India a centrepiece of Buddhist diplomacy. However, whilst in the public domain of government, Buddhism has enjoyed widescale patronage, its reputation among Modi's ideological mentors in the Hindu Right presents a different case altogether. Ranging from ambivalence to appropriation and downright hostility, ideologues of the Hindu Right have portrayed Buddhism in complete opposite to the ethics and value driven Buddha Modi wishes to market. This article examines the successes of Modi in instrumentalising Buddhism as a tool of India's growing Soft Power. It also sheds light on Buddhism's place within the Hindu Right's imagination of the Indian nation, thereby showcasing how processes of omission and decontextualization play a crucial role in cementing Modi's message and avoiding conflict with Hindutva ideologues.

*Keywords:* Soft-Power, Hindutva, Ideology, Modi, Buddhism, Diplomacy

# **Entre el poder blando y la ideología dura: el budismo en el imaginario del Estado indio y la derecha hindú**

## RESUMEN

En los últimos años, el primer ministro indio, Narendra Modi, ha liderado los esfuerzos para promover el budismo como parte de sus iniciativas diplomáticas en Asia. Anunciando que este sería el siglo

asiático, ha sido fundamental en la creación de una visión india del budismo, que ha logrado convertir a la India en un eje central de la diplomacia budista. Sin embargo, si bien en el ámbito público, el budismo ha gozado de un amplio apoyo, su reputación entre los mentores ideológicos de Modi en la derecha hindú presenta un caso completamente diferente. Desde la ambivalencia hasta la apropiación y la hostilidad abierta, los ideólogos de la derecha hindú han retratado el budismo como algo completamente opuesto a la ética y los valores que Modi desea promover. Este artículo examina los éxitos de Modi al instrumentalizar el budismo como una herramienta del creciente poder blando de la India. También arroja luz sobre el lugar del budismo dentro de la imaginación de la derecha hindú sobre la nación india, mostrando así cómo los procesos de omisión y descontextualización juegan un papel crucial para cimentar el mensaje de Modi y evitar conflictos con los ideólogos Hindutva.

**Palabras clave:** Poder blando, Hindutva, ideología, Modi, budismo, diplomacia

## 在软实力与硬意识形态之间：印度国家和印度教右翼形象中的佛教

### 摘要

近年来，印度总理纳伦德拉·莫迪在其亚洲外交活动中积极推广佛教。他宣称这是“亚洲世纪”，并致力于构建印度式的佛教愿景，成功使印度成为佛教外交的中心。然而，尽管佛教在政府公共领域享有广泛的支持，但在莫迪的意识形态导师——印度教右翼人士眼中，佛教的声誉却并不相同。从态度暧昧到挪用，再到公然敌视，印度教右翼的意识形态家们对佛教的描述与莫迪希望推广的以伦理和价值观为导向的佛法截然相反。本文将探讨莫迪如何成功地将佛教作为提升印度软实力的工具。本文还揭示了佛教在“印度教右翼对印度民族的想象”中所扮演的角色，从而展现了省略和去语境化的过程如何在“巩固莫迪的信息传递以及避免与印度教特性意识形态人士发生冲突”方面发挥关键作用。

关键词：软实力，印度教特性，意识形态，莫迪，佛教，外交

## **Introduction**

**I**n October 2024, the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, addressing the United Nations remarked that “Bharat has given the world not war, but Buddha.”<sup>1</sup> He later stated “I confidently say that the entire world will find solutions not in war, but in Buddha. On this occasion of Abhidhamma Divas, I call upon the world, learn from Buddha, move away from war, pave the way for peace.”<sup>2</sup> Lam asserts this as an “Indian vision of Buddhism which appeals to ancient history while rooted in contemporary geopolitical concerns.”<sup>3</sup> In recent years, particularly since the advent of Modi’s Prime Ministership in 2014, the Indian government has made active efforts to laud the ethics and virtues of Buddhism in the International arena and stake a claim for India as the centre of Buddhist diplomacy.

However, there is an uncomfortable question which is not addressed back home. This concerns the relationship Buddhism has with Modi’s ideological Hindu nationalist mentors and contemporaries. While scholars have rightly pointed out that the Hindu Right regards Muslims and Christians as its chief enemies, a less scholarly outcome is seen in its relationship with the “Indic” faiths, those whose birth took place in the present-day territory of India. While this article does not go to such exhaustive lengths and examine the Hindu Right’s ideological relationship with Jainism, Sikhism and Buddhism, it will place emphasis on the third of these faiths, as it is the message of Buddha which Modi seeks

to promote as an Indian virtue. At best indifferent, and at worst, hostile and often advocating violence against Buddhists, Hindu nationalists leave no stone untouched when it comes to the supremacy of the Hindu faith.

The article first introduces the concept of Soft Power, and applies it to the context of India, namely Modi’s overtures globally in the promotion of Buddhism, from its messages, beliefs as well as cooperation with other governments to enhance Buddhist tourism. Next, from the international, it focusses on the domestic sphere and provides an analysis of the Hindu Right’s perception of Buddhism within its national imagination. Here, the writings of some of its most significant ideologues will be analysed, namely Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar. Finally, it examines the Hindu Right’s approach to religious conversions, namely to Buddhism, by examining reactions to a former Delhi government Minister’s public conversion in 2022, and how the Dalit leader Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, even after his conversion to Buddhism in 1956, was never seen outside the ambit of the “Hindu” fold by the Hindu Right.

As the article deals with questions of soft power and domestic ideology, it fits within the scope the “world-view” transmission belt highlighted in this special series. It aims to examine the changing nature of India’s domestic identity from the prism of majority-minority relations. While the Hindutva discourse on minorities especially Muslims and Christians is well established

and continues to highlight tensions in various domains and forums, it is its relationship with Buddhism, both in the domestic (ideological) and international (soft power) sphere that warrants an investigation and decipher as to “how” it fits within a Modi-led Indian worldview.

## **Methodology**

**A**s the article underscores the need to examine the relationship of the majoritarian faith with minorities in the context of India, it becomes imperative to lay out key concepts and frameworks within which these will be placed. Firstly, it is the Hindu majoritarian discourse on Buddhism which will be weighed against the state attempts to project it as part of Indian identity and soft power play. In this regard, I adopt the definition of discourse as laid out by the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) school, which sees it as “so socially consequential that it gives rise to important issues of power. Discursive practices may have major ideological effects—that is, they can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations between (for instance) social classes, women and men, and ethnic/cultural majorities and minorities, through how they represent things and position people.”<sup>4</sup>

As Hindu nationalism is centred around favouring and privileging the majority community in India, i.e., Hindus, through processes of exclusion and co-option, I will analyse the discourse of the main ideologues associated with giving it a firm and coherent ideological structure. This brings us to

the second fundamental concept to be defined, which is crucial to the article, namely ideology. Ideology, within the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) of the CDA, is defined as “a one-sided perspective or world view composed of related mental representations, opinions, attitudes, and evaluations, which members of a specific social group share. Ideologies are an important means of establishing and maintaining unequal power relations through discourse.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, in this regard, while public statements and government policies might be geared towards the patronage and marketing of Buddhism at home and abroad, to garner legitimacy and support, within the ideological domain, the attitudes could not be starker. This is because, in the Hindu Nationalist imagination, ideology is key towards establishing boundaries of belonging, both from a territorial and citizenship perspective. Indeed, it becomes crucial to examine this ideology vis-à-vis attitudes to Buddhism to decipher to what extent is the government’s narrative aligned or differ through notions of exclusion and co-option.

## **India and Soft Power under Modi**

**P**olitical Scientist Joseph Nye defines Soft Power as “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction, rather than coercion or payment.”<sup>6</sup> In this sense, for India, projection of its power rests on its ability to market its most prized assets which are not military or financial in nature. Indeed, Nye

further argues that “a country’s soft power rests on its resources of culture, values and policies.”<sup>7</sup> In the Indian context therefore, the prioritisation of soft power in International Relations and diplomacy is seen as key in enhancing its influence abroad.

The deployment of its cultural assets to enhance its influence and reach in the world is not new to India. Indeed, many soft power tools at its disposal are in constant use to project a more ambitious and self-confident nation, keen to showcase its cultural heritage on a global scale. For example, yoga has increasingly been used by the Modi government since first coming to power in 2014. Adopting and promoting it in cultural diplomacy, ensures that India is seen to the world as “inclusive and promoting a more general and deeply felt spiritual and philosophical worldview that promotes India’s cultural and civilizational characteristics as unique contributions to the world.”<sup>8</sup> The marketing of yoga as a soft power tool is no great surprise as Gautam and Droogan note, that the yoga industry is worth up to 80 billion USD globally, with the United States accounting for roughly half that amount.<sup>9</sup>

The global popularity and reach of yoga were therefore key towards the Modi government refining it to enhance its marketability and publicity. The first administration (2014–19) introduced an AYUSH ministry in the central government (Ayurveda, yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy) to “promote India’s linkages with yoga within and outside the country.”<sup>10</sup> The success of this outreach can be seen in

Modi’s visits to China in 2015 where a Yoga-Tai Chi event was organised at the Temple of Heaven in Beijing, the creation of a Parliamentary league for the promotion of yoga in Japan in 2017, and the bonhomie of Modi and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu with yogic rituals used as metaphors to cement deep ties between the countries.<sup>11</sup> The pinnacle, however, of India, and in-particular Modi’s success in the export of yoga as a global brand is reflected in the United Nations declaring June 21 as the International Day of Yoga. Indeed, at the most recent celebration of the day, Modi led the largest ever yoga gathering of around 3 lakh citizens in Vishakhapatnam remarking that “Eleven years on (from the adoption of the UN General Assembly declaration), yoga has become an integral part of the lifestyle of millions across the globe.”<sup>12</sup>

Another avenue through which the government has sought to leverage India’s soft power potential has been through the active outreach towards the Indian diaspora population. Indeed, as of 2024, India has the world’s largest diaspora population, numbering roughly around 35.42 million.<sup>13</sup> Whilst there have been differing perspectives on attitudes towards diasporas between various Indian governments, which is outside the scope of this article, it would be pertinent to examine the BJP’s overtures towards the diaspora from the time it first came to power (1999–2004) and examine the trends which Modi himself has established since coming to power in 2014. The BJP first recognised the potential of the diaspora in its Chennai Declaration of 1999, stating “We believe

that the vast majority of NRIs (Non-Resident Indians) and PIOs (Persons of Indian Origin) also constitute a part of the Great Indian Family. We should endeavour to continually strengthen their social, cultural, economic and emotional ties with the mother country.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the emotional connect was realised in 2003, when the government declared January 9<sup>th</sup> as Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (Overseas Indian Day) to “strengthen the engagement of the overseas Indian community with the Government of India and reconnect them with their cultural roots.”<sup>15</sup> The significance of the date chosen is not surprising to those familiar with the history of the Indian freedom struggle, as this was the same date, that the “greatest Pravasi,”<sup>16</sup> Gandhi, returned to India from South Africa and “changed the lives of Indians forever.”<sup>17</sup>

Tapping on the twin bandwagons of the strength of the diaspora and the message of Gandhi, Modi has sought to strengthen his connection with the former—inviting them to spread the message of the latter, to strengthen India’s message of inclusiveness. This was evident, when at the PBD in 2018, he remarked that “if there is any philosophy to counter radicalisation and extremism, it is the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and the philosophy of Indian values.”<sup>18</sup>

## **Buddhism and Soft Power:**

### **A Historical Precedent?**

**A** key question to be posed before delving into Modi’s own strategic thinking vis-à-vis

Buddhism is that is the use of Buddhism as a soft power tool for India a recent phenomenon? As will be shown in the following discussion, based on Modi’s rhetoric and many policies and decisions, the answer may be in the affirmative. However, there is a deeper connection between India, Buddhism and a projection of soft power. In 1952, a few years after independence, the government under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, India hosted the International Buddhist Conference in Sanchi,<sup>19</sup> which was attended by over 3,000 monks, nuns and historians.<sup>20</sup> In fact it represented a culmination of the early Nehruvian years where the central and state governments provided substantial funding<sup>21</sup> towards restoring Buddhist sites along with Sanchi such as Lumbini, Nalanda and Bodh Gaya. Indeed, Nehru was also keen at projecting India’s contribution to Buddhism, remarking after Ceylon (Sri Lanka) had achieved its independence that “the seed of Buddhism which has flourished in Ceylon is a symbol of that great gift which India gave to Lanka and the world so long ago.”<sup>22</sup> Finally, Nehru placed great deal of importance on symbolic acts, most notably the Grand Buddha Jayanti celebrations of 1956, where “more than 200 royal dignitaries, heads of state, foreign ambassadors and Buddhist leaders” were invited to celebrate “twenty-five hundred years of Buddhism.”<sup>23</sup>

While the historical context of this article notes the importance given to using Buddhism as a tool of the state (albeit in a non-proselytising and sectarian manner), the last govern-

ment before the advent of Modi led by the Congress also contributed to Buddhism's utility to serve as a soft power tool. This was notably reflected in the field of education, with work undertaken to establish Nalanda University. Indeed, India had garnered regional support within Asia through a proposal to re-establish the ancient University, through endorsements given by sixteen countries<sup>24</sup> at the East Asia Summit held in the Philippines in 2007. It was argued that this development was significant in two respects—Asian countries could now expand their mutual interests beyond trade “into something grander that would better the region and the world,”<sup>25</sup> and a “topflight institute of higher learning” would achieve this. Indeed, with its location being in the Eastern Indian state of Bihar and enjoying support through parliamentary legislations during the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) tenure, the Nalanda project embodied a continuation of Nehru's usage of soft power to further cement India's standing in the world. This is what scholar Marion Pinkney terms “Pan-Indian-Asianism,” wherein there is a readiness on the part of Asian countries to “affirm India as a centre for Asian spirituality, and a focus for Asian values.”<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, what is clearly visible is that Buddhism already served as a vital tool for the Indian state, with which it could exert a certain influence at the regional and international level. From Nehru to Nalanda (issues surrounding its practical implementation notwithstanding), Buddhism is a ripe means from which India can derive legitimacy,

validation, and respect. It is this context, therefore, which we must keep in mind when examining the main case study of this article—the overtures of the present BJP government and in particular the rhetoric of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to decipher to what extent has he carried the legacies of his predecessors, or has he charted his own path in placing Buddhism within India's soft power paradigm.

### **Modi's Buddhist Overtures**

**T**he following section examines the moves made specifically by the Modi government in the field of Buddhist diplomacy. It unpacks three overarching themes: (a) development of Buddhist tourist sites, to place India at the centre of Buddhist civilization; (b) wooing neighbours, a strategic calculation with which to compete with China; and (c) within an ideological setting, placing of Buddhism within a Hinduised reading. It is specifically the last of these themes which marks Modi's fundamental departure from his predecessors mentioned in the previous section.

In 2016, in a bid to bolster tourist numbers, particularly Buddhist pilgrims from Thailand, Modi invoked Buddha, and his government provided double entry e-tourist visas for Thai citizens visiting Buddhist sites in India.<sup>27</sup> In exchange, his Thai counterpart, General Prayut Chan-o-Cha assured him that Thai companies would invest capital to develop the Buddhist circuit and develop high-end hotels.

In fact, Modi used one of Nye's key variables of Soft Power status to woo Thai tourists—Indian culture, and its shared heritage with Thailand. He remarked “[Y]ou come from a land that is very familiar to us. From the legend of Rama to the Wisdom of Buddha, our ties are founded in a shared cultural heritage.”<sup>28</sup> Taking advantage of India's deep geographical connection to Buddhism, Modi no doubt was putting Buddhism “at the heart of India's vigorous new diplomacy.”

This geographical advantage resonated, particularly with the holiest sites associated with the faith. Modi sought to place Bodh Gaya<sup>29</sup> as the centrepiece of his overtures to the wider Buddhist world, remarking “[W]e in India would like to develop Bodh Gaya, so that it can become the spiritual capital and civilizational bond between India and the Buddhist world.”<sup>30</sup> While Bodh Gaya ascribes huge significance to India and benefits the country from a tourism perspective, Modi in his diplomatic overtures, was also careful not to forget other countries with substantial Buddhist populations. For example, in an address to the Nepalese Constituent Assembly, he was keen to stress not just the common cultural and civilizational bonds, but also the significance of Nepal in the Buddhist faith. He remarked that while Buddha attained salvation in India, his birthplace was Nepal. This declaration seemed particularly significant given it was an attempt to “assuage the feelings of those Nepalese who have long protested against what they believed were false claims by some Indians that Buddha was born in India.”<sup>31</sup>

In an effort to further facilitate smoother tourism to Buddhist sites in India, the Indian Railway and Catering Corporation (IRCTC) launched the Buddhist Circuit Express train service in 2014. It enables tourists to visit the holiest places of Buddhism in a variety of packages. Most notably, its website states “[The] Buddha tells his followers that they can attain merit and a noble rebirth by going on pilgrimages to the places where he was born—Lumbini, gained enlightenment—Bodh Gaya, first taught—Sarnath, and attained Nirvana—Kushinagar.”<sup>32</sup> In addition, the service expands to four other additional sites “linked to some of Buddha's most significant life events: Rajgir and Vaishali in Bihar, and Sravasti and Sankasia in Uttar Pradesh.” Once again, the government was keen to promote the dual benefits of such a move, with Seshadri Chari, a member of the ruling BJP's national executive committee at the time, remarking “it can be an entry point to attract tourists (and) even world leaders can be taken to Buddhist centres like Bodh Gaya and Sarnath.”<sup>33</sup>

While India is keen to promote Buddhism in the domestic sphere, and attract foreign tourists to holy sites, Modi himself has gone to visit several Buddhist religious sites in other countries as part of his Buddhist diplomatic outreach. In fact, he said that “[D]uring my foreign visits, one day is always set aside to visit a Buddhist temple.”<sup>34</sup> He followed up his words with action by praying at the Toji and Kinkakuji temples in Japan. Subsequently, he addressed Buddhist monks at the Mahabodhi temple in Sri Lanka.

The Modi government's Buddhist outreach in India's neighbourhood, is primarily motivated by its Look East policy. In this regard, it is no surprise that economic benefits such as tourist money are important, and a more straightforward visa process to citizens from countries such as Thailand no doubt stands to benefit Buddhist tourism in India. However, on a more strategic level, these overtures should also be seen in the context of India's complicated relationship with its bigger neighbour, China. The next section examines the complexities of this relationship through the lens of Buddhism as a tool of regional influence.

### **Hindi-Chini Buddhist *Bhai-Bhai?***

**B**uddhism seems to be part of a bond between the two nations. One of Modi's Buddhist *hop on* trips was in Xian, China. This was in fact his first stop as part of a three-day state visit to China in 2015.<sup>35</sup> It would seem odd to notice that the capital, Beijing was not selected as the first stop of entry during the visit. Two reasons can be attributed here. First, Modi was following in the footsteps of Chinese President Xi Jinping. Xi had first stopped in Gujarat the year before on his own state visit to India.<sup>36</sup> Second, Modi was to visit the Wild Goose pagoda, an important site in Chinese Buddhism, that housed Buddhist texts and relics brought to China by the traveller, Xuanzang, regarded as a "household name in China and India." Chinese diplomats were keen to show that "his journey paves

the way for the communications of soul and exchanges of emotion between the two great civilizations."<sup>37</sup>

However, it must be noted that whilst symbolic manifestations of co-operation are clearly visible, Buddhist diplomacy represents another source of competition between the two countries as well. At the most basic level, the position of the Dalai Lama drives a wedge into any perceived cooperation at least on a spiritual front between India and China. This must be viewed in the larger context of Tibet, where religion and geopolitics divide the two nations. Since 1959, when he fled China, the 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso has been living in exile in India. His government-in-exile setup in Dharamshala in India is viewed unfavourably (to put it mildly) by China, as he remains the most visible manifestation of Tibetan self-determination.

Moreover, in another instance of Buddhism causing friction between the two countries—Tawang (in Arunachal Pradesh, which is disputed between India and China) became a flashpoint.<sup>38</sup> Seen as the birthplace of the 6th Dalai Lama, it has significant attachment in the realm of Tibetan Buddhism. When the Indian government granted the present Dalai Lama permission to visit Tawang in 2009, China denounced the move, claiming it would "affect the issue of the Dalai Lama's reincarnation."<sup>39</sup> While the Dalai Lama is widely seen as the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, China has taken it upon itself to promote its own version of Buddhism to counter his "anti-Chi-

na splittist nature.” This is reflected in government appointed figures such as Gyaincain Norbu, the Panchen Lama, to counter the influence of the Dalai Lama. In fact, the Panchen Lama in 2010 was appointed the Vice President of the Buddhist Association of China and vowed to “uphold the leadership of the Communist Party of China, safeguard national unification and expand Buddhist exchanges.”<sup>40</sup>

On an institutional level, India has sought to challenge China’s growing tendency to market its version of Buddhism through the International Buddhist Confederation, based in New Delhi. Its first meeting was held in 2011, and attendees stressed the importance India had in the Buddhist world. The head of the Mahabodhi Society in Sri Lanka remarked, “[The] whole world looks to India because of Buddhism. If someone takes initiative, India can take leadership of the Buddhist world.”<sup>41</sup> It is no surprise to note that China did not attend this session owing to the Dalai Lama’s presence, and in 2015, it organised the International Buddha Poornima Diwas celebrations, with Modi as the chief guest.

A further standoff occurred with India hosting the Global Hindu Buddhist Initiative on Conflict Avoidance and Environmental Consciousness, organised by the Vivekananda International Foundation. Modi accompanied delegates on their subsequent visits to Bodh Gaya. Whilst Sri Lanka, Japan, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia all sent delegates to the conference, China was

absent. China was also missing from Modi’s reference to the holy sites of Buddhism, when he addressed the conference—“The SAARC region is home to the holy sites of Buddhism: Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar.”<sup>42</sup> In fact, this conference was to set the stage for a greater partnership between India and Japan—one of China’s competitors in Asia. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe recorded a video message where he remarked “Japan owes its rule of law to Buddhism.”<sup>43</sup> The conference itself was attended by foreign Minister Minoru Kiouchi.

Finally, as recently in 2023, India organised the first Global Buddhist Summit in New Delhi. Like the previous conferences, the Dalai Lama accepted his invitation and attended, which was a red flag for China not to attend, even though an invitation was extended to it. The Indian media reported that China’s absence was down to the presence of not just the Dalai Lama, but also two representatives from Taiwan, and the stand offs on the border with India, that had started in 2020.<sup>44</sup>

A final point to conclude this section is to examine to what extent India’s overtures in Buddhist diplomacy will be successful. Whilst it seems paradoxical that the atheist Communist Party of China, would have anything to do with the regeneration of religious sites, the fact that China has the world’s largest Buddhist population, and borders states with large Buddhist populations, (particularly Nepal), means that it must compete with India in the business of spirituality. This was evident in

the massive influx of foreign direct investment estimated of around 3 billion USD, in an attempt to “buy control of Lumbini,”<sup>45</sup> through the development of its airport, establishing hotels and a Buddhist university at the site. On the other hand, India has prioritised the reconstruction and regeneration of Buddhist heritage sites within its geographical frontiers, and further, through infrastructural projects, such as the inauguration of the Kushinagar International Airport in 2021, to help facilitate the influx of tourists for the Buddhist circuit. The circuit itself provides India with immense opportunity to generate revenues through tourism and further cement its place as the cornerstone of Buddhist heritage. Whilst India’s overtures showcase the potential of its success in garnering the benefits of Buddhist soft power, as long as there remains a market to exploit against it, China will not be too far behind in this regard.

### **Where Hard Beliefs Meet Soft Power**

**W**hile there is no doubt that the Indian government, especially under Narendra Modi’s Prime Ministership has made concrete efforts to promote Buddhism within the country and use it as a tool for soft power influence in the international arena, there is an important caveat to draw attention to. This is to do with the fact that while Modi himself may project an image of tolerance, respect and love for Buddhism, his party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)’s ideolog-

ical ancestors among the Hindu Right would have a very different picture to portray of Buddhism. Indeed, the status of Buddhism in India according to the constitution states that “reference to Hindus shall be construed as including a reference to persons professing the Sikh, Jaina or Buddhist religion.”<sup>46</sup> The constitution, whilst also acknowledging India as a secular republic, legitimises the Hindu nationalist conception of Buddhism through the above categorisation. This section therefore focusses on the domestic sphere and examines what are the attitudes to Buddhism, which Modi either ignores or decontextualises when he promotes his spiritual diplomacy abroad, and finally, sheds light on the Hindu Right’s attitude to religious conversions to Buddhism. While extolling the virtues of Buddha and his messages on the one hand, Modi’s ideological mentors and foot soldiers sing a very different tune.

One of Hindu nationalism’s core tenets is the careful crafting of a selected list of “enemies” of the Indian nation. The nation itself is imagined along strict majoritarian lines, where religious minorities should cede their cultures and faiths if they wish to belong. While there has been considerable research into how Muslims and Christians, regarded as “external enemies,” are excluded from the ambit of the Hindu nation, there also exists a hostility to the so-called “Indic” faiths.

The Hindutva perception of Buddhists can be traced to the time of Adi Shankara of Kalady, who, according to Kuruvachira, can be regarded as

the “Father of Hindutva.” Kuruvachira notes that “he advocated the philosophy of non-dualism (Advaita Vedanta) and systematically developed an aggressive attitude towards all religions and systems which differed from his, especially Buddhism.”<sup>47</sup> Karl Potter remarks, “Sankara viewed Buddhism as one of the worst of heresies and criticised it as roundly as any opposing philosophy of which he was aware.”<sup>48</sup> Further, Buddha’s rejection of the Vedas, Vedic sacrifices and rituals was considered anathema by Shankara, who regarded them as “eternal, and the source of knowledge.”

Echoing Shankara, Swami Vivekananda is adamant about the purity and sanctity of the Vedas as being intrinsic to Hinduism’s superiority and eventual triumph over Buddhism. He remarked, “[On] the philosophic side, the disciples of the great master [the Buddha] dashed themselves against the eternal rocks of the Vedas and could not crush them, and on the sider side, they took away from the nation, that eternal God to which every man and woman cling so fondly. And the result was that it had to die its natural death in India.”<sup>49</sup> Finally, in another severe indictment on what he initially termed as the “rebel child of Hinduism,”<sup>50</sup> he observed, “the most hideous ceremonies, the most horrible, the most obscene books, that human hands ever wrote or the human brain ever conceived, the most bestial forms, that ever passed under the name of religion, have all been the creation of degraded Buddhism.”<sup>51</sup>

The nationalist leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak, renowned for spearhead-

ing the extremist wing of the Indian National Congress, was also an admirer of Adi Shankara for his efforts in fighting Buddhism. He praised Shankara, who “brought together all the common philosophical elements for our religion and proved and preached them in such a way that Buddhism was swept away from the Land.”<sup>52</sup> He refers to the time before the advent of Shankara as one of chaos where “Buddhism flourished, and attacks were made on the Hindu religion by Buddhists (and Jains).”<sup>53</sup> Thus, for Tilak, Hinduism is deemed the most superior faith, as it “provides Indian society a moral as well as social tie.”<sup>54</sup> Like many Hindu nationalists, he refers to a Golden Age of India’s past, the Vedic period, where India was a self-contained country and great nation united by a common culture. It was this unity which he believed was destroyed and brought about the country’s degradation. Buddhists, and Buddhism as such, were one of the key factors in bringing this about, and thus the efforts of Shankara are rightly seen by him in the rejuvenation of the faith and nation and marks a key event in his ideological frame of mind, that sought to establish a Hindu state in India.

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, widely seen as the ideological father of modern Hindutva ideology, also devoted a large chunk of his writings in consolidating negative and hostile attitudes to Buddhists for the same reasons as his predecessors. In his historical imagination, the first degeneration of the Hindu nation occurred with the “expansion of Buddhism, and its propagation of ideals of love, equality, righteousness, tol-

eration—the opiates of universalism.”<sup>55</sup> This message of the Buddhists set the stage for the invasions of India. Thus, he is quite explicit in assigning blame to Buddhists for the demise of Hindu culture and society, which was the opposite of what Buddhism preached, and for allying with external aggressors in the conquest of India.

Savarkar held them and their institutions guilty of committing “seditious acts, hatched to undermine national independence.”<sup>56</sup> Punishments were seen as natural outcomes to put down any future acts of treachery on the nation. Savarkar maintained that those guilty of such acts were to be hanged, and monasteries, which became centres of sedition, were pulled down. In-fact, he states that these were “just punishments,”<sup>57</sup> and in no way, religious persecution. Acceptance of a subordinate place in the independent Hindu nation, was Savarkar’s final offer to Buddhists, to ensure they never again threatened it with expansionist designs. He maintained that they had “nothing to fear from India, the land of toleration, they should give up all dreams of endangering the national life of India and its independence.”<sup>58</sup>

Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, head of the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) from 1940 to 1973, regarded the time after Buddha as one when his followers “began to uproot the age-old national traditions of this land. The great cultural virtues in our society were sought to be demolished.”<sup>59</sup> The first set of foreign invasions, according to Golwalkar,

took place during this time, as “Buddhist fanatics helped the invaders, who wore the mask of Buddhism.”<sup>60</sup> He, therefore, highlights a lack of devotion to the nation. In his view, the sect had turned a traitor to the “mother society and the mother religion.”<sup>61</sup> It is simple to discern that the religion he refers to is the Hindu Vedic religion. He considered India as the “mother of all Hindus, who as the real children of the Hindu Rashtra, were living here since time immemorial.”<sup>62</sup> The foreign invasions, aided by Buddhist collaborators, marked a fissure with Hindu history and thus needed rescuing. He remarked, “It is our sacred duty to re-establish the truth of our Hindu Nationhood, to remove all the debris of falsehood.”<sup>63</sup>

Golwalkar also joyously declares the erasure of Buddhism from the “mother soil,” and while welcoming Lord Shiva (Buddha), “we do not welcome the flock of demons surrounding him.”<sup>64</sup> Another cause of Golwalkar’s ire towards Buddhism is its two-fold role in weakening the Caste System and the subsequent successes of Muslim invasions in the North-East and North-West. Golwalkar believed that where the caste system eroded, it became ripe for conquest. He unequivocally states that areas such as Delhi and Uttar Pradesh, “considered to be very orthodox and rigid in caste restrictions, remained predominantly Hindu.”<sup>65</sup>

## **Buddhists Are Hindu: The Appropriation at Home**

**B**uddhist diplomacy relies on the Indian government asserting the independence of Buddhism as a separate religion. The teachings of Buddha, and pilgrimage sites must be publicised through an evocation of the government's love and commitment to the promotion of the Buddhist faith, while taking in the dividends reaped through tourist money. However, on the domestic front, Buddhism is quite often construed as a renegade child of Hinduism. Even the ultimate act of leaving a faith, i.e., conversion, is seen by many on the Hindu Right as not necessarily leaving the Hindu faith. This final section delves into how the Hindu Right, whilst maintaining a hatred for the faith (as seen in the previous section), still requires a delicate balance with which to placate the so-called Indic faiths, such that binaries can be drawn with easier identifiable enemies, i.e., Muslims and Christians.

In fact, it is argued that Modi has “publicly embraced the Buddha as a reformer whose message has been reabsorbed back into Hinduism.”<sup>66</sup> This was particularly evident at the 2015 Global Hindu-Buddhist Initiative on Conflict Avoidance and Environmental Consciousness, held in Bodhi Gaya, where he remarked “Hinduism after the Buddha's advent became Buddhist Hinduism or Hindu Buddhism. They are today an inseparable amalgam.”<sup>67</sup> Modi's usage of Buddhism therefore needs to be seen in a careful and selective process, whereby the more radical elements of the faith,

and indeed the beliefs of Buddha, particularly, critiques of caste are ignored in favour of his ethics. An example of this can be seen in Modi attempting to draw similarities between Buddhism and Hinduism, remarking “Ethical values of personal restraint in consumption and environmental consciousness are deeply rooted in Asian philosophical traditions, especially in Hinduism and Buddhism.”<sup>68</sup>

Within this Hinduised reading of Buddhism, it needs to be pointed out that Modi's portrayal above, is not a niche or new phenomenon. Indeed, it follows in the footsteps of many leaders of the 20th century, who sought to place Buddha within a Hindu pantheon. A member of the Arya Samaj, Harbilas Sarada, characterised Buddhism as “a modified form of Hinduism, not differing materially from the Vedic religion in its scientific aspects.”<sup>69</sup> Sarada finds a way to create a new set of people, termed as “Buddhist Hindus, who were responsible for the spread of Buddhism outside India through migration.” He maintained that “Hinduism is the groundwork of Buddhism, and the mythology and traditions of both are necessarily one and the same.”<sup>70</sup>

Mohandas Gandhi's view on Buddhism did not necessarily provide it with the autonomy of a separate religion. To Gandhi, there was “no distinction between the essential teachings of Hinduism and Buddhism”<sup>71</sup> and that “Gautama was a Hindu of Hindus. He was saturated with the spirit of Hinduism, with the Vedic spirit, and so far, as I am aware, he never rejected Hinduism

or the message of the Vedas.”<sup>72</sup> In fact, Gandhi at best regarded Buddhism as a reforming movement within Hinduism, similar to that of Protestantism upon Catholicism. Douglas Ober suggests that this Hinduisation of the Buddha was “nothing less than a full-fledged assault on the idea that Buddhism is different from Hinduism.”<sup>73</sup> Given Gandhi’s towering presence during the anti-colonial freedom struggle, these words, Ober suggests were given greater potency. Once again, it is evident that Modi’s own message of a Hindu Buddhism finds an intellectual genesis in the Gandhian narrative. In a similar vein as well, a decontextualised interpretation, devoid of the critiques of caste is a common vantage point.

Additionally, even the former President of India, the philosopher Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, is someone whose perspective can be said to be similar to the line of argument developed by Gandhi, and Modi today. According to Douglas Ober, Radhakrishnan’s interpretation of Buddhism was “encoded by a Vedantic philosophy were seen as only mildly different from Hindu thought.”<sup>74</sup> In fact, Radhakrishnan even argued that Buddha “did not feel that he was announcing a new religion,”<sup>75</sup> and that he was “born, grew up and died a Hindu.”<sup>76</sup> This is a similar line of argument made by Savarkar, when questioning the validity of Ambedkar’s departure from Hinduism via conversion to Buddhism, which will be discussed towards the end of this section.

In post-independence India, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, founder of

the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), was also navigating a cautious line in the linkages between Hinduism and Buddhism. Prior to the BJS, Mukherjee had also served as President of the All-India Hindu Mahasabha in 1944. While his major disagreement with Prime Minister Nehru was over the granting of special status through Article 370 of the Constitution to Jammu and Kashmir, both men seemed to see eye-to-eye on the “latent potency of Buddhist symbols and ideas.”<sup>77</sup> It is therefore intriguing to note, that in spite of his pro-Hindu leanings, Mukherjee also served as President of the Mahabodhi Society from 1942 to 1953, and according to the tributes paid to him by the society, he “proved to be the most energetic, resourceful and hardworking President that the society ever had.” As President of the society, particularly during the first few years of independence, he performed an important function for Nehru’s Buddhist outreach program, travelling to Cambodia, Myanmar and Sri Lanka to deliver Buddhist relics on behalf of the society and government.<sup>78</sup> In a similar vein therefore, Modi channels Mukherjee, in drawing careful lines between domestic rhetoric (Mukherjee withdrew from the government over Article 370), and international outreach in order to project India as the centrepiece of Buddhist civilization.

Ram Swarup and Sita Ram Goel, also provide an important dimension to the absorption of Buddhism within the larger Hindu fold. Their importance in the wider Hindutva ideological framework is underlined by their co-found-

ing Voice of India, an influential publishing house in New Delhi in 1981. It catered to the propagation and production of beliefs more in-line with the ideology of the Sangh Parivar, as it provided a “full blooded Hindu ideology of its own and process all events, movements, parties and public figures in terms of that ideology, rather than live on borrowed slogans or hand to mouth ideas invoked on the spur of the moment.”<sup>79</sup> In matters pertaining to their own ideology, Buddhism is not seen in an independent light, and according to Swarup, it is as “Hindu in its origin and development and forms an intimate part of Hindu consciousness.”<sup>80</sup> In fact, he even refers to Buddha as a “Hindu.” He sheds any pretence of it being a separate faith by declaring it is “Hindu in origin and development, in its art, and architecture, iconography, language, beliefs, psychology, names, nomenclature, religious vows and spiritual discipline.”<sup>81</sup> Swarup’s colleague, Goel, reaffirms this perspective and proceeds to embrace Buddhism within a wider Hindu fold, remarking “[The] term Hinduism is used to cover all schools of Sanatana Dharma—Buddhism, Jainism, Shaivism, Sikhism. Treating these segments of a single spiritual vision as separate religions is not only misleading, but mischievous.”<sup>82</sup>

Finally, how do Hindu nationalist ideologues view the act of conversion itself? It is well known that the Dalit reformer, lawyer and freedom fighter, Dr Bhim Rao Ramji Ambedkar, famously converted to Buddhism in 1956, after enduring years of caste-based discrimination. Ambedkar par-

ticipated in a mass conversion program to Buddhism along with 600,000 supporters in Nagpur. At this ceremony, he made twenty-two vows subsequently recited by him and his followers. One of these was the rejection of Hindu gods and goddesses —“I shall have no faith in ‘Gauri,’ Ganapati and other gods and goddesses of Hindus nor shall I worship them.”<sup>83</sup> Another made clear his religious affiliation, “I renounce Hinduism which is harmful for humanity and impedes the advancement and development of humanity because it is based on inequality and adopt Buddhism as my religion.”<sup>84</sup>

The answer lies in Savarkar’s reaction to Ambedkar’s conversion, and the need to adapt from his quite rigid views on Buddhism and Buddhists. Savarkar’s conception of belonging to (his) nation, was based on blood and territory: “a Hindu is someone who looks upon the land that extends from Sindu to Sindu—from the Indus to the Seas—as the land of his forefathers, his Fatherland (*Pitribhu*), who inherits the blood of that race whose first discernible source could be traced to the Vedic Saptasindhus”... and “addresses this land, this Sindhusthan as his Holyland (*Punyabhu*), as the land of his prophets and seers, of his godmen and gurus, the land of piety and pilgrimage.”<sup>85</sup> Indeed, according to Savarkar’s own interpretation, while it is logical that Muslims and Christians are excluded from citizenship, Buddhists are parts and parcels of this nation because they are the descendants of the same Vedic fathers as the Hindus.

Thus, according to Savarkar, the act of conversion itself, does not mark Ambedkar's departure from Hinduism, as "till Ambedkar is an Indian Buddhist, and his homeland and holy land is inevitably Asindhusindhu (India), so he will inevitably be included in the border area of Hinduism. As long as Ambedkar is a Buddhist, it is not possible for him to transgress that boundary. That is why when Ambedkar's death comes, he is a Baudh, that is why he will have to die as a Hindu."<sup>86</sup>

## Conclusion

**A**lmost 60 years later, in 2022, a repeat of Ambedkar's ceremony took place in the Indian capital, New Delhi. This time, a legislator from the state government, led by the Aam Aadmi Party, Rajendra Pal Gautam, along with the Buddhist Society of India, and 10,000 others, converted to Buddhism and pledged to "work to make India free from casteism and untouchability."<sup>87</sup> Gautam was condemned as "anti-Hindu,"<sup>88</sup> forced to resign from the government, and subsequently questioned by the Delhi police for his presence at the event, where Hindu deities were allegedly denounced. Gautam, in fact, repeated some of Ambedkar's twenty-two vows, "I will have no faith in Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh, nor will I worship them as God. I will have no faith in Rama or Krishna, nor will I worship them. I will have no faith in Gauri, Ganapati and other Hindu Gods, nor will I worship them."<sup>89</sup>

Thus, what has been found is that India today treads a fine line in

its attitude to Buddhism, at least from the ideological frame of mind, which is the backbone of the ruling party, the BJP. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a hardcore follower of Hindutva, treads a delicate balance on the international stage, in the need to showcase India's soft power status in the world. His advocacy for Buddhist diplomacy, has led to India looking East in its foreign policy outreach, and cementing alliances with countries in the region, posing a challenge to China. The rewards for this are a recognition of its place as a centre for Buddhist culture and pilgrimage, and the influx of tourists to visit the Buddhist corridor.

However, as seen in the action against Rajendra Pal Gautam, public displays of the Buddhist faith (at least by those who are ideologically opposed to Modi and his supporters) are not to be tolerated. The Hindu Right's troublesome relationship with Buddhism needs to be shunned in favour of a more ethics and values driven Buddha, who can be aligned with Hinduism. Indeed, this decontextualised representation of Buddhism in India today is symbolic of a larger Hindu nationalist outreach, that attempts at realising a majoritarian state. To what extent can the outlook of celebrated icons of the Hindu Right, such as Savarkar and Golwalkar, and indeed, Vivekananda towards Buddhism be divorced from the official government positions remains to be seen. But for the time being, it is safe to say, that in matters of public diplomacy and international outreach, Modi is firmly in Buddha's camp.

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# Indian Foreign Policy and the Diaspora: Continuity or Change?

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## ABSTRACT

The Indian government's engagement with the Indian diaspora has seen a major upswing since the early 2000s. However, very different political parties have steered the Indian government in the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Has the ideological preferences of the political parties in power shaped the Indian government's engagement with the diaspora? To answer this question, this article analyzes the government's rhetoric towards the diaspora from 2005–2025. The author uses both quantitative and qualitative content analysis on speeches by politicians at the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) to test the arguments. The main findings are that speeches contain more Hindutva themes after 2014 while they continue with economic themes but with a lesser frequency. The change indicates a stronger emphasis on Hindu ideology but continuity on engaging the diaspora for India's economic development. Using primary sources such as speeches, party manifestoes, annual reports of government ministries, and media articles, the author explains the shift based on BJP's civilizational foreign policy agenda, the effect of Modi's personalist leadership, and the desire to promote India's status on the global stage.

*Keywords:* Diaspora; Indian Foreign Policy; Modi; BJP; Congress

## La política exterior india y la diáspora: ¿continuidad o cambio?

### RESUMEN

El compromiso del gobierno indio con la diáspora india ha experimentado un importante auge desde principios de la década de 2000. Sin embargo, partidos políticos muy diferentes han dirigido el gobierno indio en el primer cuarto del siglo XXI. ¿Han moldeado las preferencias ideológicas de los partidos políticos en el poder

el compromiso del gobierno indio con la diáspora? Para responder a esta pregunta, este documento analiza la retórica del gobierno hacia la diáspora entre 2005 y 2025. El autor utiliza análisis de contenido tanto cuantitativo como cualitativo en discursos de políticos en el Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) para probar argumentos. Los principales hallazgos son que los discursos contienen más temas de Hindutva después de 2014, mientras que continúan con temas económicos, pero con menor frecuencia. El cambio indica un mayor énfasis en la ideología hindú, pero una continuidad en la participación de la diáspora para el desarrollo económico de la India. Utilizando fuentes primarias como discursos, manifiestos de partidos, informes anuales de ministerios gubernamentales y artículos de medios, el autor explica el cambio basado en la agenda de política exterior civilizacional del BJP, el efecto del liderazgo personalista de Modi y el deseo de promover el estatus de la India en el escenario global.

**Palabras clave:** Diáspora; Política exterior india; Modi; BJP; Congreso

## 印度外交政策与海外侨民：延续还是变革？

### 摘要

自2000年代初以来，印度政府与印度侨民的互动显著增强。然而，在21世纪的第一个25年里，执政党几经更迭。执政党的意识形态偏好是否影响了印度政府与侨民的互动？为解答这一问题，本文分析了2005年至2025年间印度政府针对侨民的言论。作者运用定量和定性内容分析方法，对政治人物在印度侨民日（Pravasi Bharatiya Divas，简称PBD）上的演讲进行分析，以检验相关论点。主要研究结果表明，2014年后，演讲中印度教特性（Hindutva）主题有所增加，经济主题虽然仍然存在，但出现频率有所降低。这一变化表明，政府更加重视印度教意识形态，但同时仍致力于利用侨民的力量来促进印度的经济发展。作者运用演讲稿、政党宣言、政府部门年度报告和媒体文章等一手资料，从印度人民党（BJP）的文明外交政策议程、莫迪的个人主义领导风格以及提升印度国际地位的愿望等方面，阐释了这一转变。

关键词：侨民，印度外交政策，莫迪，印度人民党，印度国民大会党

*Post-independence, overseas Indians have served as a bridge of friendship and cooperation between India and their adopted homes abroad.*

—Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, 2013<sup>1</sup>

*I have always considered the Indian diaspora as ambassadors of India.*

—Prime Minister Narendra Modi, 2025<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

**D**iasporas can have political (Paarlberg 2019; Whitaker and Wellman 2024), economic (Burgess 2020; Naujoks 2022), and cultural (Dag 2022) impacts on their countries of origin. The Indian diaspora remains connected to India from around the world via multiple channels. Cultural connections exist from historical times with indentured labourers' descendants<sup>3</sup> holding on to aspects of Indian identity (Gowricharn 2024) to contemporary familial connections and consumption of Indian cultural products like Bollywood (Bandyopadhyay 2008). Economic linkages exist in the form of remittances, charitable donations, religious donations, investments, and property ownership. The Indian diaspora is also politically engaged with India. Political engagement has ranged from historical lobbying for Indian independence to contemporary lobbying in the US for procuring an exemption for India's civilian nuclear industry (Prasad and Savatic 2023).

Given the Indian diaspora's strong connections to India, does the ideological preferences of the political parties in power shape the Indian government's engagement with the diaspora? Ideological differences between

political parties can impact foreign policy decision-making (Raunio and Wagner 2020; Hofmann and Martill 2021). However, a change in government does not necessarily mean a fundamental change in foreign policy. On the one hand, Modi's populist agenda and personalist leadership have resulted in a change in rhetoric in Indian foreign policy with themes rooted in Hindutva or Hindu nationalist ideology (Hall 2019). On the other hand, there are fundamental continuities in India's foreign policy despite Modi's active attempt to create his own doctrine (Prasad and Nooruddin 2019; Rajagopalan 2020). The question that arises then is whether the Modi government, based on its promotion of Hindutva ideology, has actively sought to highlight India and its diaspora's Hindu identity more so than a broader pluralist Indian identity.

In this article, I argue that while the Modi-led BJP government has strongly adopted the language of Hindutva ideology, it has not strayed from previous governments' aim to engage the diaspora economically. BJP leaders' speeches often invoke symbols of Hinduism such as the Kumbh mela and quote texts of ancient Hindu saints. In contrast, under the leadership of Manmohan Singh, the speeches make references to India's pluralism and diversi-

ty. However, I argue that there is also continuity across the Congress and BJP governments. Diaspora engagement consistently rests on economic incentives. Regardless of the party in power, the Indian government looks to invite diasporic economic and skills investment in India. While the Modi-led BJP government might invoke Hindutva rhetoric, they continue to engage the diaspora on economic investments.

In order to test the changes and continuities in rhetoric, I will examine speeches given by representatives of the Indian government at the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) convention from 2005–2025. This event has been selected since this is one of the largest platforms that the Indian government has set-up to directly celebrate and address the diaspora. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the content of the speeches show that there is a shift from more secular themes to Hindu themes in the speeches. However, the economic agenda for the diaspora mostly remains the same even though the frequency of economic themes drops after 2014. Using primary sources such as speeches, party manifestoes, annual reports of government ministries, and media articles, I explain the shift based on BJP's civilizational foreign policy agenda, the effect of Modi's personalist leadership, and the desire to promote India's status on the global stage. Of the four transmission belts that link domestic developments to international outcomes, my argument shows how a shift in the "worldview" from a secular Congress-led to a Hindutva BJP-led government and the "de-

cision-making process" of individual leaders can change foreign policy rhetoric towards the diaspora. Overall, this article makes an empirical contribution to understanding how a change in government in India can lead to a change in rhetoric towards the Indian diaspora while not fundamentally changing the economic goals expected from the diaspora.

In the following section, I discuss how ideology can shape foreign policy, and therefore, diaspora policy. I then show how the Indian government has engaged the Indian diaspora between 2005–2025. I derive two hypotheses regarding potential change in the Indian government's engagement with the diaspora after the BJP came to power in 2014. Based on speeches given at PBD conventions, I quantitatively and qualitatively assess whether there has been a change in rhetoric in the messaging towards the diaspora. I explain how Modi's leadership and his government's civilizational based foreign policy are the primary drivers of the shift in rhetoric while the desire to promote India's status on the global stage is also a subsidiary motivating factor. I conclude with the implications of my findings regarding the role of Hindu ideology in the Indian government's communication strategy with the Indian diaspora.

## **Can Ideology Shape Foreign Policy?**

**I**deologies can shape foreign policy both at the party and the individual level in democracies. Cross-national analyses have found that genuine

ideological differences between political parties can impact foreign policy decision-making (Raunio and Wagner 2020; Hofmann and Martill 2021). For instance, right-leaning governments are more likely to promote free trade policies while left-leaning governments are more likely to support foreign aid and protectionism (Broz 2011; Raess et al. 2018). Even when it comes to security issues where consensus across parties is assumed to be more common (Prins and Marshall 2001; Raunio and Wagner 2018), right-leaning governments are more likely to be involved in militarized inter-state disputes (Palmer et al. 2004). Ideology is the most consistent factor that determines whether legislators propose and support spending limits on security-related bills (Bendix and Jeong 2024).

Given the recent rise in populism across democratic countries, studies have now found that populist ideologies also impact policy-making at the international level (Wajner et al. 2024; Löffmann 2022b). Populism “is a political movement or party emphasizing a Manichean, us-versus-them worldview in which the “us” refers to the “people,” defined often in ethnic or communal terms” if the movement in question is right-wing (Berman 2021, 72). Populist governments, especially in democracies, tend to disengage from international institutions and adopt protectionist policies (Pacciardi et al. 2024; Mansfield and Pevehouse 2022). Populist radical right-wing parties across Europe have broadly similar foreign policy agendas across a broad range of topics (Ostermann and Stahl

2022). While populism does not automatically mean a uniform type of foreign policy (Wehner and Thies 2021), populism when combined with nationalism results in foreign policies that are more destructive for the international system (Jenne 2021).

Individual leaders are also key in shaping foreign policy agendas. Their personal values, ideologies, and every-day decision-making can influence foreign policy outcomes (Rathbun et al. 2016; Thiers and Wehner 2022; O’Connor and Cooper 2021). Particular attention has been paid to leaders labeled populists. Populist leaders’ foreign policies are characterized by centralization of power, personalization of decision-making, anti-elitism, and the invocation of their primary cultural identity (Wehner and Thies 2021; Özdamar and Yanik 2024). Even when populists do not explicitly espouse anti-elitism, their foreign policy tends to be people-centric (Wicaksana and Wardhana 2021). Populists tap into fear, anxiety, and resentment to enable “othering” at both the national and international levels (Löffmann 2022a).

Thus, political ideologies, both at the party and individual level, can affect a state’s international posturing. This leads to the following question: how has the transition from the Congress-led coalition government’s secular ideology to the BJP-led government’s Hindutva ideology affected India’s diaspora policy? Particularly given the narratives around Modi’s strong populist leadership, have his personal views changed India’s engagement with the diaspora?

## **India's Diaspora Engagement**

**T**he Indian state's pre-independence, post-independence, and post-liberalization policies towards the diaspora can be broadly characterized as a pendulum swing. Pre-independence, the Indian elite had close ties with the Indian diaspora abroad in order to bolster support for Indian independence in countries like the US and the UK (Prasad and Savatic 2023). After independence from British colonial rule, India disengaged from its diaspora, which it thought should integrate into its various host societies (Sinha 2024). However, in the aftermath of economic liberalization in the early 1990s, India changed its attitude in order to attract more investments from its diaspora (Naujoks 2013). This even led to the creation of the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) in 2004 to deal with diaspora issues (later subsumed within the Ministry of External Affairs in 2016) and the celebration of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) or Indian Diaspora Day every 9th of January.

Governments around the world have tried to create favorable conditions to attract diaspora attachment to their homeland. Strategies include creating material incentives like events, sponsored trips, and ease of economic investment (Brinkerhoff 2012). Cultivating cultural proximity to the homeland through diaspora outreach events abroad and tourism incentives domestically are also part of the strategy of increasing diaspora attachment (Abramson 2017; Tripathi and Biswas 2024). Such cultural ties are also inter-

woven with political support wherein diasporas can influence their families in terms of election outcomes (Paarlberg 2017). In India's case, cultural identity does seem to matter for political support given evidence that Hindu Americans are much more likely to support Modi than non-Hindu Americans (Prasad et al. 2023).

Within the Indian diaspora abroad, there has been strong mobilization along Hindu ideological lines. Such networks date back to the 1940s and spread in the subsequent decades. These were the very same networks that were activated by Hindu nationalist politicians in the Opposition during the Emergency era (1975–77) in India to successfully put pressure on Indira Gandhi's government to end the Emergency (Anderson and Clibbens 2018). The Sangh Parivar, a network of Hindu nationalist organizations, which the BJP is a part of, has successfully exported and replicated its institutions amongst the Hindu diaspora in many countries (Jaffrelot and Therwath 2007; Kurien 2004). The replicated Hindutva ideology perpetuate the othering of Indian minorities both in the diaspora and in India (Therwath 2007; Sabrang and South Asia Citizens Web 2002; Anderson 2015). Hindutva organizations have also proliferated online, further extending their reach (Rajagopal 2000). While we can see plenty of evidence that the Hindu diaspora has been engaged to support the political and cultural goals of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the BJP in India, does Hindutva ideology also enter the official messaging from the BJP-led In-

dian government when it addresses the broader Indian diaspora?

Modi's impact on foreign policy has been found to be especially evident in procedural and communication strategies and "Modi's interest in Indians abroad has been remarkable" (Plagemann and Destradi 2019, p. 294). However, the Indian diaspora also have varied preferences regarding politics in India and are divided regarding their support for the current Prime Minister of India (Badrinathan et al. 2021). Given Modi's active agenda to engage the Indian diaspora, it is worth asking whether his engagement is substantively different from that of prior governments. When it comes to Indian foreign policy, scholars agree that Modi has continued certain foreign policy strategies of prior governments while deviating on some others (Pant 2019). In the context of a mixed record on continuity and change in foreign policy, it is interesting to see whether Modi tries to win a broader coalition of support from the diaspora when he addresses them or taps into narratives of Hindu nationalist ideology to prop up his support base. The aim is to understand whether the Indian government's cultural and economic engagement of the Indian diaspora has remained consistent or not across the Manmohan Singh-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government and the Modi-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government. The cultural ideologies of the Congress and the BJP can be broadly articulated as secular and Hindutva, respectively. Thus, the first hypothesis can be articulated in two parts as follows:

*Hypothesis 1a: Speeches after 2014 will be more likely to contain Hindutva themes as compared to speeches before 2014.*

*Hypothesis 1b: Speeches after 2014 will be more likely to contain fewer secular themes as compared to speeches before 2014.*

In terms of economic engagement, diasporas play a key role in boosting homeland economies with financial transfers that range from remittances to foreign direct investment (FDI) (Azeez and Begum 2009; Bhagat et al. 2013; Ye 2014). The Indian diaspora has had a positive effect on Indian economic development with arguments showing that the diaspora can reverse India's "brain drain" (Agrawal et al. 2011; Sahay 2009). Studies have shown that Indian-Americans participate in the Indian economy through promoting the Information Technology (IT) sector and setting up avenues for innovation (Kapur 2001; 2004). They also enable institutionalized transnational networks for development in sectors like health and education (Agarwala 2015).

The economic embracing of the Indian diaspora has not gone hand in hand with a strong political embrace. The Indian political leadership, across party lines, perceive dual citizenship as a potential security threat (Naujoks 2015). Thus, there is no guarantee that the Indian government will always perceive the Indian diaspora as an asset. This begs the question of whether the Congress and BJP governments similarly viewed the diaspora as beneficial or not to the Indian economy. The second hypothesis, therefore, is as follows:

*Hypothesis 2: Speeches after 2014 will be as likely to contain references to economic development as compared to speeches before 2014.*

In the following sections, I analyze whether the Indian government's attitude to diasporas and role of diasporas has remained stable or changed in tone after the 2014 election of the Modi-led BJP government.<sup>4</sup>

## Data and Analysis

The data being analyzed are all speeches given by the Prime Minister, External Affairs Minister, Minister of State for External Affairs, and the Minister of Overseas Indian Affairs at any PBD convention event from 2005 to 2015. The PBD is celebrated on 9th of January to mark the date that Mahatma Gandhi returned to India in 1915. Since 2003, a convention is held around this date to acknowledge the contribution of the Indian diaspora towards India's development. The convention has been held every 2 years since 2015. The Indian government's signaling at this event is worth noting since this is one of the largest platforms organized by the Indian government that directly celebrates and addresses the diaspora. PBD "signals the commitment of the Indian state to the welfare of diasporic populations" (Mani and Varadarajan 2005, 45–46). Additionally, the time period under consideration is almost equally distributed between Congress-led governments (2005–2014)<sup>5</sup> and BJP-led governments (2015–2025).<sup>6</sup> In total,

there are 39 speeches that are publicly available from 2005–2025.<sup>7</sup>

In order to test whether there is a change in rhetoric between the Congress-led and BJP-led governments, I analyze the PBD speeches using a multi-method approach.<sup>8</sup> Quantitative text analysis allows us to spot trends in themes in the speeches while the qualitative analysis contextualizes these trends. Using both quantitative and qualitative data contributes to first establishing whether or not there is a change in rhetoric between the UPA and NDA governments.

### *Quantitative Analysis*

The quantitative analysis tests whether there is a change in substance and tone after 2014 in the speeches given by ministers at PBD. First, I test the presence and change between three categories as outlined above—Secularism, Hindutva, and Economics—in speeches delivered before and after 2014. The goal of the tests is to determine whether the key words associated with these categories exist and if the proportion of the words attributed to each category changes in the speeches with a change in government. The analysis is supplemented with a word frequency calculation to check which words dropped out most from the vocabulary of the speech givers and which words increased most in usage.

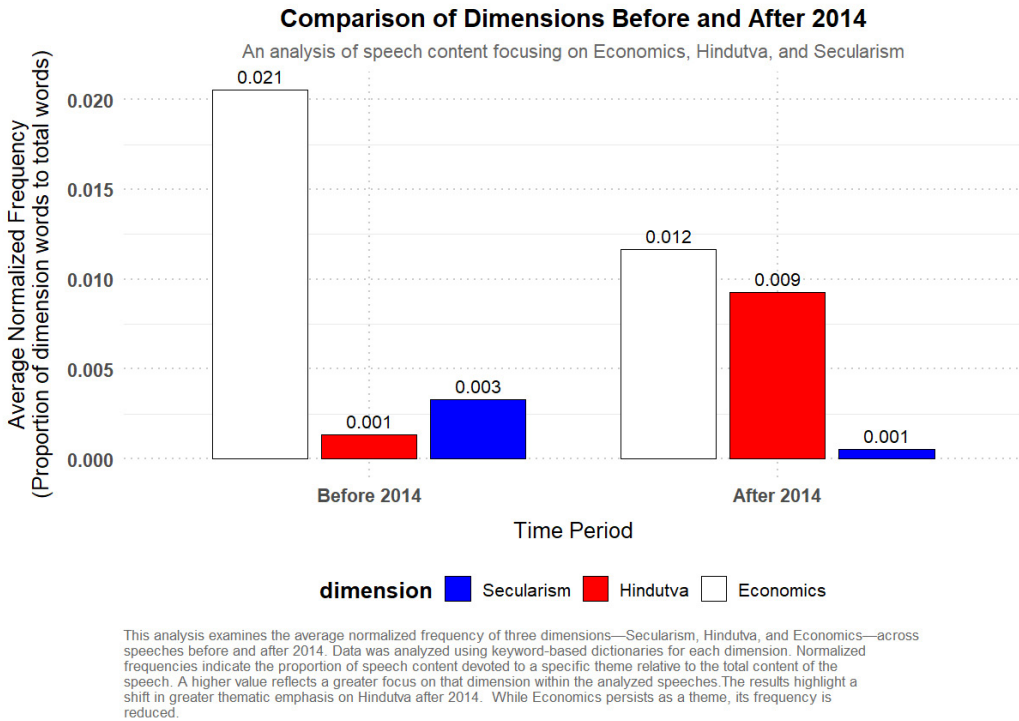
The tests conducted are the comparisons of the average normalized frequency of the three key dimensions. The analysis employs a systematic approach to quantitatively examine the-

matic trends in speeches using a keyword-based dictionary method. First, since different words indicate different types of rhetoric, I created a custom dictionary to classify keywords into the three predefined thematic dimensions: Secularism, Hindutva, and Economics (see the Appendix for a dictionary of keywords for each category). Each speech was then tokenized into individual words using the “tokens” function from the “quanteda” package in R, which processes text by splitting it into tokens while removing punctuation to ensure clean and analyzable input. A document-feature matrix (DFM) was subsequently constructed to represent the frequency of each token across all speeches. The customised dictionary was then applied to the DFM, which mapped the tokens to their respective thematic categories and generated category-specific word counts for each speech. The speeches were also divided into pre- and post-2014 in order to compare any shifts in thematic focus across the Congress and BJP governments. Missing values in category counts were replaced with zero to ensure consistency. For normalization, category counts were divided by the total word count of each speech. The average normalized frequency represents the proportion of speech content devoted to each theme relative to the total content of the speech. The normalization process accounted for the total word count in each speech, ensuring that the relative weight of each dimension could be compared across time periods. A higher value indicates a greater focus on a particular dimension, while a lower val-

ue suggests less emphasis.

As shown in Figure 1, there is a clear shift in the thematic emphasis between the two time periods. Before 2014, economics was more pronounced in the speeches, with an average normalized frequency of 0.021. Secularism’s frequency was 0.003 while Hindutva had a lower representation with 0.001. In contrast, after 2014, the thematic focus shifted significantly. Hindutva as a theme spiked with an average normalized frequency of 0.009. Secularism dropped to 0.001, reflecting a much smaller presence in post-2014 speeches. Economics continues to be important after 2014 but has a lower frequency of 0.012. This change suggests a significant shift in the political and ideological focus of the speeches over time. While economics was a key theme before 2014, Hindutva increased in importance as a topic in the speeches delivered after 2014. While economics continues to maintain a presence post-2014, it is emphasized much less. Secularism as a theme drops substantially after 2014. The *t-tests* confirm that the shifts in Hindutva and Secularism are highly statistically significant. Interestingly, the drop in frequency for Economics as a theme is moderately statistically significant.<sup>9</sup>

The analysis upholds the hypothesis regarding a shift from secular themes towards more Hindutva themes in speeches delivered after 2014. The prominence of economics and higher mentions of secular themes before 2014 aligns with the political climate of the time. The post-2014 speeches show



**Figure 1:** Average Normalized Frequency Graph of Themes Before and After 2014

a distinct rise in Hindutva discourse, reflecting Modi and the BJP’s push towards highlighting Hindu ideology. The most interesting finding is the drop in the relative frequency of economics as a theme after 2014. While economics persists as a topic, it is less invoked.

Next, I examine shifts in focus on the three dimensions—Secularism, Hindutva, and Economics—based on word frequencies in speeches before and after 2014. The text of each speech was split into individual words (tokens), which are the basic units for analysis. Common, non-informative words (e.g., “the,” “and,” “it”) were removed from the analysis to focus on content-specific terms. All the text was converted to lowercase and non-alphanumeric characters were removed to ensure unifor-

mity in the analysis. After the cleaning, word frequencies were calculated for each period.

The word frequencies were compared between the two periods to identify which words had the most significant increases or decreases in frequency. Word clouds were generated for both the words with the most increase and decrease in frequency. The word cloud serves as a visual representation of word frequency: the larger a word appears, the more frequently it was used relative to other words. For the increase and decrease, two separate word clouds were created to highlight the top 10 words in each category.<sup>10</sup>

As seen in Figure 2, there is an increased frequency of words like

“friends,”<sup>11</sup> “ji,” “diaspora,” and “convention” after 2014. None of these indicate a significant rhetorical shift. Figure 3 shows a decreased frequency of words like “economic,” “growth,” and “education,” which indicates less emphasis on traditional economic concerns after 2014. These trends help us understand how the discourse shifted after 2014. Most significantly, these changes in terms used indicate a relative decline in economic development-related discourse in the post-2014 period, which is surprising. The drop in frequency of these terms suggests that they were less emphasized in the speeches after 2014, potentially reflecting a shift in focus towards different political, economic, cultural, or social issues.

However, the word clouds do not indicate any substantial increase or decrease in terminology associated with secularism or Hindutva. The only significant change in terminology usage is the noticeable increase in frequency of the word “Bharat” in speeches after 2014. This aligns with the BJP’s push to use the Sanskrit word for India. Thus, the change in word frequencies indicate minor changes in rhetoric but nothing substantial.



*Figure 2:* Increased word frequency cloud

### **Qualitative Analysis**

While the quantitative analysis gives us a picture of how the Indian government changed its messaging to the Indian diaspora to some degree after 2014, I also qualitatively assess whether these changes were not merely numerical but also substantive in content. I assess whether secular themes decreased while Hindutva themes increased after 2014 and whether the role of the diaspora for India’s economic development was as emphasized after 2014. I also check if there are any other themes that the quantitative analysis was unable to process. Overall, the qualitative assessment backs the quantitative findings to show that there is a switch from secular to more Hindutva themes after 2014 and a drop in emphasizing economic development but continued appeals to the diaspora for economic investment.

The speeches given between 2005–2014 primarily refer to Indian identity in secular terms. As PM Manmohan Singh said in his 2011 PBD speech to the Indian diaspora “Each one of you—living in different countries, different faiths, different languages, different beliefs—are a symbol of that great idea of ‘unity in diversity’



*Figure 3:* Decreased word frequency cloud

that India represents.” The emphasis on India’s diversity and pluralism is present throughout the speeches of this era. India is described as “a vibrant whole of many cultures, religions, languages and regions. It is this plurality that gives us strength ... This plurality is true as much of the Indian diaspora.”<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, the plight of the marginalized in India is highlighted to talk about strategies to improve their economic, social, and political welfare. Success is highlighted as “more and more people from the disadvantaged sections of our society”<sup>13</sup> entering the economic and political system. References to the marginalized are absent in speeches after 2014.

It should be noted that speeches prior to 2014 are not devoid of references to India’s ancient cultural heritage. For instance, the image of Indians traveling the world in ancient times runs across both time periods. At the PBD in 2013, references were made to the “earliest Indians who travelled abroad were the emissaries of Emperor Ashoka to disseminate the tenets of Buddhism in the third century B.C.”<sup>14</sup> However, references to classical texts, especially Hindu figures, increases after 2014. The links between ancient culture and modern processes are more explicitly made through observations like: “Our classical texts describe the long journeys that saints and monks undertook for the spread of knowledge, peace and love ... The present-day travel of Indians as professionals, labourers, traders and entrepreneurs to the rest of the world is a continuing saga of Indian Migration.”<sup>15</sup>

The use of the Sanskrit term “*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*” (the world is one family), taken from ancient Hindu texts, is not unique to the BJP government and has been used by prior governments as well. However, it is much more frequently invoked in the speeches after 2014 to indicate India’s relationship with its diaspora. Similarly, the Sanskrit term for India, “*Bharat*,” is used much more frequently after 2014. Its usage often juxtaposes India’s modernizing drive with its cultural history to highlight “a *Bharat* that is more confident, modernizing and inclusive. Where tradition and technology go hand in hand.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the speeches are littered with references to Hindu cultural heritage sites and events (like the *Kumbh mela*) and more recent explicit references to Hindu gods. For example, Modi welcomed the Indian diaspora at the 2025 PBD event in Odisha with: “On this holy land of Lord Jagannath and Lord Lingaraj, I welcome my Indian diaspora family from all over the world.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, the trend from secular to more explicit *Hindutva* themes is substantively present in the speeches as well.

When it comes to economic themes, the shift in content is more subtle after 2014. Prior to 2014, the speeches centered on India’s development goals and the role the Indian diaspora could play in helping achieve this agenda. As the External Affairs Minister in 2013 put it, “ultimately as the Americans say – ‘It is the economy stupid that really finally decides relationships.’”<sup>18</sup> The diaspora is seen as the “catalyst for development and contribute in na-

tion-building activities back home”<sup>19</sup> since they can bring “the resources, talents, expertise and experience”<sup>20</sup> to promote Indian development. The Indian government’s appeal to the Indian diaspora is rather bluntly expressed. As the Minister for Overseas Indian Affairs said in 2009, “We wish to provide the vast majority of you the opportunity to contribute—each in your own way—to India’s development story.”<sup>21</sup> There is little doubt that the Indian government viewed the Indian diaspora as an economic resource.

After 2014, the economic appeals to the Indian diaspora do not disappear from the speeches but they substantially reduce in frequency. India is highlighted as a growing economy that attracts investments. However, the appeals to the diaspora are tinged with cultural import. For instance, the Minister of Overseas Indian Affairs said, “[we] welcome entrepreneurs, investors and professionals from the diaspora to partake in our endeavor to develop the motherland and restore it to its past glory,”<sup>22</sup> harkening back to an implied golden age of India that is linked to its Hindu heritage. Furthermore, the shift in the messaging around India’s economic development is seen in the emphasis on India’s ability to be “self-reliant” with many references across speeches to “Aatmanirbhar Bharat.” The shift seems to be a move away from actively engaging the diaspora as partners in India’s development to showcasing India as a thriving economy that can now benefit the diaspora if they so choose.

## **What Explains the Shift?**

**T**he shift towards more Hindutva language shows that ideology matters and is markedly present in the change in how the diaspora is addressed. In this section, I assess how ideology shapes this change in discourse. As outlined earlier, both at the party and individual level, ideology can shape foreign policy. In the case of India, I argue that the shift to more explicit Hindutva messaging towards the diaspora is primarily due to the BJP-led government’s emphasis on a Hindu civilization based foreign policy and Modi’s personalist leadership. I also assess an alternative argument that this shift is due to India’s desire for greater status on the world stage, which requires mobilizing its diaspora by any means. I examine PBD speeches, PBD agendas, election manifestoes, ministerial reports, and media reports as primary sources to support the explanations.

### ***Civilizational based Foreign Policy***

The BJP’s Hindutva worldview shapes how its government approaches foreign policy (Michael 2018; Gupta et al. 2018). This Hindutva lens presents India’s civilizational legacy as being synonymous with India’s Hindu traditions. Indian foreign policy, therefore, is increasingly imbued with a Hindu civilizational ethos. For instance, the MEA celebrates the “growing impact of India’s civilizational values on international cooperation, underpinned by the enduring conceptual framework of ‘Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam,’”<sup>23</sup> by highlighting how artists from 124 countries came togeth-

er to sing Mahatma Gandhi's favourite Hindu *bhajan* (prayer).

The significance of this civilizational agenda is clear in the BJP's election manifestoes. Foreign policy is geared towards making India a "Vishwaguru" (world leader) that draws on its "ancient wisdom and heritage."<sup>24</sup> The goal is to "deepen the relationship of culture and heritage with people of Indian origin."<sup>25</sup> The BJP also shifts to calling India Bharat in its 2024 manifesto and promises to "fortify our connection with the Bharatiya diaspora"<sup>26</sup> and ensure cultural and economic ties with them. The diaspora is encouraged to take pride in and highlight this history of Hindu heritage with appeals like, "[i]n the countries where you live, you must also take the lead in spreading India's true history"<sup>27</sup> of prosperity and culture.

The civilizational approach also shapes who in the diaspora gets recognized. While Bharatiya Samman awards for members of the diaspora were a feature of the PBD across both Congress and BJP governments, who received those awards is also interesting to examine. Modi's government has felicitated prominent members of the diaspora who have actively promoted Hindu culture and traditions. For instance, Mahesh Mehta, the organizer of the first chapter of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) in the US, was given an award in 2017. Vaikuntam Iyer Lakshmanan, the co-founder for the Sringeri Vidya Bharati Foundation in Canada, was recognized in 2023 amongst other things for his work in "promoting In-

dia's spiritual and cultural traditions."<sup>28</sup> In the same year, Dewendrachandra-bose Sharman was honored for his participation in various Arya Samaj organizations and his support for the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS) in Suriname. The Guyana Hindu Dharmic Sabha (GHDS) was also recognized in 2019 for its contribution to the Indian community. Thus, the BJP government has selected awardees from around the world that have promoted Hindu culture and traditions. This shows that there is a tangible shift towards embracing a Hindutva ideology in India's diaspora policy under the BJP government since 2014.

### ***Modi's Personalist Leadership***

While the BJP's Hindutva ideology serves as the background for the shift in the rhetoric towards the diaspora, the manner in which this shift has occurred can also be attributed to Prime Minister Modi's personalist style of leadership. Modi has been successful in centralizing power within the BJP and garnering in-party loyalty (Leake and Chhibber 2024). Modi's personalist style of leadership is evident in his party's political campaigns. Modi has projected himself as synonymous with the BJP. The BJP's national election campaigns of 2014, 2019, and 2024 all refer to Modi individually and not to the party in general. "*Ab ki baar, Modi sarkar*" (This time, Modi's government) and "*Phir ek baar, Modi sarkar*" (Once more, Modi's government) were election slogans for 2014 and 2019, respectively. By 2024, the BJP's election manifesto itself was called "*Modi ki guarantee*" (Modi's guarantee).

The Indian diaspora seems to have caught Modi's particular attention (Plagemann and Destradi 2019). He has worked with the diaspora in the past as a member of the RSS (Anderson and Clibbens 2018) and during his tenure as Chief Minister of Gujarat (Sinha 2024), so knows how to navigate both Hindu cultural narratives and economic policy to connect with the diaspora. For instance, Modi seamlessly links the religious importance of the river Ganga in Hinduism to development goals in his PBD 2015 speech by asserting that "the cleaning of the Ganga is an environmental issue, a matter of devotion as well as a matter of cultural legacy. Similarly cleaning of the Ganges can become a symbol of progress,"<sup>29</sup> which he goes on to describe as economic investments in the states that the river runs through. Modi appeals to the diaspora based on cultural ties rooted in Hinduism. However, he also emphasizes the importance of the diaspora's economic role, for instance, constantly highlighting that India is the number one country for remittances.<sup>30</sup>

The personalist approach in foreign policy has meant that public engagement with the diaspora has focused on Modi's role as central to that engagement. A noticeable shift in visible engagement with the diaspora is that what used to be delegated to the Minister of Overseas Indian Affairs under the Congress-led government has been taken on by Prime Minister Modi himself.<sup>31</sup> This personal handling of the diaspora is highlighted by the numerous official social media posts depicting Modi's interactions with the diaspora.<sup>32</sup>

Modi makes it a point to do personal outreach with the Indian diaspora on each of his international visits. In 2025 alone, until June, the Press Information Bureau of India has reported on Modi's meeting with local Indian communities in all of his six state visits.<sup>33</sup> The symbolic significance of Modi's personal engagement with the diaspora is further underscored with the usage of Modi's photo at a packed stadium in Houston, Texas, for the "Howdy Modi" event organized by the Indian-American community as the cover photo of the MEA's Annual Report for 2019–20. The diaspora events focus both on culture and economics. This explains why there has been a rhetorical shift towards more Hindutva themes but a strong continuation of focusing on the economic role the diaspora can play.

There is also a noticeable change in the style and content of non-Prime Ministerial speeches at the PBD after 2014. A substantial change after 2014 is the sharp spike in references to Modi's leadership. Every single minister's speech after 2014 explicitly mentions Modi at least once, and more often than not, attributes India's success on the international stage to Modi. For example, Sushma Swaraj, the External Affairs Minister addressed the Indian diaspora in her 2019 PBD speech by saying that "today India's prestige that has increased abroad due to the effective leadership of the Prime Minister in India, has also increased your dignity and respect." This lends credence to the argument that a personalist style of governance characterizes the BJP government under Modi even when addressing the diaspora.

### ***Desire for Greater Status***

An alternative explanation for the shift to more Hindutva symbolism but a reliance on economic messaging when addressing the diaspora is neither about the party's ideology nor the individual leader's disposition. It is based on India's desire for greater status on the world stage and recognizing its diaspora's importance for this cause (Hall 2019). After 2014, India has increasingly sought to advertise itself as a country with status and importance in the world order. This explanation contextualizes why even with a change in rhetoric, the BJP-led government still primarily engages the diaspora for economic issues (Verma 2018).

However, the desire for greater status is not unique to the BJP-led government when it comes to India's foreign policy. When comparing the Congress-led and BJP-led governments from 2005–2025, a common line across both parties is an emphasis on diaspora investment in the Indian economy in order to strengthen India's role globally. Thinking of the diaspora as representatives of India internationally is common across both the Congress and BJP governments. The election manifestoes of both parties for 2019 and 2024 highlight deepening India's relationship with its diaspora and strengthening economic ties.<sup>34</sup>

Under the Congress, the PBD in 2008 was highlighted as having a "special 'Marketplace' to showcase Indian companies and their products."<sup>35</sup> Recommendations were made for Indian diaspora to have a special status

and incentives for partnering with the government on development projects.<sup>36</sup> Despite the BJP's move towards signaling India's greater autonomy economically, the BJP government still clearly highlighted that the diaspora has an economic role to play in "Aatmanirbhar Bharat" with a whole session dedicated to this topic at PBD in 2022. The BJP-led government continued the economic policy of mobilizing the diaspora for capacity building in India regarding a variety of topics like waste management, artificial intelligence,<sup>37</sup> agriculture,<sup>38</sup> healthcare, tourism,<sup>39</sup> and sustainable development.<sup>40</sup> Even state Governments were encouraged to connect with their respective diasporas and showcase their states' investment and business potential.<sup>41</sup>

One noticeable difference on the economic agenda between the Congress and BJP governments' is that the former encouraged diaspora philanthropy for poverty alleviation while the latter has dropped this topic from its messaging towards the diaspora.<sup>42</sup> This aligns with the expectation of Modi's government showcasing the Indian economy as strong and warranting recognition globally.

This explanation shows how even with a change in rhetoric, the BJP-led government still engages the diaspora on economic issues. However, it fails to adequately capture on its own why the economic mobilization is now tinged with more Hindutva themes. If a desire to claim greater status in the world is motivating the rhetoric directed at the diaspora, then we should also see ap-

peals directed at non-Hindu Indian diaspora to mobilize them as ambassadors of India and investors in India. However, this is not the case. Based on my analysis of the PBD speeches, while “Indian” values are highlighted and generic appeals to the Indian diaspora for investment are common, there is no emphasis on non-Hindu identities in those appeals.

Overall, while India does seek greater status on the world stage, the primary drivers of the Hindutva shift in India’s diaspora policy is based on the BJP’s centering of Hindu civilization in its foreign policy and Modi’s personalist leadership.

### **Conclusion: Implication for India’s Diaspora Policy**

In this article, I sought to answer the question of whether the ideological preferences of the political parties in power shape the Indian government’s engagement with the diaspora. In addition, I also analyzed whether the Indian government would find the diaspora’s potential economic power appealing independent of their ideological leaning. In order to compare the differences between a Congress-led and a BJP-led Indian government, I analyzed the speeches delivered by ministers at the PBD convention from 2005 to 2025. The convention is the biggest official platform organized by the Indian government for addressing the Indian diaspora. To test the differences between the speeches given before and after 2014, I created three thematic categories—Secular, Hindutva, and Economic. I evaluated the presence of these

themes in the speeches both quantitatively and qualitatively.

The analyses show that speeches after 2014 are more likely to contain Hindutva themes and fewer secular themes as compared to speeches before 2014, which align with my first hypothesis. The evidence shows that while the Sangh Parivar is known to have a strong influence amongst the Indian diaspora, the Indian government is also explicitly addressing the diaspora on official platforms with Hindutva content. Furthermore, speeches after 2014 continue to mention economic themes but contain fewer references to economic development as compared to speeches before 2014. Thus, my second hypothesis finds weaker evidence. While economic development as a topic continues to be present in speeches after 2014, the drop in frequency is noticeable. There are three probable reasons that can be attributed to this drop. The speeches before 2014 included the effects of the 2009 financial crisis, which might have led to a greater urgency in focusing on India’s economic growth. Also, as the years have progressed, the Indian diaspora’s role in India’s economic development might also be increasingly taken for granted, so the Indian government may not feel as much pressure to appeal to the diaspora on this front. Finally, after 2014, the BJP government has also tried to project India as a self-reliant economy, which might have resulted in signaling a changed interest in the diaspora’s role.

I explain the shift towards more Hindutva content as based on BJP’s civ-

izational foreign policy agenda and the effect of Modi's personalist leadership. The desire to promote India's status on the global stage explains the continued reliance on the diaspora for economic support. My analysis shows how a shift in the "worldview" from a secular Congress-led to a Hindutva BJP-led government and the "decision-making process" of individual leaders like Modi can change foreign policy rhetoric towards the diaspora. The worldview of both the political party and its leaders is an important transmission belt for articulating India's self-perception in foreign policy. Additionally, the decision-making process transmission belt is evident in Modi's personalist leadership style.

Overall, this article offers evidence that after 2014 the Indian government engages the diaspora with more Hindutva themes and a relatively smaller economic agenda. There are two main implications of these findings. First, the Indian government will potentially ramp up its cultural signaling to the diaspora. India will be more explicitly linked to Hindu identity. PBD events will be increasingly tied to Hindu cultural festivals and sites. Such ties have already begun with the

2019 PBD event facilitating trips to the Kumbh mela and the 2025 PBD event promoting trips to Hindu temples like the Konark Sun temple. Future research should examine whether Modi's more targeted speeches to the diaspora in different countries follow the same pattern of increasingly promoting a Hindutva narrative. Second, the strategy to draw increasingly on Hindu themes could alienate non-Hindu Indian diaspora. The negative ramifications of alienating India's diasporic minorities range from fueling sympathy for separatist movements like Khalistan to creating a sense of abandonment, especially for India's unskilled diaspora workers who migrate for work to mainly the Gulf countries. Given existing evidence that homeland minorities in the diaspora often have different priorities and interests (Kurien 2017; Mishra 2021), further studies could explore the impact of minority alienation amongst the Indian diaspora and how it affects their economic, political, cultural ties with India. This can also contribute to contemporary research on counter Hindutva narratives and activism in the diaspora (Biswas 2023). Thus, future research should unpack the diverse diaspora responses to the Indian government's rhetoric.

## **APPENDIX**

### **Keyword Dictionary**

#### **Secularism**

- Secular
- Diversity
- Religions
- Marginalized
- Minority
- Minorities
- Federal
- Harmony
- Unity
- Multi-cultural
- Multicultural
- Pluralistic
- Pluralism
- Tolerance
- Rights
- Justice

#### **Hindutva and Hindu culture**

- Yoga
- Kumbh
- Varanasi
- Kashi
- Ganga
- Ganges
- Vasudaiva Kutumbakam
- Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam
- Indian values
- Bharat
- Spiritual
- Ram
- Temples
- Temple
- Heritage
- Lord
- Sita
- Ayodhya
- Holy
- Saint
- Saints
- Bhagwan
- God
- Prayagraj

#### **Economics**

- Boom
- Booming
- Growth rate
- Growing
- Business
- Economic
- Economy
- Skills
- Investment
- Investments
- Remittances
- Progress
- Development
- GDP
- Employment
- Technology
- FDI
- Foreign direct investment
- Industry
- Industrialization
- Industrialisation

**Word Cloud Frequency – top 10****Table 1.** Words With the Largest Increase After 2014

Word	Before 2014	After 2014	Difference	Absolute Difference
ji	0.000149	0.00662	0.00647	0.00647
friends	0.00126	0.00700	0.00574	0.00574
diaspora	0.00684	0.01170	0.00486	0.00486
convention	0.000297	0.00441	0.00412	0.00412
event	0.00119	0.00441	0.00322	0.00322
abroad	0.00335	0.00652	0.00318	0.00318
bharat	0.000372	0.00355	0.00318	0.00318
time	0.00364	0.00652	0.00288	0.00288
odisha	0.00000	0.00269	0.00269	0.00269
pandemic	0.00000	0.00259	0.00259	0.00259

**Table 2.** Words With the Largest Decrease After 2014

Word	Before 2014	After 2014	Difference	Absolute Difference
overseas	0.01480	0.00614	-0.00865	0.00865
growth	0.00610	0.000767	-0.00533	0.00533
economic	0.00595	0.00153	-0.00441	0.00441
workers	0.00468	0.000863	-0.00382	0.00382
development	0.00624	0.00278	-0.00346	0.00346
ministry	0.00431	0.00125	-0.00306	0.00306
home	0.00424	0.00125	-0.00299	0.00299
education	0.00349	0.000672	-0.00282	0.00282
origin	0.00439	0.00201	-0.00237	0.00237
gulf	0.00268	0.000384	-0.00229	0.00229

## Notes

- 1 Prime Minister's speech at the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, 2013.
- 2 Prime Minister's speech at the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, 2025.
- 3 Also known as the Girmityas.
- 4 In the limited space of a research article, also testing the material implications of this change in rhetoric is not feasible. Future research should take on the next step of analyzing the material implications of this change.
- 5 A technical point to note is that the Congress-led UPA was still in power in 2014 for the PBD celebration in January.
- 6 The Pravasi Bharatiya Divas published theme papers between 2008–2013 but not after, so comparisons cannot be made regarding the topics of each year across the Congress-led and BJP-led governments.
- 7 Unfortunately, Annual Reports of the MEA cannot be compared quantitatively in a similar fashion across these periods because the content on diasporas is minimal.
- 8 The Indian government's diaspora policy rhetoric is one dimension of many to test India's changing views on the diaspora. The aim of this analysis is to complement other methods and studies that are also exploring various facets of India's diaspora policy changes.
- 9 The p-values are 0.000673 for change in Hindutva rhetoric, 0.000313 for change in Secularism rhetoric, and 0.0163 for Economics.
- 10 Please see the Appendix for the values of the change in frequency for the top 10 words after 2014.
- 11 Explained by Modi's speech style of addressing his audience as "friends."
- 12 Minister for Overseas Indian Affairs, Oscar Fernandes, 2006 PBD speech.
- 13 PM Manmohan Singh, 2012 PBD speech.
- 14 Minister of State for External Affairs, E Ahamed, 2013 PBD speech.
- 15 Minister of Overseas Indian Affairs, 2015 PBD speech.
- 16 Minister of External Affairs, S. Jaishanker, 2025 PBD speech.
- 17 PM Narendra Modi, 2025 PBD speech.
- 18 Minister of External Affairs, Salman Khurshid, 2013 PBD speech.
- 19 Minister of External Affairs, Pranab Mukherjee, 2007 PBD speech.
- 20 Minister of External Affairs, Pranab Mukherjee, 2008 PBD speech.
- 21 Minister of Overseas Indian Affairs, Vayalar Ravi, 2009 PBD speech.

- 22 Minister of External and Overseas Indian Affairs, Sushma Swaraj, 2015 PBD speech.
- 23 Annual Report of the Ministry of External Affairs (2018-19), p. 7.
- 24 BJP (2014), “Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat,” p. 40.
- 25 BJP (2019), “Sankalp Patra,” p. 38.
- 26 BJP (2024), “Modi ki Guarantee,” p. 36.
- 27 PM Narendra Modi, 2025 PBD speech.
- 28 PBSA Awardees, 2023: <https://www.pbdindia.gov.in/pbsa-awardees> (accessed on 20 May 2025).
- 29 PM Narendra Modi, 2015 PBD speech.
- 30 See PM Narendra Modi’s 2017, 2021, and 2025 PBD speeches.
- 31 See the Annual Reports of the Ministry of External Affairs from 2005-2024 for reports on public diaspora engagement.
- 32 See Modi’s X (formerly Twitter) handle @narendramodi for posts like this one his meeting with the Indian diaspora in Kuwait: [https://x.com/narendramodi/status/1870443948768141435?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1870443948768141435%7Ctwgr%5Efc9646b11943402bf5d0c480233b0d8db8a451f8%7Ctwcon%5Es1\\_c10&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.pmindia.gov.in%2Fen%2Fnews\\_updates%2Fpm-expresses-happiness-on-a-heartwarming-welcome-from-the-indian-diaspora-in-kuwait%2F](https://x.com/narendramodi/status/1870443948768141435?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1870443948768141435%7Ctwgr%5Efc9646b11943402bf5d0c480233b0d8db8a451f8%7Ctwcon%5Es1_c10&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.pmindia.gov.in%2Fen%2Fnews_updates%2Fpm-expresses-happiness-on-a-heartwarming-welcome-from-the-indian-diaspora-in-kuwait%2F) (accessed on 20 April 2025).
- 33 See ‘Prime Minister Visits Abroad’ for full coverage at <https://www.pib.gov.in/PMContents/PMContents.aspx?menuid=5&Lang=1&RegionId=3&reg=3> (accessed on 3 June 2025).
- 34 For BJP, see ‘Sankalp Patra’ (2019) and ‘Modi ki Guarantee’ (2024); for Congress, see ‘Congress will Deliver’ (2019) and ‘Nyay Patra’ (2024).
- 35 “Pravasi Bharatiya Divas: Theme Paper” (2008), p. 4.
- 36 “Pravasi Bharatiya Divas: Theme Paper” (2012), p.10.
- 37 15<sup>th</sup> Pravasi Bharatiya Divas Convention Programme (2019).
- 38 Youth Pravasi Bharatiya Divas Programme (2023).
- 39 17<sup>th</sup> Pravasi Bharatiya Divas Convention Programme (2023).
- 40 18<sup>th</sup> Pravasi Bharatiya Divas Convention Programme (2025).
- 41 Annual Report of the Ministry of External Affairs 2016–17, p. 230.
- 42 Comparing agendas for the PBD from 2005–2025 and reading the PBD theme papers (2008–2013) highlight this difference.

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# **Between Territory and Worldmaking: The Evolution of India's Double Conception of Sovereignty from Jawaharlal Nehru to Narendra Modi**

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyses the evolution of India's relation to sovereignty since independence. While the latter is a key concept in International Relations and foreign policy, India's relation to sovereignty is not well understood. It has often been argued that India was simply a strong defender of the principle of state sovereignty. However, historical research shows not only that its behaviour did not always match this description, but also that its views have been more complex and strategically defined. Taking a historical perspective, this article first posits that, since independence, India's conception of sovereignty has rested on two pillars: a territorial understanding and a flexible understanding of sovereignty, which was a function of its international worldmaking projects. It then traces how these two understandings evolved during four foreign-policy eras: under Jawaharlal Nehru, under Indira Gandhi and in the 1990s–2000s, and under Narendra Modi. It argues that whereas India's territorial view of sovereignty has remained constant and amplified under the prime ministership of Narendra Modi, Indian worldmaking ambitions have narrowed. This narrowing has, in turn, transformed India's relation to sovereignty internationally. This evolution partly reflects, and helps assess, the role of the Hindu nationalist worldview in India's foreign policy, as well as the changing understandings of sovereignty in the current world.

**Keywords:** Sovereignty, Worldmaking, Hindu Nationalism, Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Narendra Modi

## **Entre el territorio y la creación del mundo: la evolución de la doble concepción de la soberanía en la India desde Jawaharlal Nehru hasta Narendra Modi**

### RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la evolución de la relación de la India con la soberanía desde su independencia. Si bien este último es un concepto clave en las relaciones internacionales y la política exterior, su relación con la soberanía no se comprende bien. A menudo se ha argumentado que la India simplemente defendió con firmeza el principio de soberanía estatal. Sin embargo, la investigación histórica muestra no solo que su comportamiento no siempre se correspondió con esta descripción, sino también que sus perspectivas han sido más complejas y estratégicamente definidas. Desde una perspectiva histórica, este artículo plantea, en primer lugar, que, desde la independencia, la concepción india de la soberanía se ha basado en dos pilares: una comprensión territorial y una comprensión flexible de la soberanía, en función de sus proyectos de construcción del mundo internacional. A continuación, analiza cómo estas dos comprensiones evolucionaron durante cuatro eras de política exterior: bajo Jawaharlal Nehru, bajo Indira Gandhi y en las décadas de 1990 y 2000, y bajo Narendra Modi. Argumenta que, mientras que la visión territorial de la soberanía en la India se ha mantenido constante y se ha intensificado bajo el mandato de Narendra Modi, sus ambiciones de construcción del mundo se han reducido. Este estrechamiento, a su vez, ha transformado la relación de la India con la soberanía a nivel internacional. Esta evolución refleja en parte, y ayuda a evaluar, el papel de la cosmovisión nacionalista hindú en la política exterior de la India, así como la cambiante comprensión de la soberanía en el mundo actual.

**Palabras clave:** Soberanía, Creación de mundos, Nacionalismo hindú, Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Narendra Modi

在领土与世界建构之间：从贾瓦哈拉尔·尼赫鲁到纳伦德拉·莫迪，印度双重主权概念的演变

### 摘要

本文分析了印度自独立以来主权概念的演变。主权是国际关

系和外交政策中的一个关键概念，但印度对主权的概念却并不清晰。人们常常认为印度只是国家主权原则的坚定捍卫者。然而，历史研究表明，印度的行为并非总是符合这种描述，而且其主权观念更为复杂，更具战略性。本文从历史视角出发，首先提出自独立以来，印度的主权观念建立在两大支柱之上：领土主权和灵活的主权观，后者是其国际建构计划的产物。随后，本文追溯了这两种主权观念在四个外交政策时期的演变过程，这四个外交政策时期分别为贾瓦哈拉尔·尼赫鲁时期、英迪拉·甘地时期、20世纪90年代至21世纪初、以及纳伦德拉·莫迪时期。本文认为，尽管印度的领土主权观在纳伦德拉·莫迪总理执政期间保持不变并得到强化，但印度构建世界格局的雄心却有所收窄。这种收窄反过来又改变了印度在国际上与主权的关系。这一演变在一定程度上反映了印度教民族主义世界观在印度外交政策中的作用，并有助于评估当今世界不断变化的主权理解。

关键词：主权，构建世界格局，印度教民族主义，贾瓦哈拉尔·尼赫鲁，英迪拉·甘地，纳伦德拉·莫迪

## Introduction

Given the rise of populist nationalist ideologies, new geopolitical tensions, and disillusionment with globalization, sovereignty is once again a prominent topic amongst academics and politicians. Ironically, this resurgence of sovereignty in public discourse has happened at the same time as sovereignty has been under attack as a norm of international law. These ironies and ambiguities are however not new. The meaning and shape of sovereignty have constantly been debated throughout the twentieth century. In the interwar period, the weakening of empires led to the emergence of federal schemes to reconfigure imperial spaces; new legal inventions such as the man-

dates system; and political visions of polities beyond the nation-state, imagined by anticolonial actors. During the 1940s–50s, in the midst of decolonization, new debates revolved around the meaning of sovereignty, including the very real limitations of economic and political sovereignty in newly decolonized states. By the 1980s, the extent to which state sovereignty had been eroded by economic globalization became a major concern. In the 1990s, major humanitarian failures in Rwanda and former Yugoslavia renewed debates about the legitimacy and possibility of humanitarian interventions that could infringe upon state sovereignty to protect the human rights of populations. The 2000s witnessed a new display of state power through the war on terror, new

surveillance technologies, and increasingly harsh migration controls. In the 2010s, and most clearly in the past few years, new discourses have reclaimed sovereignty as supreme authority over the ever more bounded national territories, in a world shaken by economic crises. At the same time, the violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity by Russia's invasion in 2022 and claims made by states including the United States over foreign territories have raised new alarms about actual and potential breaches to the United Nations (UN) Charter.

To what extent, and why, states' understanding of sovereignty have evolved in such dramatic ways? This article takes on this question by focussing on India. It examines India's engagement with the conception and practice of sovereignty in the sphere of foreign policy from India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, of the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), in power since 2014. It analyses whether, and to what extent, the Indian government's engagement with sovereignty has undergone reorientations, and draws conclusions on how this evolution reflects the state's changing relation to the international order.

India's case requires particular attention for several reasons. Despite being a major international actor, India's relation to sovereignty remains poorly understood and is often boxed into old static tropes. New Delhi is usually seen as exemplifying the strong and strict support to the principle of state sovereignty—as non-interference in internal

matters and territorial inviolability—that is deemed to characterize former colonies. This support would derive from the experience of foreign domination, a more fragile state-building, and a distrust of the motives of great powers when it comes to advocating liberal interventionism. Yet this characterization of a “sovereignty hawk” is simplistic and not historically accurate.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the BJP has claimed to mark a break with the long-lasting consensus in the Indian government and the strategic community around the Nehruvian political model, both at home and in its foreign policy. Domestically, there is no doubt that Hindutva ideology has changed Indian society and politics, including via the “saffronization of the public sphere” (Anderson and Jaffrelot, 2018).<sup>2</sup> However, the claim that Hindu nationalist ideology has changed foreign policy requires further assessment. India's rhetoric has clearly evolved through the refusal of the old Nehruvian non-alignment discourse and its replacement by other concepts such as “multi-alignment,” as well as the Hinduization of foreign policy idioms.<sup>3</sup> Yet analysts have tended to argue that changes have been “minimal” and that there is a broad continuity in foreign policy orientations (see Gupta et al., 2019). India has maintained both its core objective of strategic autonomy and its post-1991 pragmatic foreign policy approach—which is shaped by practical constraints, strategic logics, and national interests rather than ideology (see Hall, 2015; Manjari Miller and Sullivan de Estrada, 2017; Basrur, 2017, Gupta et al., 2019). If anything,

domestic constraints have historically limited India's foreign policy ambitions and influence—from Nehruvian times until today (see Hall, 2022).<sup>4</sup> However, new research has demonstrated deeper, less visible change in foreign policy directly resulting from its linkages with a new domestic ideology (for example, the saffronization of the Indian Foreign Service has led an old elite to be replaced by a new one (Huju, 2022)). The current state of research has left mostly underexplored the impact of domestic politics and ideology on India's foreign policy (for exceptions, see Basrur, 2023, Hall, 2019; Blarel, 2025).

This article addresses India's relation to sovereignty and aims to define its evolution and character by comparing the practices and conceptions of sovereignty over four eras. I am here concerned with sovereignty in the context of foreign policy, thus with how the state defines its meaning, in speech and through practice, in relation to the international sphere.<sup>5</sup> In this respect, sovereignty is both a recognized structuring norm of the international order and an idea whose meaning is the site of political struggles over different worldmaking projects and visions of the international order. By worldmaking, one means the attempt to remake the world order, a "project of reordering the world" (Getachew, 2019: 2). Worldmaking attempts by states or political groups do not have a priori any given or fixed normative orientation; their political content is historically contingent. They can carry emancipatory, progressive, or hierarchical if not outrightly reactionary political visions, ranging

from myriads of decolonization projects against domination to Nazi Germany's racial projects (Heilbronner, 2021).<sup>6</sup> With various levels of ambition to restructure a given order, worldmaking attempts have been more common than often recognized (Ibid; Murray, 2024; Harnett, 2022). The period of decolonization between the 1940s and the 1960s might have most dramatically exemplified the struggle over competing notions of sovereignty—from pan-Asian or Arab proposals to federal plans to nation-state claims—underpinning alternative worldviews. However, any debate on sovereignty at the global level implicitly involves contending worldviews which, in turn, presume different power configurations. From that perspective, worldmaking projects are necessarily related to the question of sovereignty: they express a certain conception of sovereignty held by the actor formulating them. For this reason, such debates are always about challenging the parameters of an existing order. I use here the term "worldmaking," rather than the more conventional terms in foreign policy analysis of reform of the international system or order building, because it both encapsulates the project of change and its imaginary.

This article builds on the finding that, between the 1920s and the 1960s, Indians who promoted different political projects for the future of the world and of India did not have a simple, strict understanding of sovereignty (Khan, forthcoming). Indians were not the only ones—they were representative of the creative agency that fueled new political imaginations in the colonies

during colonial times (Cooper, 2014). Partly in continuity, partly in rupture, when independent India emerged in 1947, its understanding of sovereignty developed around two conceptions: 1) one built around its relation to state territorial sovereignty, and 2) one that emerged from its strategic actions in international fora like the UN, aimed at refashioning the global order, dependent on its worldmaking ambitions. Indian understandings of sovereignty became capacious enough to make space for flexible conceptions that allowed the government to promote global anticolonial objectives (Khan, 2021).

Against this background, this article makes three main arguments:

First, to think about the Indian take on sovereignty insofar as its external orientation is concerned, one must think of its two pillars: territoriality and worldmaking. This conceptualization complicates and nuances the common view that a postcolonial country would think of sovereignty in a monolithic fashion. Instead, it proposes to analyse it in relation to two axes along which conceptions and practices of sovereignty evolve: territorial and worldmaking. A *territorial conception of sovereignty* coexists with a *non-territorial and flexible notion of sovereignty*, one that challenged a simple notion of state sovereignty because it is a function of larger global worldmaking projects.

Second, through this lens, India's relation to sovereignty has only partially, yet critically, changed over time. Modi's emphasis on territorial sovereignty aligns with earlier interpretations that

first crystallized at independence under Nehru's prime ministership. His conception is an amplified version of this original territorial interpretation of sovereignty. However, his worldmaking ambitions have significantly shifted. India still holds worldmaking ambitions, however they are no longer driven by an expansive project of democratization of international society, spurred by a search for global equality.

Third, changes in India's conception of sovereignty were incremental. Under Indira Gandhi and post-1991 liberalization, Indian worldmaking ambitions and their related conception of equality narrowed gradually, reflecting evolving international priorities. India less and less strategically used flexible understandings of sovereignty to pursue systemic equality, as its earlier ambitions had involved.

Several factors may explain this evolution: India's increasing reliance on hard power and recognition to achieve greater equality, the new domestic ideological orientation under Hindutva, and post-Cold War global power dynamics, including the US-China rivalry, which have shaped India's strategic options.

The first section examines how IR theory conceptualizes sovereignty and uses a historical perspective to position India's understanding in relation to these frameworks. Next, I consider how India's conceptions of sovereignty have changed along the axis of its relation to territorial sovereignty and to its worldmaking projects. I chart this evolution across four foreign-policy eras: Nehru's era (1946–1960s), Indira Gand-

hi's leadership (1966–1984), the post–Cold War phase of India's economic rise (1990s–2000s), and the Modi administration (2014–present). Finally, I conclude with reflections on policy implications and a research agenda.

## **An Indian Perspective on Sovereignty**

**M**uch has been written on sovereignty. While mainstream IR dominates the field, post-colonial perspectives have emerged to account for the historical specificity of former colonies. Yet this corrective often reifies India's conception of sovereignty rather than interrogating its contingencies. Historians have allowed us to reconsider India's relationship to sovereignty in more granular and nuanced ways. This section briefly sketches this evolution and situates the argument within this context.

### ***Mainstream IR Theories on Sovereignty***

Research in mainstream IR emphasizes two approaches to sovereignty: it broadly defines it either as a legal convention shaped by a principle of domestic jurisdiction agreed within the international society (see Krasner, 2009) or as a social construct.<sup>7</sup> In the first case, for realists, it is a legal idea. Domestic jurisdiction, which delimits a state's domestic sphere, is constituted through a legal agreement between states (although called into question by human rights debates). Sovereignty can be divided between legal recognition and objective control/independence,

within the broader distinction between an internal and external dimension of sovereignty. From that angle, sovereignty can be analysed in terms of interference and non-interference. In the second case, the political constructivist approach allows us to consider sovereignty not as a fixed but as a variable concept. For instance, one can ask what practices and, on whose behalf, sovereignty is constructed (Biersteker and Weber, 1996: 8). Such an approach raises other questions: how is sovereignty made? "What role do recognition, intervention, and language play in the construction of sovereignty?" (Ibid: 9). From this perspective, sovereignty is not a "timeless principle" underlying the state system, but different normative conceptions that "[link] authority, territory, population (society, nation), and recognition in a unique way and in a particular place (the state)" (Ibid: 3). The state is defined by claims about territory, authority and population. It can be analysed as a "set of ongoing norms and practices" and through constituent elements: autonomy, control, and legitimacy (Caporaso, 2000: 8). This constructivist approach allows analysing how the meaning of sovereignty evolves through time and space as these elements and concepts vary. Through this lens, sovereignty can emerge as the power to decide the exception (as discussed by Carl Schmitt). The sovereign is the one who wields the ultimate authority. This double legal/political approach is helpful to understand a state's behaviour and reflect on the impact of a regime's ideology on how a state understands sovereignty.

However, mainstream IR studies assume that former colonies have understood international norms in an *already constituted* playing field and rarely analyse how these colonies *came to* understand these norms. This is in great part because they think about IR concepts from European historical experiences and assume that, when becoming independent, former colonies merely internalized existing international norms (for a critique and corrective approach, see for instance, Acharya, 2004; Tickner, 2003; Shilliam, 2011). Mainstream IR's Eurocentrism limits the analytical scope of studies on sovereignty by obscuring how historical processes have shaped formerly colonized states' conceptions and exercise of sovereignty.

### ***Postcolonial Sovereignty***

At first sight, studies on postcolonial sovereignty, revolving around the argument that the emergence of modern nation-states after colonialism shaped the character of postcolonial sovereignty, remedy this problem of ahistorical Eurocentrism. According to that perspective, a distinct postcolonial understanding and experience of sovereignty emerged in the newly decolonized state due to the impact of colonialism. As a result of this colonial past, states like India and China would arguably have a strict (Westphalian) understanding of the principle of sovereignty. It is also recognized that, in practice, their relation to the principle of sovereignty has been more ambiguous.<sup>8</sup> Yet critics have tended to characterize India as a "sovereignty hawk" (with a negative connotation), referring to its support for

a strong sovereignty principle, non-interference and non-intervention in a state's territory and its internal affairs.<sup>9</sup> This expression has been used to characterize India's cautious attitude vis-à-vis international interventions and the use of military force (Chaudhuri, 2014: 262), and its reluctant attitude towards democracy/human rights promotion (Ganguly and Sridharan, 2013).

India's strict attitude to sovereignty has been explained by it being a post-colonial state and by its territorial issues with China (a disputed border) and Pakistan (the status of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir), which themselves are consequences of the decolonization process. According to the conventional narrative, India inclines to be protective of state sovereignty in multilateral settings and against foreign intervention in internal matters, in particular due to the unresolved and controversial problem of Kashmir, at the UN since 1947–8. Nehru referred the case to the Security Council, which internationalized ever since, to India's chagrin. To many scholars, this diplomatic setback would explain not only India's strong support for the principle of non-intervention but also a certain aloofness and ambivalence in dealing with issues at the multilateral level of the UN, marking a change in India's relationship with sovereignty in relation to the UN (Bajpai, 2013; Sreenivasan, 2009: 476).<sup>10</sup> For instance, Kanti Bajpai argues that India's ambivalence towards multilateralism stems from "its historical experience with multilateral institutions" and "other third-party interventions on issues that affect its interests"

(Bajpai, 2013: 115). C. Raja Mohan links the “bitter experience” of Kashmir with India’s attitude of “[rejecting] all multi-lateral attempts at increasing the power of the UN and other bodies vis-à-vis the state” (Raja Mohan, 2010: 136).

The debate on India’s relation to sovereignty overlaps with the debate of whether India moved from a stance of idealism to *realpolitik*, as several authors place the Kashmir issue within this larger narrative. According to the latter, multilateralism and idealism informed India’s decision to approach the UN to solve the Kashmir problem and characterized early Indian foreign policy. The story goes that, after the setback, India relinquished multilateralism and idealism and instead turned to bilateralism and realism. The Indian leadership, it was argued, was led to reverse its attitude after Nehru realized that the UN was in reality “an institution of power politics, not an impartial police force” (Chellaney, 1999: 545).<sup>11</sup> Other turning points would be the 1962 Sino-Indian war, Nehru’s death in 1964, and India’s isolation after it intervened in East Pakistan in 1971. Realism would have followed a period of idealism and entail a new relation to sovereignty, characterized chiefly by a greater emphasis on territorial sovereignty.

Historians have dismantled this realist-idealist dichotomy, recast Nehruvian foreign policy in strategic terms (see, for instance, Raghavan 2010), and demonstrated that India actively pushed for third-party role in many issues, such as apartheid. Yet the conventional narrative on sovereignty has

remained mostly in place. Crucially, even this narrative remains thinly historicized and confines India to an overly simplistic, archetype. What is in effect a form of historical amnesia serves to veil the complexity of Indian views on sovereignty and, in doing so, distorts our understanding of India’s role internationally. India’s relation to sovereignty needs to be understood historically. Against this backdrop, I briefly demonstrate how new historiographical work on India’s sovereignty during decolonization has revised this limited view and pushed the boundaries of studies on sovereignty.

## **Sovereignty under Colonial Rule**

**A**s positivist international law emerged in the nineteenth century, European jurists defined sovereignty as absolute control over a territory. This territorial interpretation of sovereignty, termed “Westphalian,” implied non-intervention from other states.<sup>12</sup> Once European powers’ political and economic dominance expanded, it became a recognized international norm (Anghie, 2006: 746). However, while European jurists recognized the norm of sovereignty as the structuring norm of an international society and a universal template, they did not accord the recognition of sovereignty to non-European polities and societies. The close connection drawn by jurists between sovereignty, the standard of civilization, and the idea of a society of states instead entrenched a global system of structural inequality between

European and non-European polities.<sup>13</sup> Sovereignty became a reference for non-European people, who only experienced its negation. Around that tension was built a hierarchical international system and the justification of colonialism.

Instead, in colonial India, British India and the princely states became a ground for ideas and practices of *layered and divided* sovereignty, rather than Westphalian sovereignty. At the imperial level, British colonial practices adapted this international template to establish India's subordinate status. Simultaneously, historians have shown that Indian nationalists and other political actors wrestled with the political potential and limits of these colonial practices to articulate and promote their own conceptions of sovereignty.<sup>14</sup> Their conception was not fixed but changed over time. Varied anticolonial visions emerged on the terrain of late imperial politics (see Bayly, 2017; Guyot-Réchar and Leake, 2023; Khan, 2022), which did not necessarily imagine the future in the form of the nation-state. Those varied visions became paths not taken, yet retrieving them proves that the imagination of "the international" in the colonies was much more creative and diverse during the empires to states transition than what mainstream IR assumes. Other thinkers in Africa and the Caribbean also imagined sovereignty in new ways that would allow them to promote a more equal future, which they saw as part of fulfilling the promise of sovereignty (Cooper, 2014; Getachew, 2019; Wilder 2015).

As historians have pointed out, after independence, Nehruvian India further developed a more complex conception of sovereignty than what is usually acknowledged in IR. Nehru was central (though not alone) in its formulation. Scholars remain divided about which kind of world configuration Nehru desired, how conceptually innovative he was, and to what extent he wanted to challenge the state system.<sup>15</sup> However, it has been argued that he developed visions of a post-sovereign world order through the UN (Bhagavan, 2012; Chacko, 2011), beyond the fact that he talked about "One World," world government, and world federation. At the same time, he did not shy away from using force to assert the power of the state over other political logics, illustrating a gap between what he urged internationally and his actual policy, and leading scholars to question whether he actually "sought to erode the sovereignty of the state" (Raghavan, 2014: 152). Ultimately, historical contingencies shaped Nehruvian India's choices and postures over sovereignty and its relation to domestic and international issues (see Mishra, 2021; Khan, 2020, 2021; Khan and Sherman, 2022).

The following section focuses on four historical cases to examine how the Indian conception and practice of sovereignty has evolved after independence, along the axes of India's contingent relation to territoriality and its worldmaking ambitions.

## India's Conceptions of Territorial Sovereignty and Worldmaking Ambitions

For analytical purposes, this article divides Indian foreign policy into four broad eras: the Nehruvian government (1947–1964), Indira Gandhi's government (1966–1984), the post-economic liberalization governments (1991–2014), and Narendra Modi's government (2014–present). It considers them in turn.

In August 1947, Partition fractured colonial India and gave birth to India and Pakistan. The two states emerged before the princely states' status was settled. India quickly sought their accession to the Union, but several states resisted. In these cases, India resorted to military force. What became ongoing nation- and state-building projects, and their coexistence with larger global projects of order refashioning, marked the rise of a double understanding of sovereignty in the Nehruvian government. Nehruvian policy set up an original and lasting tension between, on the one hand, a *territorial conception of sovereignty* driven by state-making and, on the other hand, a *non-territorial and flexible notion of sovereignty*, one that challenged a simple notion of state sovereignty because it was a function of larger global worldmaking projects (see Khan, forthcoming). Those understandings came to coexist—nascent independent India expressed a state logic, but it also challenged the norm of sovereignty internationally at several crucial moments by striving for a more equal global order (see Khan, 2020, 2021).

With state-making, new practices of sovereignty arose, anchored in territoriality. The new Indian government consolidated the state by centralizing power and erasing the competing sovereignties of reluctant princely states by force. In September 1948, it annexed the princely state of Hyderabad, whose ruler, the Nizam, had expressed the wish for independence. Earlier, in October 1947, India sent troops to the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir at the request of the Maharaja, who faced a tribal invasion. Pakistan reacted militarily; ultimately, following several wars between India and Pakistan, Kashmir was de facto divided between India and Pakistan at the Line of Control. Both cases illustrate in their own way how the logic of integration backed by the use of force, that is, the primacy of imposed state sovereignty, prevailed over other political logics. India's handling of claims in the Northeast, in which insurgencies were quelled, is another case in point—the use of force by the state became a way to integrate these regions but also to assert state sovereignty (see Leake, 2016). Through these cases, in practice, a narrow territorial understanding of sovereignty emerged, accompanied by official discourses on non-intervention and legitimacy of territorial control, amid “cartographic anxieties” (to use Sankaran Krishna's expression in Krishna, 1994). According to this logic, Atul Mishra (2021) argues that, when statehood emerged after Partition, the pursuit of sovereignty became an end in itself.

Yet decolonization was as much about worldmaking ambitions (see

Getachew, 2019; Younis, 2022; Khan, 2021). Older global anticolonial objectives that had formed before independence did not disappear in 1947. Thus, for the Nehruvian government, the question and stakes of sovereignty extended beyond its territorial dimension of getting and consolidating a state. It also saw the decolonization project as a creative search for a new world order, against the hierarchies that characterized it from the time of empire. Even after the Kashmir setback at the UN, Nehru “did not give up on assertive multilateralism” (Bingham Kennedy, 2012: 200). New Delhi remained very active in that forum for at least another decade. Nehru was arguably particularly aware of the power of norms (Raghavan, 2014: 145), and Indian diplomats thus used the UN for various diplomatic goals. The new leadership was also keenly aware that gaining a state did not dismantle a hierarchical order, despite the stated principle of state equality in the UN Charter. Anticolonial leaders knew that sovereignty was not just a transfer of power and the realization of statehood, but rather that achieving it also entailed the transformation of structures of domination and the search for a more inclusive and democratic international order (see Grovogui, 1996; Getachew, 2019; Wilder, 2015). Furthermore, effective sovereignty also included economic sovereignty, which involved state intervention, self-reliance, control over foreign exchange, a socialist element of welfare provision, and a larger restructuration of asymmetric economic power relations.

The dynamic relationship be-

tween the Indian conception of sovereignty and the pursuit of a more equal order is manifest in India’s 1946 UN case against South Africa. In September 1946, as vice-president of the Interim Cabinet, Nehru declared non-racialism a fundamental objective of Indian foreign policy (see Thakur, 2018: 4). That was to be a feature of a new, more equal order. Originally, when the colonial government had brought a case against South Africa, it had argued that treaties agreed with the latter on the treatment of Indian minorities had been broken. However, when nationalist India became independent, Indian diplomats reframed the case and invoked the concept of Human Rights, challenging South Africa’s claim that racial policies were a matter of domestic jurisdiction. This was the first time that the concept of Human Rights, drawn from the UN Charter Preamble (which was not supposed to have any legal value) was mobilized to challenge sovereignty claims (on this case, see Lloyd, 1990; Thakur, 2017; Mazower, 2009; Khan, 2020). In this context, the Indian delegation argued that the existence of Human Rights limited the scope of the principle of domestic jurisdiction codified in Article 2(7) of the UN Charter. Beyond helping the Indian diaspora, this rethinking of sovereignty enabled India’s leadership in shaping a post-imperial normative order, as the government broadened its claim to argue that India was fighting on the basis of universalist principles on behalf of all Asians —a larger Third World (Khan, 2020). It opposed not only racial discrimination against Indian populations in South Africa but

also more generally the racial hierarchy of empire. In subsequent debates at the UN Human Rights Commission, the Indian delegate promoted a strong Human Rights regime by supporting a UN mechanism to implement and enforce these rights, their binding character, and a right of petition by individuals and organizations (Khan, 2020; for a larger context, see Burke, 2010). Despite its ambiguities, India's intervention at the UN opened up a field for normative contestation and transformed the UN "into a key forum for anti-colonialism" where the norm of sovereignty would be challenged (Mazower 2009, 152).

Between 1947–49, India also proposed a new basis of engagement with the Commonwealth that involved a flexible understanding of sovereignty. It proposed a non-national Commonwealth citizenship that would have granted reciprocal rights (and thus protection) to Commonwealth citizens in the Commonwealth (Khan, 2021). Thus, New Delhi was willing to relinquish exclusive national citizenship to advance the welfare of all citizens, including its diaspora, within a reformed Commonwealth.

Thus, worldmaking aspirations and state-building were in tension from independent India's very inception. The initiatives cited above show how the desire for greater racial equality shaped Indian views on sovereignty. This expansive conception of equality—not only for states but also for individuals—entailed promoting transnational rights and strong international organizations. The search for a more equal order and

the attempt to shape the norm of sovereignty internationally were linked (Khan, 2020; 2021). Indian diplomats strategically adapted their understanding of sovereignty to pursue a political agenda that derived from a larger anti-imperialist and democratic project of decolonization. This is not to say that India's policy was fully coherent or successful. The Nehruvian project of democratization internally had substantial limitations; some hierarchies were reinstated at home (see Dasgupta, 2024; Sherman, 2022). Externally, diplomats arguing against global hierarchies did not prevent casteist elitism in the diplomatic corps, leading Sankaran Krishna (2025) to talk about "vacuous diversity" (see also Thakur, 2016).

### ***Under Indira Gandhi (1966–1977, 1980–84)***

Under Indira Gandhi's prime ministership, India's relation to sovereignty underwent some changes within an overall trajectory of broad continuity with Nehruvian policy. On the front of territorial sovereignty, there was a marked continuity in the primacy of a logic of territorial integration. Indira Gandhi further consolidated Kashmir's integration into the Indian Union, and it was under her ministership that Sikkim was annexed in 1975 (see Datta-Ray, 1984). India thus continued to build and consolidate its territorial sovereignty by force, while becoming more interventionist in its neighbourhood. Its intervention in West Pakistan during the Bangladesh liberation war in 1971 is a case in point (see Raghavan, 2013). The tension between a discourse

of non-interference and actual practice increased.

As regards worldmaking, some Nehruvian ambitions survived, and they equally involved a more flexible relation to sovereignty. Indira Gandhi's left-wing, secular populism did not contradict the core Nehruvian foreign policy tenets inherited from the decolonization struggle. She maintained the broader goal of restructuring the global system in favor of more equality for Third World countries; kept an anti-imperialist rhetoric; presented herself as the spokesperson of the Third World; and pursued non-alignment understood at minima as a search for autonomy and independence. Gandhi's commitment to Third World development was reflected in India's instrumental role in establishing the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), first held in 1964, and in the adoption of the Declaration on the Establishment of the New International Economic Order (NIEO) in May 1974 (Lall, 440). In the 1970s, she was among the leaders pushing for the last large movement to systemically restructure the international economic order. As Nils Gilman (2015: 1) notes, sponsoring the NIEO aimed at redirecting more benefits of transnational economic integration towards developing nations and thus "[complete] the geopolitical process of decolonization and [create] a democratic global order of truly sovereign states." That project aimed at "[reversing] the effects of colonialism" (Anghie, 2005: 199). Adom Getachew (2019:12) describes the NIEO as the "most ambitious project of

worldmaking" of anticolonial nationalists. As a key advocate, Gandhi (1983) highlighted at the UN that "the present world economic order [was] based on domination and inequality" and voiced the collective aspirations of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) countries by advocating "a new international economic order based on equality and justice." On the one hand, these proposals were an attempt from the Third World to use their sovereignty for a political project, to reassert control over national resources, and preserve "hard won sovereignty" (Moyn, 2018: 91). On the other hand, however, they also involved reimagining the meaning of sovereignty at a global level, since they involved "a radical recasting of sovereign equality as a demand for an equitable share of the world's wealth" (Getachew, 2019:12) as well as a collective conception of sovereignty (Anghie, 2005: 199), tied to redistribution and social justice. In the 1980s, Indira Gandhi sought to revive the NAM, at the 1983 New Delhi Summit. The Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation signed in 1971 had undermined India's commitment to non-alignment. Her chairmanship was an "opportunity [for her] to restore Indian leadership among Third World nations as well as her personal prestige" (CIA, 1983). She indeed presented herself as the "legitimate" spokesperson of the Third World, and supported the principles of decolonization, Third World development, and disarmament (Sawkar, 2022: 367-68, 371).

However, the Cold War and domestic dynamics had been changing. In response, Indira Gandhi advocated

flexibility and added the new ambiguous concepts of “security,” “territory,” “power,” and “prestige” to her diplomatic vocabulary (Mansingh, 1984: 26, cited in Sawkar, 2022). Emerged more clearly with her two other notions of sovereignty. The first one was close to the definition of sovereignty as the power of deciding the exception. Domestically, she declared the Emergency, transforming the country into an authoritarian state from 1975 to 1977. The Emergency suspended constitutional rights, curtailed civil liberties, and led to cracking down on dissent and political opposition as well as censoring the press (see Prakash, 2019; Jaffrelot and Anil, 2020; Raghavan, 2025). As Mansingh (2015) notes, “Indira Gandhi saw power in personal, or dynastic, terms and not institutional ones.”<sup>16</sup> This authoritarian turn laid the groundwork for the “strong leader” model that was subsequently further developed by Narendra Modi. The second notion of sovereignty that emerged equated sovereignty with hard power and personal power. Her foreign policy displayed power overtly and built legitimacy through “personal branding” (Sawkar, 2022: 363-364). India carried out its first (underground) nuclear test in 1974. While those tests were presented as a “Peaceful Nuclear Explosion” and India remained pro-global disarmament, they signalled a new valorization of hard power in Indian foreign policy. Military nuclear power was also a symbol of the power of deciding on the exception, insofar as Indira Gandhi refused to sign the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, turning India into a nuclear pariah.

### ***Post-liberalization India of the 1990s–2000s (1991–2014)***

In 1991, the Indian government borrowed from the International Monetary Fund after a grave balance of payment crisis and embarked on major economic reforms that liberalized its economy and opened it up to foreign investments. Finance Minister Manmohan Singh “[overhauled] the country’s trade and exchange rate regime—virtually overnight.” Foreign exchange controls were relaxed, restrictions on imports were reduced, and India adopted a flexible exchange rate regime (Irwin, 2025: 6). This shift away from the Nehruvian developmental model of centralized planning transformed India’s foreign policy, just as major geopolitical reconfigurations brought about by the collapse of the Soviet Union were under way. The opposition—the BJP and the Communist Party—criticized the “acceptance of IMF conditionalities,”<sup>17</sup> and expressed the fear that India would lose its national sovereignty. While the Congress leadership responded that it would protect Indian economic sovereignty (Irwin, 2025; Singh, 2005: 7-8), at that moment, India’s conception of economic sovereignty and its relation to the state transformed. The government came to think of economic sovereignty in the terms of economic liberalization. For instance, after refusing it for decades, it signed treaties that delegated sovereignty to international law on the protection of foreign investments (Ranjan, 2024). The treaties explicitly limited state authority by allowing investors to bring cases against it before international arbitration tribunals. Ac-

cepting them meant a “significant departure from the previous era when [India] zealously tried to preserve its sovereignty with respect to protecting foreign investment” (Ibid: 124).

However, while New Delhi committed itself to liberalization, the primacy of the territorial sovereignty logic remained paramount. In that sense, its relation to sovereignty stayed on its earlier trajectory. The government kept its territorial claims and established a stronger administrative and political control over the state of Jammu and Kashmir, which involved granting exceptional powers to the military. AFS-PA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act), which grants “sweeping” special powers and provides “virtual immunity from prosecution” to the army, was imposed in 1990 (see Amnesty International India, 2013). At the same time, the early 1990s saw the beginning of the militancy—Kashmir was arguably less integrated than before.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, the notion of Indian sovereignty as an expression of hard power and independence found deeper anchorage in the nuclear tests of May 1998, through which India declared itself a nuclear state. The BJP, which had won the elections that year, had made becoming a nuclear power a key part of its election campaign. It “prioritized bequeathing to India a full-fledged nuclear capability” (Fair, 2005: 25). As an analyst observed in 1998, “[t]he nuclear ambition ... has always been part of the BJP’s philosophy of negotiating with the outside world from a position of strength” (Malik, 1998: 201). This am-

bition also dovetailed with its discourse about a “strong India.” The new nuclear tests signalled India’s greater assertiveness in deploying hard power and underscored its aspiration to be recognized as a great power on the global stage, at a higher status in the hierarchy of states. Within India’s scientific and political circles, some argued that a robust nuclear capability might even pave the way for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council (Fair, 2005: 24). That was regardless of the international condemnation that it triggered.

On the worldmaking front, India’s ambitions narrowed after the Cold War. The worldmaking projects linked to its postcolonial identity evolved into more modest, targeted goals. This may partly be because it now acted within a capitalist system that, in a unipolar order, it had integrated and therefore no longer challenged. By then, the NIEO proposals had failed. Most developing countries of the Global South (which overlapped with the older Third World) had been weakened by the economic crises of the 1980s, and many had been hit by severe debt crises (Narlikar, 2006: 1026). New Delhi remained committed to promoting their interests, but its efforts mainly focused on global trade and climate negotiations. It had been an influential leader in advocating for the Global South at the GATT. During negotiations rounds at its successor, the World Trade Organization, its focus on issues of agricultural subsidies and intellectual property rights highlighted its continued engagement in promoting greater equality globally. Narlikar (2006: 1006, 1026) notes that, in these

negotiations, India sometimes supported demands of redistribution and equity that had little economic value to it or entailed costs, while as a more powerful actor it could have used a discourse of power. The country remained a significant voice for developing nations within multilateral negotiations. Furthermore, by presenting itself as a representative of the Global South, New Delhi continued to claim its identity as a defender of the interests of the developing world. However, its objectives had narrowed and were less systemically challenging than what the NIEO proposals had demanded in the past—they were no longer about distributive justice and radical transformation.

Another result of India's economic liberalization, its dramatic economic growth in the 2000s, further impacted New Delhi's relation to worldmaking and sovereignty. Based on this growth, India claimed the status of rising power. The group of the BRICS, in which it got involved, represented a new form of contestation of Eurocentric global governance by the Global South, but it also further problematized India's dual identity as both an aspiring great power and the advocate for the developing world. At the UN, New Delhi turned to narrower priorities, notably UN reform to get a permanent seat at the UNSC. The claim for a seat at the UNSC, along with the 1998 nuclear tests, were effort to assert itself as a rising power at an individual level, even though symbolically it could have collective resonance. Politically too, worldmaking ambitions further narrowed in terms of the scope of potential change, and the recogni-

tion of sovereignty as individual status became a more pronounced objective.

Lastly, it is worth noting that, over those years, India resisted other worldmaking projects that it perceived as reinforcing hierarchies, and that implied renegotiating the norm of sovereignty. The 2000s saw the emergence of a global debate on the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P), which proposed to make state sovereignty conditional to the respect of Human Rights. In 2011, during debates on a possible intervention in Libya, India's stance on sovereignty slightly evolved,<sup>19</sup> but finally retracted to its traditional stance on the primacy of state sovereignty.<sup>20</sup> It ultimately resisted the reconfiguration of sovereignty proposed by the United States and its allies and re-committed to its old territorial interpretation of sovereignty, in line with the Nehruvian conception.

Overall, during that period, there was a discernible continuity in India's core commitment to an old understanding and discourse of territorial sovereignty as well as of its worldmaking project of securing the interests of the Global South. However, its ambitions evolved in the post-liberalization context in a way that involved fewer systemic demands and less radical notions of equality. Therefore, it seems that they less required flexible notions of sovereignty. Notions of sovereignty became more flexible in relation to the private sector, as for instance in the case of treaties protecting foreign investments.

## **Sovereignty in Modi's India (2014– )**

**N**arendra Modi assumed office in 2014 and was re-elected in 2019. Since then, his government has frequently portrayed India as the “Mother of Democracy” and emphasized that it was “the largest democracy in the world” (for an analysis of this discourse, see Chacko and Thakur, 2025). Claims have been made that India is more representative now than in the past (Shaikh, 2024). In 2025, a survey reported that Modi was the “most popular democratic leader” with an approval rating of 75 percent (NDTV, 2025). Nevertheless, the markers of liberal democracy have been fading. To many analysts, India has become an example of the “global democratic recession” (Tudor, 2023). There have been major “setbacks” of political rights and civil liberties in the country since Modi came to power (Repucci and Slipowitz, 2022: 8; Ganguly, 2023) and attempts to legitimize older “authoritarian statist tendencies” (Chacko, 2018, citing Poulantzas, 1980). Ideologically, the Hindu nationalist BJP represents a rupture with the traditionally secular, pluralist, democratic vision of Indian society carried by the Congress since independence and embodied in the Indian constitution. The BJP’s ethno-religious conception of India, centred on the idea that India is a Hindu nation, has de facto challenged the core liberal principle of equal democratic rights for all citizens. The controversial 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which set a religious criterion for citizenship, in

combination with the National Register of Citizens, has created the possibility of “second-rate rate citizens” within the Muslim minority (Goodyear, 2024). Christophe Jaffrelot (2021) terms this configuration, where the majoritarian community defines the nation, an “ethnic democracy.” The government’s support for Hindutva has also fuelled broader violence and discrimination against minorities (Waikar, 2018; Kinvall and Svensson, 2010). Paradoxically, India’s undermining of liberal rights and democratic institutions at home has occurred alongside a warming of relations with the “liberal West,” enhancing its international recognition as a democratic power (Sullivan de Estrada, 2023: 451). This raises critical questions: How does Hindutva change India’s relationship to sovereignty and how has it affected its global role? This section argues that Hindutva has reshaped India’s conception and practice of sovereignty, linking domestic ethno-nationalism to selective international assertiveness and a constrained vision of global equality. Regional pressures have also affected India’s relation to territorial sovereignty.

### ***A More Assertive Territorial Sovereignty Toward Pakistan***

Under the Modi government, India’s discourse on sovereignty has been elevated, amplifying the traditional Nehruvian inflexible conception of territorial sovereignty. However, it has been operationalized selectively, and its meaning has been reshaped unevenly. The rhetoric is assertive toward Pakistan, but cautious toward China. Concomitantly, India has become more interventionist

toward the diaspora, that is, it has become more flexible with the norm of sovereignty with some allied countries.

Hindu nationalists have a more assertive stance on national sovereignty, with greater emphasis on territorial integrity and territorial control. This stance goes hand-in-hand with valuing the use of hard/military power, and is in tune with the Hindu nationalist idea of a “muscular” India, which Modi embodies with the image of a strongman.<sup>21</sup> In practice, this more assertive stance on sovereignty has manifested itself in relation to the state of Jammu and Kashmir, that is, also in relation to Pakistan. Under Modi, sovereignty has been invoked, performed, and exercised toward Pakistan with new intensity. First, India has shown an increased willingness to use hard power and claim sovereignty over the entire contested region. In February 2019, New Delhi decided to retaliate against Pakistan after a deadly terror attack in Pulwama, leading commentators to fear a potential nuclear war (Yusuf 2019). Second, in August 2019, the Government of India revoked the special status and autonomy of the state of Jammu and Kashmir by abrogating Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, downgrading it to two Union Territories directly ruled from the center, and imposing an unprecedented months-long shutdown, including a communications blackout. In May 2025, following an attack by militants in Pahalgam, India retaliated even more strongly by launching an attack on Pakistan. Operation Sindoor escalated tensions to new heights.

The Hindu nationalist more assertive stance on sovereignty has also manifested through what Atul Mishra (2021b) calls India’s new posture of “hard sovereignty.” He notes that, since 2019, after the BJP-led government changed the status of Jammu and Kashmir and the parliament passed the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, India’s message has been that “outsiders have no stake in India’s internal affairs, especially as it undergoes profound and rapid changes. India’s stance on non-interference in the domestic affairs of states has become more stringent. Overall, the Modi government has reacted increasingly strongly to perceived threats to sovereignty coming from Pakistan and has deployed a corresponding hard-sovereignty discourse.

### ***Ambiguity Toward China***

In contrast, India’s response to China has been more ambiguous. In this case, the generally strong Indian discourse on territorial sovereignty has not always been followed by actions. When June 2020, the Indian Armed Forces and the People’s Liberation Army of the PRC clashed at the Sino-Indian border in the Galwan Valley in eastern Ladakh, along the Line of Actual Control, the Indian Army reported that 20 Indian soldiers had been killed in the encounter (Haider et al., 2020). This constituted a major national security crisis with high domestic salience: a direct threat to territory at the contested border that India considers its own. Indian sovereignty was under threat through Chinese actions. Yet, after the Galwan Valley clash, Modi’s initial public response advanced

a narrative of denial around the question of territorial loss. This was noted and criticized by the Indian media, the political opposition, and prominent diplomats as “[endorsing] the Chinese position” and surrendering territory (Outlook, 2020).

Subsequently, the government remained silent on the violation of India’s territorial integrity (Singh, 2022a), despite ongoing clashes and China’s continued infrastructure building and occupation within Indian territory. It provided little information on the border situation and the circumstances that led to the Galwan clashes (see Joshi, 2022). It “studiously avoided referring to the region when Chinese troops imposed their biggest blockade on the Indian side of the LAC” (Ibid). By December 2022, not only had China not withdrawn its troops, but fears were expressed among Indian military veterans and experts that it planned “to create a new status quo on the frontier by claiming ownership of territory they have occupied” (Siddiqui, 2022; see also Singh, 2022b). According to reports, it is estimated that, since May 2020, China has taken over and has occupied “close to 1,000 sq km of India-claimed territory in eastern Ladakh” by blockading areas that Indian troops patrolled until 2020 (Siddiqui, 2022; Singh, 2022b). India responded by increasing its defence budget in 2022 and 2023 and investing at the border (Kumar, 2023), and showed willingness to deepen its security and defence cooperation with its Indo-Pacific partners. It thereby showed its will to materially balance China. However, in a context of strong

power asymmetry, India has tended to carefully signal via implicature towards China (Khan and Sullivan de Estrada, 2024) and de facto lost control of some territory. The extent of Chinese inroads was not acknowledged, and the sovereignty vocabulary was not used, preventing sovereignty from emerging as an issue to address.

In October 2024, India and China concluded a disengagement agreement leading China to withdraw its forces to pre-2020 positions, formally ending the four-year military standoff. However, it remains that India’s relationship to sovereignty regarding China seems to be changing. While earlier sovereignty challenges were treated more uniformly, since Galwan there has been a marked discrepancy between the strong reaction to Pakistan and the more ambiguous one toward China—both in speech and action. This seems to suggest that, under Modi, the power differential with a given state influences if sovereignty features in Indian discourse.<sup>22</sup> Paradoxically, despite Hindu nationalism’s avowed commitment to territorial integrity,<sup>23</sup> regional constraints appear to have reshaped the traditionally strict discourse on sovereignty, producing a more pragmatic, cautious, approach.

### ***Interference Abroad and the Diaspora***

A further shift on sovereignty concerns India’s growing interference in other states through engagement with its diaspora. According to Canadian intelligence services, New Delhi perpetrated foreign interference and transnational repression “plays a central role in India’s

activity in Canada” (Reuters, 2025). This statement comes after Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau accused the Indian government of being involved in the killing of a Sikh political activist on Canadian territory in 2023. The US Department of State (2023: 16) similarly noted reports of the Indian government being “engaged in transnational repression against ... members of diaspora populations.” Thus, India seems to signal that a more powerful state can prioritize its own perceived interests over strict adherence to the norm of sovereignty, even when this encroaches on the sovereignty of other countries—including partners

### ***Hindu Nationalist Worldmaking Aspirations***

Modi and the Hindu nationalist volunteer movement Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), to which the BJP is closely connected, have long articulated world-making projects rooted in Hindu right-wing narratives developed in the early twentieth century (Jaffrelot, 1996; Bhatt and Mukta, 2000). These projects offer a clear vision of what the international order should look like. Arguably, the search for a more equal order no longer involves flexible notions of sovereignty for greater overall equality, partly because of the hierarchical assumptions of Hindu nationalism and its narrower conception of power.

On one level, the Hindu nationalist project resembles its Nehruvian predecessor. Both seek a more equal international order, pursue recognition for India as a major power, and affirm India’s exceptionalism. Modi similarly ad-

vances the belief that India has a moral and spiritual role to play in global affairs, encapsulated in the notion of “Vishwa guru” (world teacher), now common in official discourse. Kate Sullivan de Estrada (2023, 436) convincingly argues that it represents a fight for recognition in a persistently hierarchical world, with old roots: a “quest for superior social positioning ... to remake the global social hierarchy of civilizations and states.” As she notes, both “post-independence Nehruvianism and Hindu nationalism” are “grounded on a belief in India’s spiritual superiority, juxtaposed against the spiritual impoverishment of modern Western civilization, and imagine a moral community rooted in tradition at the level of the nation. Each expresses a sense of mission: an Indian duty to serve as the moral and spiritual leader of humanity” (Ibid, 448).

However, the underlying philosophies diverge sharply. Hindutva’s ethno-nationalist foundations contrast with the internationalist nationalism of the 1950s, which was tied to anti-colonial egalitarianism. Domestically, Hindu nationalism undermines liberal principles of political equality, raising the question of how a state that circumscribes equality at home can meaningfully promote it abroad. Moreover, Hindu nationalism shares aspects of cultural nationalism with contemporary white nationalist movements, particularly in its treatment of racial and religious difference (Ashutosh 2021). Its vision of decolonization is hierarchical rather than egalitarian. Indeed, the discourse of “decolonization” has frequently been deployed to de-

flect criticism and legitimize Hindutva projects—from anti-conversion laws to historical revisionism—which reinforce hierarchies rather than embody the egalitarian ethos of decolonization (Pani 2024).

These limits are also evident in India's attempt to position itself as the leader of the "Global South." The term re-emerged on the international scene after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine (Russell, 2023). As New Delhi seeks to maintain a multipolar order amid US–China rivalry, it has new incentives to speak on behalf of the Global South, though its close partnership with the U.S. (until recently at least) limited the extent of its ambitions for structural changes. New Delhi started to openly revive the rhetoric of India's Global South leadership in 2022, and especially in 2023, during the G20 and the three Voice of Global South Summits that it organized around it. India expressed its ambition to be the spokesperson for the Global South: Modi stressed India's intention to shape its G20 priorities in consultation with "fellow-travellers in the global South, whose voice often goes unheard" (PIB, 2022). External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar argued that it was the duty of India to serve as "the voice of the global South" (NDTV, 2023). In July 2023, Modi argued that "[he saw] India being that strong shoulder that if the Global South has to make that high jump, India can be that shoulder to propel it ahead" (*India Today*, 2023). India's claim was reinforced by the G20 New Delhi Declaration, which admitted the African Union as a permanent member.

Yet this leadership seems to primarily serve to elevate India's status—especially its bid for a permanent UN Security Council seat—rather than to promote deeper equality across the international system. Significantly, India has made the link between being a voice of the Global South and getting a seat at the Security Council. Furthermore, India wishes to gain greater recognition and status (as in the past), but without the aspiration for a more expansive and deeper notion of equality in international society. Its current worldmaking project does not extend to advocating radical systemic changes that would redefine sovereignty globally for the sake of greater equality at an individual and collective level.

Current initiatives for the Global South remain quite modest and are no longer anti-systemic. India's South-South cooperation now seeks to find accommodation within the US-led order in the Indo-Pacific region, while advocating greater multipolarity and a more inclusive vision (Blarel et al., 2025). Equality seems to mean first and foremost the inclusion and recognition of other powers at the top of different hierarchies, as exemplified by the G20.

### ***Civilizational Discourse: From Nehru to Modi***

Nehruvian and Hindu nationalist understandings of civilization are also starkly different. During decolonization, Nehru saw India as a civilizational state and wrote about Indian civilization in *Glimpses of World History* (1934) and *The Discovery of India* (1946). His discourse emerged in a context in which

Christian and enlightenment-based conceptions of civilization had served as the criterion for claiming sovereignty since the nineteenth century (Duara, 2001: 100). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after WWI, the idea of multiple civilizations gained prominence due to changing geopolitical circumstances and the rise of national movements. Duara notes that “ascendant national movements in the colonies [...] sought to utilize the notion of civilization precisely to counter Western definitions. The idea of civilization as warranting sovereign status circulated the world as different societies claimed this status” (Duara, 2004: 3). Like other civilizational discourses, the Nehruvian version thus went hand in hand with nationalism. These civilizational narratives, for India and China, “justified the leadership of each to the decolonizing world” (Dura, 2010: 23). They were also part of a strategy to regain a due place in the international sphere. These civilization discourses challenged the West by valorizing other values (Duara, 2010: 23). Nehruvian India put forward its “civilizational pacifism,” its civilizational ideals of “peace, contentment, solidarity, and world unity, as against the Western propensity to fight wars and cause destruction” (Thakur, 2018: 12). Nehru’s civilizational discourse was compatible with a liberal order and a larger anticolonial democratic ethos. Older claims of cultural influence in Southeast Asia and of Greater India, which could have led to claims over neighbouring countries, were relegated to the background, as Nehru distanced himself from them after independence.

In contrast, the Modi government’s rhetoric has been underpinned by a civilizational Hindu discourse. Commenting on the Hindu nationalist vision of India’s place in the international system, Rahul Sagar (2009: 801) notes that “Hindu nationalists want Indians to act as muscular defenders of Hindu civilization.” Saleem et al. (2022) observe that “Hindutva is currently a civilizational populist narrative that is the force behind India’s “saffron tide.” This ideology leads to a different relation to worldmaking and sovereignty internationally. Unlike Nehru, Modi defends the existence of a civilizational state different from (and against) the liberal order. This vision is not based on a universalist rights-based vision in which equality has an expansive meaning. It rather leads to arguing that universal standards like Human Rights should have a caveat for India, rather than be universally applied. Its opposition to the West leads it to argue for exceptions for India rather than for refashioning the international order at large.

The civilizational discourse of a Hindu India both undermines the principle of popular sovereignty as rights in the country, while implicitly challenging the territorial sovereignty of other states (on this, see Singh 2022a). The civilizational understanding of India has been used to justify either the exclusion of non-Hindu minorities from the Indian polity or to claim territories outside of national boundaries in the neighbourhood. Hindu nationalist discourses on an undivided India or “Akhand Bharat,” an imagined civilizational geography, echo older ex-

pansionist narratives of a greater India from the early 20th century, which had been rejected by independent India.

In sum, under Modi, India's sovereignty discourse and practice has been reshaped unevenly, depending on power asymmetries, notably regional power asymmetries, the civilizational ideas of Hindutva, and authoritarian trends. Whereas, under Nehru, sovereignty claims were linked to a universalist, egalitarian project rooted in anti-colonialism, under Hindutva, sovereignty is framed as the prerogative of a civilizational state entitled to exceptions, rather than a shared condition whose expansion benefits all. Not having a strong domestic liberal democratic ideal makes it difficult to deploy a worldview based on a broader egalitarian vision. India has rather continued to favour the realization of equality through accumulating hard power and individual recognition. Global structural constraints also shape this trajectory, though a full analysis of these is beyond this article's scope.

## **Conclusion**

**T**his article has argued that India does not have a simple and by default strict postcolonial conception of sovereignty, to be opposed to the supposed flexibility of Western powers. Rather, its understanding of sovereignty since independence can be analysed along two axes: a non-flexible territorial understanding, and a flexible understanding dependent on the nature of Indian worldmaking projects.

During the Nehruvian era emerged a territorial conception along with anticolonial worldmaking ambition that involved a strategic use of the norm of sovereignty for the sake of greater democratization and equality in the international society. The original territorial understanding of sovereignty remained throughout the century and, in fact, amplified and culminated under Narendra Modi's prime ministership. However, Indian worldmaking ambitions have narrowed. This narrowing, in turn, has changed India's relation to sovereignty. The Hindu nationalist ideology of the Modi government has played a role in unevenly changing India's conception and practice of sovereignty. In particular, the Hindu nationalist version to rights and democracy does not articulate the wider and deeper understanding of equality that underpinned the drive behind and the decolonization worldmaking project. It does not seek to use the norm of sovereignty strategically and shape it to pursue such objective. Yet Indian conception and practice of sovereignty have also changed incrementally. Evolutions are observable under the governments of Indira Gandhi and the post-liberalization governments of the 1990s–2000s—including, arguably, the narrowing of worldmaking ambitions. Further research should analyse the evolution of registers of equality in these governments, for while they used the same term, its meaning substantially evolved.

## Notes

- 1 As US former deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott described India.
- 2 On Hindu nationalism, see Gould (2004), Hansen (1999), Jaffrelot (1996; ed. 2007), Hansen and Srirupa Roy (eds. 2022).
- 3 For instance, the use of Hindi acronyms (as in SAGAR), and debates on the use of Hindi in the Foreign Service. On multi-alignment, see Hall (2016); Baru (2021).
- 4 Those constraints include economic constraints, still clear today in relation to the BRI.
- 5 I do not focus on economic sovereignty, which is a distinct topic.
- 6 On other hierarchical and reactionary worldmaking visions, see for instance Dilawri (2023); Banerjee et al., forthcoming.
- 7 Liberals have tended to focus on debates on intervention and democracy promotion. This is less significant here for my argument.
- 8 See for instance India's interventions in its neighbourhood, or its attitude towards the Ukraine-Russia war.
- 9 One of its first uses in connection to India can be traced back to 2007, when the then United States Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott commented on the US-India negotiations over a deal on nuclear cooperation.
- 10 American aid to Pakistan and the latter's signing of military pacts also pushed Nehru to emphasize non-intervention.
- 11 For an overview of this debate, see Chacko (2012: 1–3).
- 12 On the role of these jurists, see Koskenniemi (2004).
- 13 On the hierarchical dimension of the international system, see Hobson and Sharman (2005); for the argument that this system was a regression vis-à-vis past practices in which European and non-European states had treated each other as equals, and a critique of the universalism of Western international law, see the work of C.H. Alexandrowicz, in Armitage and Pitts (2017).
- 14 New historical works on the concept and practice of sovereignty during colonial times have explored the behaviour of semi-sovereign or subordinate sovereign entities in the British empire, like princely states, how layered sovereignty worked, and the contestation of sovereignty under empire by different Indian actors (Banerjee, 2018; Shankar, 2022; Beverly, 2015). They have also highlighted the role of international law and its language in the construction and claim of sovereignty in South Asia before independence (see for instance Khan, 2017; Saksena, 2023), which continued after independence at the UN and in other fora.
- 15 See also Bhagavan, 2010; Chacko, 2011; Bajpai, 2003; Raghavan, 2010: 2–3.

- 16 He references Sahgal, 1982.
- 17 Bharatiya Janata Party (1991:16). Cited in Singh (2005:7).
- 18 My thanks to Vineet Thakur for mentioning that point.
- 19 India first accepted its principle in the 2005 World Summit Outcome, yet it proved “reluctant” to endorse R2P and its human rights promotion agenda (Destradi, 2017; for details, see Aneja, 2014; Bloomfield, 2015; Choedon, 2017; Jaganathan and Kurtz, 2014; Møller, 2017; Virk, 2013; Hall, 2013).
- 20 The focus of attention was two resolutions passed by the UNSC. The resolution 1970 condemned the use of force by the Libyan regime, imposed sanctions and referred the case to the International Criminal Court. The resolution 1973 was in favour of a military intervention through establishing an immediate ceasefire. It also authorized the establishment of a no-fly zone, called to enforce an arm embargo, decided an asset freeze. Most importantly, it allowed member states to “take all necessary measures,” except occupation, to protect civilians. India voted in favour of the resolution 1970 but abstained on the resolution 1973. It refused to approve it, despite lobbying from Western powers, including the United States (*The Hindu*, 2011). While remaining very cautious, India had first moved in favour of what looked like a shift in foreign policy (Hall, 2013), accepting a referral to the ICC. But it fell back to condemning violence and supporting state sovereignty. It remained reluctant to adhere to a new post-Cold War narrative linking human rights, democracy promotion and humanitarian intervention, despite engaging with a US democracy discourse under Manmohan Singh and supporting some of the US-led initiatives on democracy (see Sullivan, 2023: 449).
- 21 As Neilesh Bose (2024) notes, the term “muscular nationalism” has been often used to describe Modi. He refers for instance to Chawla (2022).
- 22 My thanks to Atul Mishra for mentioning this insightful point.
- 23 Varshney (1993).

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# India's Governing Trilemma and the Paradox of Economic Nationalism

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## ABSTRACT

India presents a democratic development paradox. It has been an outlier as the only consistent democracy at low levels of per capita GDP to sustain high growth for four decades. Yet since 2014, India has pursued protectionist economic nationalism precisely when global integration seems most necessary. This paper argues that India faces three irreconcilable imperatives that cannot be simultaneously satisfied: developmental needs requiring sustained 9 to 10 percent growth, democratic pressures demanding immediate redistribution with multiple veto points, and civilizational assertions rooted in historical consciousness and instrumentally mobilized by polity. While any two imperatives can coexist, all three cannot. The paper shows how India has settled into a politically stable but developmentally suboptimal equilibrium: democracy plus civilizationalism without full developmental transformation. This configuration produces below par 5 to 6 percent growth, creating a self-reinforcing feedback loop where disappointing outcomes intensify nationalist responses and short-term welfare interventions for consumption, while civilizational framing and strategic opacity generate international incoherence constraining developmental partnerships. The analysis examines transmission mechanisms through which the trilemma operates, explains why India cannot replicate East Asian success, at least in pace, and identifies realistic paths forward. This tests whether democracy and rapid development remain compatible in twenty-first century conditions.

**Keywords:** India, economic nationalism, democratic development, trilemma, structural transformation, civilizational politics, developmental state, multi-alignment, comparative political economy, Hindu nationalism, East Asian development model.

## **El trilema del gobierno en la India y la paradoja del nacionalismo económico**

### RESUMEN

India presenta una paradoja de desarrollo democrático. Ha sido la única democracia consistente, con bajos niveles de PIB per cápita, que ha mantenido un alto crecimiento durante cuatro décadas. Sin embargo, desde 2014, India ha adoptado un nacionalismo económico proteccionista precisamente cuando la integración global parece más necesaria. Este artículo argumenta que India se enfrenta a tres imperativos irreconciliables que no pueden satisfacerse simultáneamente: necesidades de desarrollo que requieren un crecimiento sostenido del 9% al 10%, presiones democráticas que exigen una redistribución inmediata con múltiples puntos de veto, y reivindicaciones civilizatorias, tanto intrínsecas a la cultura como instrumentalmente implementadas por la política. Si bien dos imperativos pueden coexistir, los tres no. El artículo muestra cómo India se ha asentado en un equilibrio políticamente estable, pero subóptimo en términos de desarrollo: democracia más civilizacionalismo sin una transformación integral del desarrollo. Esta configuración produce un crecimiento inferior al esperado del 5% al 6%, creando un círculo vicioso que se retroalimenta, donde los resultados decepcionantes intensifican las respuestas nacionalistas y las intervenciones de bienestar a corto plazo para el consumo, mientras que el marco civilizatorio y la opacidad estratégica generan incoherencia internacional que limita las alianzas para el desarrollo. El análisis examina los mecanismos de transmisión mediante los cuales opera el trilema, explica por qué India no puede replicar el éxito de Asia Oriental, al menos en términos de velocidad, e identifica caminos realistas para el futuro. Esto pone a prueba si la democracia y el rápido desarrollo siguen siendo compatibles en las condiciones del siglo XXI.

**Palabras clave:** India, nacionalismo económico, desarrollo democrático, trilema, transformación estructural, política civilizacional, estado desarrollista, multialineamiento, economía política comparada, nacionalismo hindú, modelo de desarrollo del este asiático

## 印度的治理三难困境与经济民族主义悖论

### 摘要

印度呈现出一个民主发展悖论。它一直是一个特例，是唯一一个在人均GDP较低的情况下，仍能保持四十年高速增长民主国家。然而，自2014年以来，正值全球一体化似乎最为迫切之际，印度却奉行保护主义的经济民族主义。本文认为，印度面临着三个无法同时满足的、不可调和的迫切需求：持续9%至10%增长的发展需求；要求立即进行再分配且拥有多重否决权的民主压力；以及既根植于文化又被政治工具化运用的文明诉求。虽然其中两个需求可以共存，但三个需求却无法同时存在。本文阐述了印度如何陷入一种政治稳定但发展欠佳的平衡状态：民主加上文明主义，却未能实现全面的发展转型。这种格局导致经济增长率低于预期，仅为5%至6%，形成了一种自我强化的反馈循环：令人失望的结果加剧了民族主义情绪和短期消费福利干预，而文明框架和战略不透明则造成了国际间的不协调，限制了发展伙伴关系的建立。本文分析了三难困境的传导机制，解释了印度为何无法复制东亚的成功模式（至少在速度上），并提出了切实可行的前进方向。这检验了在21世纪条件下，民主与快速发展是否仍然兼容。

关键词：印度，经济民族主义，民主发展，三难困境，结构转型，文明政治，发展型国家，多方结盟，比较政治经济学，印度教民族主义，东亚发展模式

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### Introduction: The Democratic Development Paradox

India has become the world's fifth-largest economy while remaining 140<sup>th</sup> in per capita income—a superpower in aggregate, still a struggling developer per person. In the Vande Bharat trains, the paradox finds its moving metaphor. While these impressive locomotives carry a name that proclaims civilizational pride, they race past the millions whose poverty keeps them tethered to unreserved compartments. Beneath the nationalist livery lies

a harder truth: imported components and speeds barely half those promised expose the developmental constraints that pride alone cannot overcome. These juxtapositions—and India produces them daily—reflect more than ironic contrasts; they reveal a governance trilemma that explains why the world's most improbable success story now pursues policies that constrain its own transformation.

The improbability requires emphasis. Among all poor countries with per capita incomes below \$100 (current

prices) in 1960, India alone sustained both democratic continuity and then meaningful economic growth for over four decades, starting in 1980. While South Korea abandoned democracy for development and China showed no intentions to sail towards democratic waters, India maintained competitive elections, free expression, and judicial independence while growing at 4.5 percent per capita annually—pulling more humans from poverty than any democratic experiment in history. This achievement becomes more remarkable considering India manages within a single democratic framework linguistic diversity comparable to Europe, religious pluralism exceeding the Americas, and economic and social hierarchies reminiscent of colonial empires. No theory of political economy predicted this; most suggested it impossible.<sup>1</sup>

Yet this improbable democracy now embraces economic nationalism precisely when integration seems most vital for the next stage of development. The puzzle sharpens: Why does democratic India, having succeeded against theoretical predictions, now choose policies that economic history and theory suggest will fail? The conventional answers satisfy few. Blaming individual leaders ignores how different parties converge on similar policies. Attributing it to populist ignorance dismisses the sophisticated technocrats who design these interventions. Invoking cultural explanations fails to explain why the same culture embraced globalization in 1991 and nationalism in 2014. The persistence of economic nationalism despite disappointing results—

manufacturing stuck at 15-17 percent of GDP, export competitiveness declining, 45 percent labor still employed in agriculture, a large portion of which is unproductive, and growth moderating to 5-6 percent instead of the needed 9-10 percent (Rajan and Lamba 2024)—suggests structural forces rather than mere correctable errors.

This essay argues that India faces three legitimate but irreconcilable imperatives. Developmental needs demand patient capital accumulation, technology absorption, and occasionally painful structural adjustment to achieve the 9-10 percent growth required to gainfully employ the masses and give them dignity of good jobs before demographic dividends dissipate. Democratic pressures insist on immediate redistribution, visible employment, and accommodation of diverse regional interests within five-year electoral cycles. Civilizational assertions frame economic choices as recovery of historical greatness, sovereignty from Western prescriptions, and validation of indigenous wisdom against foreign models. Each imperative has validity: development without democracy produced East Asian prosperity but at authoritarian cost; democracy without development preserves freedom but not prosperity; civilizational pride without economic might and hard power rings hollow in a materialist world.

The impossibility lies not in choosing among these imperatives but in simultaneously satisfying all three. Any two can coexist—East Asia combined development with nationalism by suppressing democracy; India from

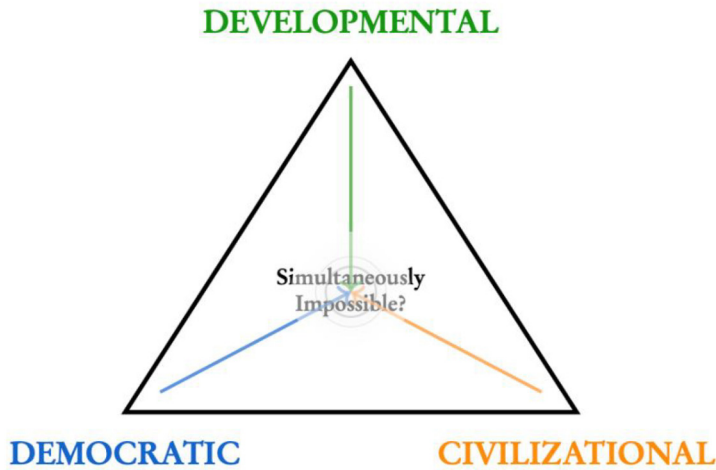


Figure 1: Governance Trilemma: India cannot maximize all three imperatives simultaneously

1991 to about 2008 combined development with democracy by soft-pedaling civilizational themes; India since 2014 combines democracy with civilizational assertion by moderating developmental ambitions. However, all three together create contradictions that no amount of political skill can reconcile. When farmer protests block agricultural reforms, democratic imperatives override developmental needs. When economic integration requires cultural accommodation, civilizational pride rebels. When patient institution-building demands electoral sacrifice, democratic cycles intervene. The result is not policy failure but structural bind—a trilemma where movement toward any vertex necessarily means movement away from others.<sup>2</sup>

Understanding this trilemma reframes India's economic nationalism from mistake to equilibrium. The persistence of import substitution despite its failures, the pursuit of production-linked incentives despite

their limitations, the withdrawal from trade agreements despite their benefits—these reflect not ignorance but the political economy of managing irreconcilable pressures. Democratic societies with civilizational consciousness may simply face different constraints than the authoritarian developers or post-historical democracies that dominate development theory. The question becomes not whether India can escape this trilemma but how it manages the trade-offs within it.<sup>3</sup>

This matters beyond India because the trilemma increasingly characterizes our global moment. From Trump's America First to Xi's Chinese Dream, from Erdoğan's Ottoman revival to Brexit's sovereignty assertion, major powers simultaneously pursue economic development, democratic legitimacy (however degraded), and civilizational distinction. The technocratic consensus that governed postwar prosperity—that economic rationality would

subsume political passion and cultural particularity—has shattered (Fukuyama 2014; Diamond 2015; Coker 2019). India's experience navigating this triple bind may be a preview rather than a deviation, a prototype rather than an exception. Understanding why the world's largest democracy chooses identity over efficiency, stability over transformation, and civilizational framings over economic optimization illuminates not just one country's constraints but democracy's future in an age of resurgent nationalism.

What follows examines this trilemma through multiple lenses—theoretical framework, empirical evidence, comparative analysis, and practical implications—to explain why economic nationalism persists despite its costs. The argument proceeds not through condemnation but comprehension, seeking to understand why rational actors make seemingly irrational choices when facing structural binds. The essay's ambition is not to solve India's trilemma—structural contradictions rarely yield to clever proposals—but to explain why it binds so tightly and what this means for development theory, democratic practice, and international cooperation when identity matters more than interests.

## **The Trilemma Framework: An Impossibility Theorem?**

### ***Conceptualizing the Three Imperatives***

India's governing trilemma emerges from three powerful forces, each with distinct logic, timeframe, and institu-

tional requirements. Understanding how these imperatives function individually is essential before examining why they cannot be reconciled collectively.

**Developmental Needs.** India confronts an urgent developmental imperative requiring sustained growth of 9-10 percent annually to generate employment for more than ten million young workers who join the working age population every year.<sup>4</sup> This demands structural transformation, moving workers from low-productivity agriculture (still employing 45 percent of the workforce [Waghmare 2024; Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare 2025]) into higher-productivity sectors. Such transformation requires patient capital allocation over twenty-to-thirty-year periods, disciplined policy implementation protected from short-term political pressures, export competitiveness through technology absorption, and tolerance for temporary inequality while imposing painful structural adjustments. The temporal logic of developmentalism is *patience*: deferred consumption today for prosperity tomorrow. East Asian developmental states—Japan's MITI coordination (Johnson 1982), South Korea's Heavy and Chemical Industry drive (Amsden 1989), China's gradual reform since 1978 (Naughton 2007)—succeeded because authoritarian or semi-authoritarian arrangements insulated long-term planning from electoral pressures.

**Democratic Pressures.** Competitive electoral democracy generates fundamentally different temporal logic.

Politicians facing contested elections every five years have powerful incentives to deliver immediate, visible benefits rather than invest in long-term capacity building (Bardhan 1984). Democratic accountability demands responsiveness: subsidies for food and fuel, loan waivers for farmers, employment guarantees, reservations for disadvantaged groups. Coalition management requires accommodating diverse interests whose short-term demands conflict with long-term priorities (Kohli 2004). The temporal logic is *immediacy*: satisfying demands now, providing tangible benefits before the next election. While responsiveness prevents catastrophic errors possible under authoritarianism—India has experienced no famines since independence (Sen 1999), unlike China's Great Leap Forward—it constrains patient, disciplined implementation that developmental transformation requires (Lamba and Subramanian 2020).

**Civilizational Assertions.** Under Narendra Modi's leadership since 2014, civilizational identity assertion has gained prominence. This imperative operates on eternal timeframe—neither developmentalism's multi-decade patience nor democracy's immediate responsiveness, but civilizational continuity across millennia. Hindu nationalism frames contemporary India as an ancient civilization temporarily interrupted by colonialism, and sometimes even adding centuries of Islamic rule before British colonialism to the temporariness, now reclaiming rightful great power status (Jaffrelot 2021).<sup>5</sup>

Economic policies become civilizational statements: "Atmanirbhar Bharat" (self-sufficient India) represents not merely import substitution but sovereignty recovery, resistance to "mental slavery" accepting Western prescriptions. The temporal logic is *assertion*: policies must demonstrate civilizational authenticity even when pragmatic integration might deliver superior economic outcomes. China under Xi Jinping combines civilizational pride with developmental pragmatism, but under authoritarian control constraining democratic pressures (Economy 2018).

### ***The Impossibility Theorem: Why Only Two of Three***

The trilemma's core insight is an impossibility theorem: in India's current institutional context, any two of the three imperatives can coexist, but not all three simultaneously. Understanding why requires examining each possible two-dimensional configuration, its historical manifestations, and inherent limitations preventing addition of the third imperative.

**Configuration 1: Development + Democracy (WITHOUT Civilizationalism).** This configuration characterized India during two distinct reform phases: the Rao government (1991–1996) and the Vajpayee government (1998–2004) (Panagariya 2008; Ahluwalia 2020; Kelkar 2023). These administrations combined technocratic reforms with democratic legitimacy. Liberalization measures—dismantling industrial licensing, reducing tariffs, opening sectors to foreign investment, reforming telecommunications and

banking—gained acceptance through gradual improvement in living standards. Pragmatic international engagement brought technology transfer, capital inflows, and market access. Coalition politics worked both ways—creating roadblocks but also cementing consensus once reforms were agreed upon.<sup>6</sup>

The first Manmohan Singh government (2004–2009) largely preserved this reform momentum under favorable global conditions, continuing the trajectory established over the previous decade and a half. However, by the second term (2009–2014), the absence of new reforms caught up with the administration as it shifted focus toward expanding the welfare state through programs like the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. This pivot along with widespread corruption allegations ensured fractures in the already fragile consensus on economic reforms had started emerging (Rajan 2012; Lamba and Subramanian 2020).

This configuration delivered respectable results over two and half decades: growth at its peak hitting close to double digits, poverty reduction from 45 to 22 percent of the population (Narayan and Murgai 2016), emergence of globally competitive service sectors particularly in information technology and business process outsourcing (Das 2012). The 2004 election, in which the ruling BJP-led coalition lost despite presiding over 8 percent growth, demonstrated democratic accountability's vitality (Varshney 2007).

However, this configuration proved politically unstable. Identity pol-

itics and civilizational rhetoric simmered with renewed vigor, especially as abject poverty was being addressed. By 2014, this configuration had exhausted its political sustainability under the weight of reform fatigue, governance challenges, and rising demand for civilizational recognition. The key limitation: in diverse, poor democracies where identity appeals remain available as mobilization tools, a purely technocratic-developmental approach faces sustainability challenges beyond one or two electoral cycles.

**Configuration 2: Development + Civilizationalism (WITHOUT Democracy).** This configuration characterizes the successful East Asian developmental states. Japan from the 1950s through 1980s combined developmental ambition with nationalist mobilization under Liberal Democratic Party hegemony that minimized democratic constraints (Johnson 1982). South Korea from the 1960s through late 1980s pursued heavy industrialization under military rule while mobilizing anti-Japanese nationalism and cultivating narratives of national resurrection from colonial humiliation (Amsden 1989; Eckert 2016). China since 1978 has combined rapid development with escalating civilizational pride and appeals to China's "century of humiliation" under continued Communist Party monopoly (Z. Wang 2012).

Crucially, civilizational rhetoric and nationalism played important roles in driving the East Asian developmental miracle. These narratives provided mass legitimacy for developmental sac-

rifice, created psychological motivation for “catching up” with the West, and fostered social discipline necessary for high savings rates and acceptance of inequality during rapid capital accumulation (Castells 1992; Woo-Cumings 1999; Pyle 2007). The civilizational frame helped populations tolerate present hardships for future national strength and glory, with nationalist appeals justifying the postponement of consumption and redistribution until developmental goals were achieved.<sup>7</sup>

The logic enabling this configuration is authoritarian or semi-authoritarian control that suppresses short-term democratic demands. Workers could be suppressed, rural-urban migration controlled, inequality tolerated—all towards the goal of rapid capital accumulation. Insulated technocracies could plan long-term without political interference. In China’s case particularly, the authoritarian structure enabled what Ang terms “directed improvisation”—the center set ambitious developmental targets while allowing provinces to experiment with implementation methods, creating adaptive capacity through controlled competition among local governments (Ang 2016). Crucially, export discipline forced competitiveness. Unlike Latin American import substitution failures (Bruton 1998), East Asian states made subsidies conditional on export performance, preventing rent-seeking inefficiency.

This configuration delivered 8 to 11 percent growth sustained for decades, rapid industrialization, manufacturing export success, and eventual

high-income status for Japan and Korea, with China rapidly approaching that threshold.<sup>8</sup> However, India cannot replicate this path given its institutional trajectory. Seventy-five years of competitive democratic elections, active civil society, largely independent judiciary, and empowered federal states create path dependence that makes authoritarian development politically unavailable regardless of its economic appeal (Przeworski et al. 2000; Acemoglu and Robinson 2019).<sup>9</sup>

**Configuration 3: Democracy + Civilizationalism (WITHOUT Development).** This arguably describes India’s current situation since 2014. Electoral populism combines with Hindu nationalism to create political stability. Economic policies framed as civilizational imperatives (“Atmanirbhar Bharat” as sovereignty recovery) enjoy popular legitimacy. Protection shields domestic constituencies—farmers, small manufacturers—from global competition’s immediate pain.

The civilizational idea here is both intrinsic and instrumental. The Ram Temple in Ayodhya and the abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir represent popular sentiments at the core of BJP’s beliefs, but who also serve as a potent mobilization tool (Jaffrelot 2021; Choudhary 2025). The short-term political logic is powerful: reinforcing civilizational symbolism compensates for material delivery shortfalls and the intrinsic presence of the demand in the populace, which is otherwise arguably more contained, makes the symbolism more credible. The 2019 and 2024 elec-

toral victories despite jobs crisis and manufacturing stagnation demonstrate this configuration's political sustainability (Lamba and Rajan 2024). Federal diversity provides political cover: Gujarat and Karnataka showcase developmental success while failures in West Bengal and Bihar get attributed to local, even historical, factors, allowing the configuration to persist despite aggregate underperformance.

However, developmental costs accumulate. Manufacturing share remains stuck at 15 percent of GDP. Youth unemployment hits 25 percent. Gross fixed capital formation declines from 34 to 27 percent of GDP. Growth constrains to 5-6 percent—adequate for middling outcomes but insufficient for rapid transformation.<sup>10</sup> International isolation increases as partners perceive India's policies as driven by volatile domestic imperatives rather than strategic reliability (Tellis 2023, 2025).

The developmental lag inherent in this configuration creates opportunities for political opposition—but only if it articulates a credible alternative path to higher growth that competes politically with civilizational narratives without belittling them. Over the last decade, most opposition forces have struggled to formulate such a vision that resonates electorally while addressing cultural and identity dimensions that civilizational politics engages. The only cogent narrative has been the old playbook of reviving caste centered politics as a direct attack on BJP's attempt at big tent Hindu politics (Mehta 2024).

This configuration persists as the *default equilibrium* given India's constraints: politically stable but developmentally suboptimal, managing contradictions rather than resolving them, achieving political legitimacy at the cost of economic dynamism with middle-income trap risk as the demographic window closes.

### ***Why the Trilemma Binds in India's Context***

Four structural features explain why the trilemma operates with particular force in India's case, distinguishing it from more successful developmental trajectories elsewhere.

**Premature Democracy.** India achieved universal suffrage in 1950 at per capita income of sixty dollars, reversing the typical sequence where countries developed before democratizing (Acemoglu and Robinson 2019; Lamba and Subramanian 2020). This created pressure for redistribution before accumulation, immediate welfare before patient capital building. Bardhan's insight: democratic politics in poor societies drives consumption over investment as electoral competition rewards visible benefits over deferred prosperity (Bardhan 1984). East Asian developmental states followed the opposite sequence—Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan developed under authoritarian or semi-authoritarian arrangements, democratizing only after reaching middle-income status. This sequencing allowed them to impose discipline, forced savings, and adjustment costs without electoral punishment (Haggard 1990; Kohli 2004).

**Extreme Diversity.** Linguistic, religious, regional, and caste fragmentation prevents unified nationalist mobilization. Hindu nationalism alienates two hundred million Muslims and complicates regional relations rather than creating cohesion (Ganguly 2019; Jaffrelot 2021). Caste drives a historical cleavage, and while reservations try to correct past wrongs, they arguably also cement existing caste identities, challenging their primary objective (Mehta 2003, 2024). A fiscally and operationally centralized but politically vibrant federal structure inhibits coordinated developmental strategy (Singh 2015). Japan and South Korea's relative homogeneity enabled unified nationalist mobilization behind developmental goals. China's diversity exists but authoritarian control channeled it productively—provincial competition for growth became a developmental asset under centralized Party coordination (Ang 2016). India's democracy must accommodate diversity through coalition building and federal negotiation rather than harnessing it through controlled competition, slowing implementation and constraining tools.

**Service-Led Structure.** India bypassed manufacturing, transitioning directly from agriculture to services (55 percent of GDP) while manufacturing stagnates at 15 percent. Manufacturing nationalist policies designed for 1960s Korea mismatch 2020s India's service economy. Services cannot absorb low-skilled labor at manufacturing's historical scale, yet protected manufacturing will not grow competitively. East

Asia followed the canonical agriculture-manufacturing-services sequence that nationalist policies fit naturally. India's comparative advantage lies in skill-intensive services, but nationalist rhetoric elevates manufacturing symbolism over service reality (Rajan and Lamba 2024).

**Twenty-First Century Timing.** Late development in the twenty-first century faces constraints East Asian predecessors avoided. First WTO rules limited industrial policy tools (Wade 2003) and now an increasingly fractured and antagonistic West that is turning inwards does not allow for the path that Japan, Korea, and China employed freely (Rajan and Lamba 2024). Automation reduced manufacturing's labor intensity, limiting job creation even when production grows. Climate constraints render carbon-intensive industrialization politically and environmentally unviable (Rodrik 2025). Global value chains require integration and component imports, making self-sufficiency economically irrational (Baldwin 2016). Rodrik's concept of premature deindustrialization captures this predicament: manufacturing employment now peaks at lower income levels than historically (Rodrik 2016). India competes against established powers, particularly China, with entrenched scale and learning advantages.

These four structural features combine to create what has been termed "dynamism with incommensurate development"—sustained growth without commensurate progress in manufacturing employment, human capital

formation, or comprehensive structural transformation (Lamba and Subramanian 2020).

### **Configuration 3's Self-Reinforcing Dynamics**

Configuration 3—democracy plus civilizationalism without developmental discipline—exhibits self-reinforcing dynamics that explain why it persists as default equilibrium despite producing suboptimal outcomes. Understanding this mechanism reveals why course correction becomes progressively more difficult even as developmental costs accumulate.

The internal logic operates through what can be termed a *ratchet effect*. Configuration 3 lacks the corrective mechanisms present in the other two configurations. Configuration 1 (development plus democracy) featured correction through electoral punishment when growth disappointed or didn't cast a wide enough net—the 2004 election demonstrated this. Configuration 2 (development plus civilizationalism) embedded correction through export discipline—subsidies that failed to produce competitive exports got withdrawn, forcing policy adjustment. However, Configuration 3 removes both corrective forces: civilizational framing insulates policies from economic performance feedback, while democratic competition rewards nationalist rhetoric regardless of developmental outcomes.

Consider how the mechanism operates. Ambitious developmental promises emerge from electoral com-

petition—9 to 10 percent growth, manufacturing transformation, doubling farmer incomes, employment generation. These promises reflect genuine needs but also serve political purposes, with civilizational framing elevating economic targets into identity statements about India's rightful place among nations. When promises confront institutional constraints—democratic pressures demanding immediate benefits, state capacity limitations, federal complexity—underperformance follows predictably. Youth unemployment persists above 25 percent, investment remains weak, structural transformation stalls.

Critically, this underperformance triggers intensified nationalism rather than strategic recalibration. Civilizational rhetoric escalates to compensate symbolically for material disappointments. Growth shortfalls get attributed to insufficient nationalism, foreign sabotage, or historical injustices rather than flawed strategy. Democratic pressures channel into nationalist demands rather than policy questioning. The political logic proves powerful: a cocktail of cultural pride and economic nationalism delivers electoral victories even when producing economic underperformance. The 2019 and 2024 elections validated this dynamic—civilizational symbolism combined with targeted welfare effectively substituted for broad-based economic transformation, winning comfortable elections despite jobs crisis and manufacturing stagnation (Lamba and Rajan 2024).

Arguably, this creates unidirec-

tional escalation rather than reversible cycling. Each iteration produces more ambitious promises framed in more nationalist terms, confronting the same constraints but with degraded capacity from previous failures, generating underperformance, triggering still more nationalism. Reversal becomes progressively harder through three reinforcing mechanisms. First, ideological rigidity: once policies become civilizational identity statements—Atmanirbhar Bharat as sovereignty recovery, not pragmatic industrial policy—abandoning them or at least admitting failure appears to betray foundational values. Second, electoral incentives: nationalism delivers political victories, creating powerful incentives for escalation regardless of economic outcomes. Third, sunk costs: reversing course means admitting error, which becomes politically costlier as more resources get committed and more rhetoric gets invested.

Why does this pattern not emerge in successful developmental states? Export discipline provides correction in Configuration 2. When South Korean heavy industry subsidies failed to produce competitive exports, technocrats withdrew support and reallocated resources (Amsden 1989). When Chinese Special Economic Zones underperformed, the center adjusted policies or closed failed experiments (Vogel 2011). Export markets provide objective performance feedback that authoritarian governments can act upon without electoral punishment. India's Configuration 3 lacks this discipline—protected domestic markets allow firms to profit

without becoming competitive, while democratic politics rewards protection regardless of its developmental impact.

Configuration 1 on the other hand can thrive if there is a widespread consensus amongst elites that incremental but persistent economic reforms must be encoded into the political landscape, as arguably emerged in the 1991–2008 period in India, irrespective of democratic incentives on deepening civilizational rhetoric and societal cleavages. In a poor and highly-diverse democracy like India, however, its sustainability is always beholden to this fragile elite and somewhat technocratic consensus. In that sense, unfortunately, the 2004 defeat of the Vajpayee BJP, despite sound economic growth, may have started the fall of Configuration 1. Configuration 3, in turn, severs this connection of incentives for governments to prioritize policies delivering growth—civilizational appeals compensate for growth disappointments, allowing governments to win elections despite developmental underperformance. The mechanism becomes self-sustaining: each nationalist success emboldens further nationalism, each electoral victory despite economic stagnation validates the strategy's political viability.

This dynamic explains Configuration 3's stability as default equilibrium. Breaking this pattern requires either moderating democratic pressures to allow patient developmental implementation (politically unavailable given India's institutional trajectory), pausing civilizational assertions to permit pragmatic recalibration (po-

litically costly when nationalism delivers electoral victories), extraordinary political leadership and entrepreneurship that can sell development while reconciling civilizational yearning and democratic principles (always possible but highly unlikely given the costs to entry for outside talent in Indian politics) or experiencing external shocks severe enough to force strategic revision (the 1991 balance of payments crisis pattern). Absent such disruption, Configuration 3 persists: politically sustainable through electoral success, developmentally suboptimal through accumulating constraints, self-reinforcing through mechanisms that prevent rather than enable correction. The Section III empirical cases demonstrate this pattern's operation across multiple policy domains, validating the framework's explanatory power.

### ***Theoretical Implications***

The trilemma framework contributes to three scholarly literatures by revealing how institutional configurations shape developmental outcomes, with implications extending beyond India's specific case.

**For Democratic Development Theory.** The trilemma challenges modernization theory's assumption that democracy follows linearly from economic development (Lipset 1959). India demonstrates the reverse: democracy can constrain development by creating pressures for immediate redistribution over patient capital accumulation. However, democracy also prevents catastrophic errors—India has experienced no famines since independence, un-

like China's Great Leap Forward which killed tens of millions (Sen 1999). The democracy-development relationship emerges as complex and conditional, depending on diversity, timing, and economic structure (Przeworski et al. 2000). Democratic institutions neither guarantee development nor make it impossible, but fundamentally alter available pathways and required timeframes compared to authoritarian alternatives. This contributes to ongoing debates about sequencing of political and economic reforms (Fukuyama 2014).

**For Nationalism and Civilizational State Studies.** Economic nationalism and civilizational assertions operate differently across institutional contexts, producing divergent outcomes determined less by ideological content than by regime constraints (Helleiner 2021). Authoritarian civilizational states—China's "rejuvenation," Putin's "Russian World," Erdoğan's "New Turkey"—can suppress democratic demands to pursue patient developmental strategies while maintaining nationalist mobilization (Coker 2019). Democratic civilizational assertions, exemplified by India but increasingly visible from Hungary's "illiberal democracy" to America's MAGA movement, face electoral cycles that transform economic policy into identity performance (Krastev 2018). The same civilizational rhetoric that Xi Jinping deploys for long term plans becomes, in Modi's India, hostage to five-year electoral verdicts. This distinction—between civilizational authoritarianism that can impose developmental disci-

pline and civilizational democracy that must satisfy immediate constituent demands—explains why similar nationalist frameworks yield opposite economic outcomes. The finding challenges both celebrations of civilizational state efficiency and assumptions that democratic nationalism necessarily moderates over time.

**For Late Development Studies.**

India may represent a distinctive configuration challenging frameworks derived from East Asian experience (Wade 1990). Premature democracy, service-led growth, and civilizational politics create constraints that developmental state prescriptions do not address. Twenty-first century late developers—Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Bangladesh—may face similar trilemmas where neither the authoritarian-manufacturing path nor the gradual-democratic path remain available. This suggests need for new analytical frameworks for democratic, diverse, service-oriented late developers rather than assuming universal applicability of models from different institutional and temporal contexts (Rodrik 2025). The service-led development path requires rethinking traditional assumptions about manufacturing's centrality to structural transformation (Ghani and O'Connell 2012; Rajan and Lamba 2024), while premature democratization demands fresh perspectives on how political competition shapes economic policy choices in poor societies. India's trajectory thus offers a case study of the difficulties in mechanical application of East Asian developmental strategies to

fundamentally different political and economic contexts.

**Empirical Evidence: Three Diagnostic Cases from the Modi Era**

The trilemma framework generates testable predictions about policy outcomes. If the impossibility theorem holds, we should observe developmental imperatives systematically sacrificed when they conflict with democratic pressures or civilizational assertions. Three diagnostic cases from Modi's tenure—spanning trade, industrial, and foreign policy—validate this pattern. Each demonstrates how Configuration 3 achieves political sustainability while producing developmental underperformance, with costs accumulating over time to constrain future options.

***Trade Policy: The Protectionist Turn and RCEP Withdrawal***

India's trade trajectory since 2014 exemplifies the trilemma's operation. After two decades of gradual liberalization following 1991 reforms, trade policy reversed sharply toward protectionism. Average applied tariffs rose from 13.5 percent in 2014 to 18.1 percent by 2022 (United States Trade Representative 2024)—the highest among major economies and diverging from global trends toward lower barriers.<sup>11</sup> Tariff escalation targeted imports across manufacturing sectors: mobile phones increased from 0 to 20 percent (European Commission 2024), with similar increases across electronics components and

continued high tariffs on automobiles. The government withdrew from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership in November 2019, abandoning Asia-Pacific's largest trade agreement despite years of negotiation (Crabtree 2019).

Democratic pressures drove selectivity favoring politically organized groups. Agriculture remained heavily protected—high tariffs, government price guarantees, and export bans (Takshashila Institution 2025)—while manufacturing received escalating shelter despite persistent stagnation. Small manufacturers and even large industry houses demanding protection mobilized effectively. The 2020-2021 farm law protests, though ostensibly about market reforms, revealed the political impossibility of agricultural liberalization (Shah and Verma 2021). Electoral arithmetic makes touching agricultural protection improbable, if not impossible, when 45 percent of the workforce remains in farming.

Civilizational framing transformed protectionism from pragmatic tool into identity statement. Trade opening became portrayed as subordination, “mental slavery” accepting Western prescriptions. Atmanirbhar Bharat elevated self-sufficiency from economic strategy to civilizational imperative. RCEP withdrawal rhetoric emphasized sovereignty over opportunity costs—forgone services market access, exclusion from supply chains, reduced negotiating leverage.<sup>12</sup>

The trilemma here produces policy incoherence. India seeks foreign in-

vestment while imposing local content requirements that deter it. Tariff escalation raises input costs for exporters while claiming to boost competitiveness. Agricultural protection maintains rural incomes short-term but prevents productivity transformation enabling reallocation of physical, human and bureaucratic capital. The government simultaneously promotes “Make in India” while handicapping manufacturers with expensive protected inputs, subsidizes exports while raising tariffs that harm export competitiveness, and seeks global supply chain integration while imposing restrictions driving firms elsewhere (Subramanian 2025).

Yet services thrived precisely because they escaped this logic. Information technology and business process outsourcing exports grew from around 6.6 lakh crore (approximately \$100 billion) in 2014 to 16.6 lakh crore (approximately \$200 billion) by 2024 (India Brand Equity Foundation 2025). Services faced neither strong democratic mobilization demanding shelter—software engineers don't protest liberalization—nor civilizational framing as identity issues. This asymmetry validates the mechanism: when developmental logic operates unconstrained by democratic pressures or civilizational assertions, competitive exposure generates innovation and global success. The services exception proves the rule by demonstrating what Indian firms achieve when Configuration 3 constraints don't apply.

Outcomes reveal Configuration 3's costs. India's goods trade defi-

cit widened from around 9 lakh crore (\$140 billion) in 2014 to 24 lakh crore (\$280 billion) by 2025 despite rising protection (Ministry of Commerce and Industry 2015, 2025a). India's share of global manufacturing exports barely inched up from about 1.7 to 1.8 percent between 2017 and 2024 (Kantha 2025). RCEP partners proceeded without India, deepening regional integration excluding Indian participation. Trade policy could enable transformation—exposing agriculture gradually while redirecting protection's fiscal cost into rural infrastructure, human capital, and safety nets facilitating structural change. Democratic institutions and civilizational rhetoric prevent such re-orientation, locking policy into politically sustainable but developmentally suboptimal equilibrium (Basrur 2023).

### ***Industrial Policy: From License Raj to Production-Linked Incentives***

India's industrial policy evolution demonstrates how the trilemma transcends particular governments or eras. The License Raj (1950s–1980s) epitomized early dirigisme: industrial licensing, import substitution, bureaucratic control stifling competition while attempting capability building (Panagariya 2008; Lamba and Subramanian 2020). Liberalization after 1991 discredited activist industrial policy. Three decades later, the Modi government revived intervention through Production-Linked Incentives launched in 2020, allocating 1.97 lakh crore (\$26 billion) across fourteen sectors (Ministry of Commerce and Industry 2025b). Framed as Atmanirbhar Bharat's centerpiece, PLI offered

subsidies of 4 to 6 percent of incremental sales to firms meeting production targets, with sunset clauses ensuring temporary support. The scheme showed sophistication absent in License Raj— incentives tied to performance, focus on incremental production—addressing manufacturing stagnation at 15 to 17 percent of GDP.

Implementation revealed persistent constraints. Democratic pressures immediately constrained design. Electoral demands for visible jobs clashed with PLI's inevitable capital-intensive focus—across all 14 PLI sectors, only 36 percent of the total employment target of over 1.6 million jobs over five years had been achieved by end of the fourth year (IndBiz Economic Diplomacy Division 2024). Fiscal limits from welfare commitments constrained disbursements. Parliamentary opposition criticized subsidies as favoring large corporations over small enterprises, creating pressure to spread allocations across sectors rather than concentrate resources where impact could be greatest. State-level coalition management meant choosing locations by political calculus rather than economic logic. China under Deng began with concentrated geographic focus—Special Economic Zones in Guangdong adjacent to Hong Kong, allowing experimentation before gradually expanding successful policies (Vogel 2011). India's democratic federal structure prevents such strategic concentration.

Civilizational framing through Atmanirbhar Bharat elevated expectations impossibly. When policies become

civilizational assertions rather than pragmatic experiments, any outcome short of transformation feels like failure. This rhetoric constrained adjustments—admitting subsidies needed modification would undermine narratives about India’s inherent capabilities. Democratic incentives packaged even modest successes as transformative achievements, distorting feedback mechanisms essential for policy learning.

Results proved damning across most sectors. Mobile phone “manufacturing” involved primarily assembly with 80 percent components imported, creating limited value addition despite production growth (Chauhan, Rajan, and Lamba 2023). Pharmaceutical PLI attracted minimal investment. Automobile components faced compliance complexity. Textiles could not overcome global competition. Food processing lacked infrastructure PLI did not address. By early 2025, the government quietly allowed much of the scheme to lapse, with actual disbursements falling far below projections (Reuters 2025).

Why did PLI fail where East Asian industrial policy succeeded? Three critical differences emerge from the trilemma framework. First, export discipline: Korea and China made subsidies contingent on export performance, forcing firms to compete globally and preventing rent-seeking (Amsden 1989; Wade 1990). PLI emphasized production volume without export requirements, allowing firms to profit from protected domestic markets while remaining internationally uncompetitive. Second,

patient implementation: authoritarian or semi-authoritarian arrangements insulated technocrats from short-term political pressures, enabling course correction when policies underperformed. Democratic India’s electoral cycles force visible success within five years, preventing iterative learning. Third, complementary investments: East Asian states simultaneously built infrastructure, trained labor, reformed regulations, and opened markets selectively. PLI operated in isolation, subsidizing factories while leaving infrastructure deficits, regulatory complexity, and human capital gaps unaddressed (Rajan and Lamba 2024). The trilemma prevents India from replicating this comprehensive approach—democratic pressures demand visible manufacturing subsidies over patient capacity building, while the noise of civilizational framing prevents acknowledging that subsidies alone cannot substitute for systemic reform.

The China dimension compounds these constraints. Following the June 2020 Galwan border clash, India banned Chinese foreign direct investment and restricted technology partnerships, severing crucial channels for manufacturing capability building. Territorial sovereignty rightfully demands vigorous defense, but strategy requires choosing when, how, and what form such responses take. The current outcome represents failure on both dimensions: China retains territorial gains while India decoupled from Asia’s dominant production networks precisely when manufacturing ambitions

required deepest integration. Chinese imports to India continue rising even as investment and technology partnerships ended, leaving India attempting parity through protection and subsidies while losing time and technological learning opportunities that successful late developers historically exploited.<sup>13</sup>

The pattern mirrors License Raj despite different instruments—both eras show how democracy plus self-reliance narratives prevent the patient, export-disciplined, technocratically-insulated implementation that enabled East Asian success. Manufacturing remains stuck at 15 percent of GDP. The 1.97 lakh crore rupees could have funded massive human capital upgrades—teacher training, healthcare expansion, judicial capacity—benefiting any developmental path. Instead, it subsidized capital-intensive factories creating limited employment while leaving binding constraints unaddressed (Rajan and Lamba 2024).

### ***The May 2025 Pakistan Clash and Strategic Isolation***

In April 2025, a terrorist attack in Pahalgam killed twenty-six Indian tourists, triggering domestic pressure for strong response. The May 2025 military action followed, with Indian forces conducting strikes against terrorist infrastructure. By May 10, tactical advantages emerged—degraded Pakistani air defenses created opportunities to strike deeper military targets. Yet India seems to have held back despite military feasibility (National Bureau of Asian Research 2025; Stimson Center 2025).

The international response revealed strategic isolation. The United States issued neutral statements urging restraint without endorsing India's right to self-defense. The European Union called for de-escalation without distinguishing aggressor from victim. Even Russia abstained in informal Security Council consultations. China predictably opposed Indian actions. No major power provided diplomatic cover enabling sustained pressure on Pakistan (Chellaney 2025c, 2025b, 2025a). This isolation reflected accumulated costs from prior choices—years of economic nationalism, civilizational rhetoric prioritizing projection of sovereignty (to domestic audiences) over partnerships, and diplomatic approaches emphasizing autonomy had eroded goodwill and interdependence generating international support during crises (Council on Foreign Relations 2024).

Democratic pressures demanded visible, strong response. The attack dominated media, opposition questioned government resolve, and upcoming state elections meant appearing weak was politically catastrophic. Civilizational framing elevated response beyond security into identity assertion—demonstrating strength, refusing terrorist violence. Not responding forcefully was politically impossible under democratic competition combined with heightened nationalist rhetoric.

Developmental underperformance constrained strategic options. Years of protectionist trade policy, underinvestment in human capital, and nationalist rhetoric prioritizing self-re-

liance accumulated strategic costs. Growth at 5-6 percent instead of 9-10 percent meant India's relative economic power grew more slowly than potential. Foreign policy rhetoric shifted to what Foreign Minister Jaishankar termed "multi-alignment"—maintaining relationships with all major powers while preserving strategic autonomy (Jaishankar 2020). Yet practical payoffs remained unclear: when crisis arrived, multi-alignment produced no-alignment. Limited economic interdependence through protectionism and investment restrictions meant partners calculated interests without strong incentives to support India.

India possessed military capacity to strike airbases but lacked international cover to sustain escalation. Pressing advantages risked isolated confrontation without partners restraining Pakistani retaliation or providing diplomatic support. The decision to hold back seems to have reflected strategic constraint from accumulated international isolation, not military limitation. The episode reveals how trilemma-driven choices constrain future options. Arguably, Configuration 1—developmental needs plus democratic legitimacy without excessive civilizational assertion—would have generated higher growth providing greater economic leverage, pragmatic engagement building partnership depth, and crisis response enjoying stronger international support enabling decisive action.

Domestic political success—strong approval ratings, electoral victories, demonstrated resolve—coexisted

with strategic limitation. India responded but could not press tactical advantages to impose meaningful costs on Pakistan. Pakistan learned responses would remain calibrated by international isolation rather than escalating decisively, reducing deterrent effect. The pattern establishes that attacks trigger responses but responses remain constrained by accumulated policy choices.

### ***Synthesis: The Impossibility Theorem Validated***

These three cases, spanning trade policy, industrial policy, and foreign policy, reveal consistent patterns validating the trilemma framework. In each domain, democratic pressures demanding immediate visible benefits combined with civilizational framing elevating policies into identity statements systematically override developmental logic. Trade policy's asymmetry between protected sectors stagnating and exposed services thriving demonstrates this mechanism experimentally. Industrial policy's continuity from License Raj to PLI shows the pattern transcends particular governments, ideologies, or eras—different configurations produce similar developmental constraints when democracy combines with self-reliance narratives. The May 2025 Pakistan clash reveals how prior choices accumulate costs constraining future options: India possessed immediate military capability but lacked strategic freedom to use it decisively.

The impossibility theorem operates through path dependence with accelerating costs. Once policies become civilizational identity state-

ments—trade withdrawal framed through Gandhi's talisman, manufacturing as *Atmanirbhar Bharat*, foreign policy as multi-alignment preserving civilizational distinctiveness—reversal would somehow signal a betrayal to foundational values. Each nationalist policy choice, regardless of economic outcome, politically validates the next. RCEP withdrawal's domestic popularity, at least with the coalitions that were protected, emboldens further protectionism. Packaging PLI as a success despite economic underperformance justifies continued subsidization. Managing setbacks through nationalistic rhetoric on how India responded to Pakistan for the Pahalgam terror attack normalizes foreign policy incoherence. This mechanism operates unidirectionally: nationalist policies that fail economically or strategically succeed politically, creating incentives for escalation rather than recalibration.

International costs accumulate asymmetrically. Economic nationalism reduces interdependence gradually—each tariff increase, each foreign investment restriction, each local content requirement individually seems modest. But cumulatively they signal unreliability, driving partners to diversify away from India. By the time crisis arrives—terrorist attack, border conflict, pandemic—the accumulated costs materialize suddenly as isolation. Multi-alignment rhetoric promised maintaining relationships with all powers while preserving autonomy. The May 2025 episode revealed the strategy's limitation: when India needed support, no major power had sufficient

economic stake or strategic interdependence to provide meaningful backing.

The pattern establishes Configuration 3 not as temporary phase but as default equilibrium, given India's current and evolving political economy. Growth remains at 5-6 percent instead of needed 9-10 percent. Manufacturing stagnates despite protection and subsidies. International partnerships remain transactional rather than strategic. Yet the configuration achieves political stability—elections are won, approval ratings maintained, social cohesion preserved through nationalist appeals and compensating welfare delivery. The trilemma framework thus explains not isolated policy mistakes but systematic outcomes emerging from interaction among three powerful imperatives that cannot be simultaneously satisfied in India's institutional context. Until either democratic pressures of multiple veto centers moderate, civilizational assertions pause, or developmental needs become electorally decisive, Configuration 3 persists as the electorally viable yet developmentally constrained equilibrium.

### **Transmission Mechanisms: How the Trilemma Operates**

**H**aving established the theoretical framework and examined empirical evidence, this section analyzes the mechanisms through which the trilemma constrains India's developmental outcomes. Three inter-related pathways emerge: civilizational worldview creates path dependence, centralized decision-making amplifies

democratic volatility, and these dynamics affect state capacity for implementation.

### ***Civilizational Worldview and Path Dependence***

India's turn toward civilizational framing of economic and foreign policy is not unique. Russia under Vladimir Putin invokes civilizational narratives to justify its sphere of influence and distinctive political model (Tsygankov 2016). Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan draws on Ottoman and Islamic civilizational resources to position itself as a bridge between East and West while asserting autonomy from both (Yavuz and Öztürk 2020). China under Xi Jinping has intensified civilizational rhetoric around the "Chinese Dream" and historical greatness. Even within the West, scholars like Samuel Huntington have argued that civilizational identities fundamentally shape world politics (Huntington 1996). It can also be argued that nationalism was a driving force behind economic growth in England, France, Russia, Germany and the United States (Greenfeld 1992, 2001). The developmental effects of such framing, however, depend critically on institutional configuration.

Configuration 3's primary transmission mechanism operates through how civilizational framing transforms economic policies from pragmatic instruments into identity statements resistant to performance-based adjustment. When policies become assertions of civilizational authenticity and question of identity rather than tools subject to evaluation, three interconnected path-

ways create path dependence that prevents course correction despite mounting evidence of underperformance.

First, ideological rigidity emerges because policy failure implies questioning civilizational values themselves. Each policy accumulates sunk costs in nationalist framing, making reversal progressively costlier as more rhetoric gets invested and more symbolic capital committed. Second, learning barriers arise from civilizational distinctiveness logic. Policy innovation becomes constrained to wrong precedents, limiting the experimental learning that developmental transformation requires. Third, negotiation difficulties multiply when economic discussions trigger civilizational defensiveness. This transforms standard economic diplomacy into identity confrontations, narrowing space for the pragmatic compromise that integration demands.

Democratic competition amplifies these dynamics. Electoral politics often rewards civilizational rhetoric or narrower identity movements over technocratic adjustment. Opposition parties must engage in outbidding on these dimensions rather than offering alternative strategies. Social media amplifies symbolic satisfaction while marginalizing substantive debate. The short-term political logic proves powerful: civilizational framing and frames of identity manage democratic pressures by compensating symbolically when material delivery disappoints. But this creates escalating dependence on nationalist or identity assertions that progressively constrain the developmental

options necessary for sustainable material improvement.<sup>14</sup>

The developmental impact depends on corrective mechanisms present or absent. Civilizational mobilization drove transformation in Japan, Korea, and China when combined with export discipline forcing competitive reality checks and authoritarian control suppressing democratic short-termism. Configuration 3 removes both: protected markets eliminate competitive discipline, while democratic competition rewards symbolic satisfaction despite economic underperformance. Policies fail economically but succeed politically, creating incentives for escalation rather than recalibration.

***The Wrong Kind of Centralization:  
State Versus Polity***

Configuration 3's second transmission mechanism operates through a structural paradox: India combines centralized state capacity with decentralized political authority, the inverse of China's successful developmental formula. This mismatch creates policy volatility that democratic pressures amplify, making patient transformation politically infeasible even when technically well-designed.

The distinction between centralized polity and centralized state clarifies why institutional architecture matters. China features centralized polity—the Communist Party provides coherent national strategy—combined with decentralized state implementation where provinces, even cities, compete for growth and experiment with

innovations. Ang terms this “directed improvisation”: the center sets ambitious targets while provinces discover implementation pathways through controlled competition (Ang 2016). Strategic coherence enables adaptive capacity.

India's political architecture creates a fundamental mismatch between where decisions are contested and where capacity resides. The polity remains intensely decentralized and perpetually electoral—with states the size of European countries conducting overlapping election cycles that fragment policy attention. This political contestation makes coordinated action nearly impossible, whether it is controlling pollution across the National Capital Region of Delhi, harmonizing agricultural reforms across states with divergent rural politics, or implementing coherent industrial policy when each state pursues different priorities. Yet paradoxically, state capacity—fiscal resources, policy expertise, regulatory authority—remains heavily concentrated at the center (Rao 2020). The Union government controls major taxation and sets industrial policy, while states and local bodies that actually deliver services operate with severe resource constraints (Kapur 2020). This structure prevents both the local experimentation and adaptation essential for public goods provision and the intense inter-jurisdictional competition for business investment that drives efficiency in China or even the United States. Political decentralization without corresponding administrative capacity creates the worst of both worlds: neither unified national strat-

egy nor empowered local innovation (Aiyar 2013, 2022).

The centralization of power in the Prime Minister's Office since 2014 compounds rather than resolves this problem. There is widespread reportage on the decline in the authority of the Cabinet, reduction in the salience of the parliament as the law-making body, and decline in consultations across political parties through what are called standing committees. Even if power concentration in the PMO is aimed to overcome gridlock and accelerate decision-making, it cannot overcome limited capacity and implementation constraints that political decentralization creates.

Demonetization in November 2016, which overnight rendered 500 and 1,000 notes illegal tender, illustrates the dynamic. A tiny circle decided with four hours public notice, demonstrating valued decisiveness. Even if one tries to overlook its flawed economic logic, implementation crashed against India's complex reality of local capacity to manage banks and cash logistics. GDP growth declined two percentage points, with employment and output falling three percentage points in the immediate aftermath, particularly affecting and shrinking the cash-dependent informal sector (Chodorow-Reich et al. 2020). Political success (BJP won subsequent state elections on anti-corruption symbolism) coexisted with economic cost.

Farm laws in 2020–2021 show how centralization bypasses consensus-building that democratic implementation requires. The reforms had economic merit but centralization

rushed passage with minimal consultation. Federal structure resisted—Punjab and Haryana's agricultural markets constitute major revenue sources. Farmer protests mobilized democratically, sustaining year-long demonstrations. Government eventually repealed all three laws. Centralized decision-making enabled dramatic action, but lack of consensus building, required in a democracy, and decentralized resistance prevented implementation (Shah and Verma 2021).

Democratic timing creates particular pathologies. Electoral cycles demand visible results within five years. Production-Linked Incentives allocated across fourteen sectors simultaneously rather than sequencing strategically as China did with Special Economic Zones. Smart Cities announced one hundred cities rather than piloting five locations, learning, then scaling. Neither strategic coherence nor adaptive capacity results. Democratic pressures interact with this structural mismatch to produce volatility—ambitious announcements generating electoral visibility, implementation failures when constraints bind, focus on preserving political capital rather than learning and adjusting incrementally.

The personalization of policy, particularly in international relations, creates both opportunities and vulnerabilities. Leader-to-leader diplomacy can open doors and build relationships, as seen in India's engagements with Japan, Israel, and initially with China. However, when such relationships depend heavily on personal chemistry rather than institutional frameworks,

they become vulnerable to leadership changes or bilateral tensions. The varying dynamics with different U.S. administrations, or the shift in India-China relations post-Galwan, illustrate how personalized approaches can experience sharp discontinuities.

### ***State Capacity and Implementation Challenges***

The interaction of civilizational framing and democratic pressures affects state capacity for policy implementation. This manifests through several channels that deserve analytical attention.

Resource allocation patterns reflect the competing imperatives. Visible infrastructure projects and welfare schemes respond to democratic demands for tangible benefits. Symbolic initiatives can be packed as serving civilizational aspirations. Meanwhile, less visible but crucial investments in administrative capacity, judicial infrastructure, or educational quality may receive less priority. The PLI scheme's 2 lakh crore allocation, while substantial, might be compared to the resources needed for comprehensive educational reform or healthcare system strengthening. Regardless of which investment strategy is optimal, these allocation patterns demonstrate how the trilemma shapes fiscal priorities. It also hurts adaptivity: Smart Cities announced one hundred locations consuming 96,000 crore rupees rather than piloting five and learning (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs 2015).

Implementation bandwidth becomes stretched when policies require extensive state monitoring and enforce-

ment. Economic nationalism—whether through local content requirements, import substitution mandates, or complex subsidy schemes—demands significant administrative capacity. The same state apparatus must simultaneously deliver basic services, manage welfare programs, and execute development projects. With limited judicial capacity and bureaucratic resources, implementation bottlenecks emerge not from incompetence but from structural over-extension (Muralidharan 2024).

Human capital constraints represent perhaps the most binding limitation. Educational outcomes, as documented in successive ASER reports, show persistent learning deficits (ASER Centre 2023). Skills mismatches, highlighted in industry surveys, limit both manufacturing and service sector expansion (Wheebox 2025). These challenges require patient, long-term investments in educational quality, teacher training, and institutional reform. Yet the political economy of the trilemma—with its emphasis on visible achievements and symbolic victories—may not align with such patient capacity building.

The feedback effects are important to recognize. When state capacity constraints lead to implementation gaps, growth outcomes disappoint. This generates additional democratic pressure for immediate relief through welfare dole outs and more ambitious announcements that further strain resource allocation and implementation capacity. Unlike developmental states that could protect bureaucratic capacity from political interference, India's dem-

ocratic framework ensures that administrative machinery remains responsive to electoral dynamics.<sup>15</sup>

These mechanisms reveal how the trilemma operates in practice. Civilizational framing creates political commitments that constrain flexibility. Democratic pressures interact with centralized decision-making to produce rigid policies. Both dynamics affect state capacity for implementation. These are not failures of intention or commitment, but structural tensions arising from the attempt to simultaneously pursue developmental transformation, democratic responsiveness, and civilizational assertion. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for realistic assessment of India's developmental options within its institutional constraints.

### **Comparative Context: Why India Differs**

**T**he puzzle of India's economic nationalism becomes sharper when contrasted with East Asian success stories. Japan, South Korea, and China all employed nationalist economic strategies to achieve rapid development, yet India's similar rhetoric yields relatively disappointing results. This section examines why the same broad approach—economic nationalism—produces such different outcomes across these cases.

#### ***The East Asian Configuration: Development Plus Nationalism Without Democracy***

The East Asian developmental states share a common configuration despite

their institutional differences. Japan under Liberal Democratic Party hegemony (1955–1993), South Korea under military rule (1961–1987), and China under Communist Party governance (1978–present) all successfully combined developmental imperatives with nationalist mobilization while limiting democratic pressures.

These cases demonstrate how suppressing democratic pressures enabled patient capital accumulation and structural transformation. Japan's LDP managed electoral competition through factional balance and rural subsidies while insulating economic bureaucrats in MITI from political interference (Johnson 1982). The Economic Planning Board could pursue industrial policy without worrying about electoral cycles. South Korea's military government could suppress labor demands, force savings rates exceeding 30 percent and channel credit to strategic sectors without fear of electoral punishment (Amsden 1989). China's reforms under Deng Xiaoping proceeded through careful experimentation—household responsibility systems, township-village enterprises, special economic zones—implemented gradually over decades without electoral disruption (Vogel 2011).

Crucially, these states made nationalism serve developmental ends through export discipline (Wade 1990). Unlike import-substitution regimes that allowed inefficiency behind protective walls, East Asian states conditioned support on international competitiveness. Korean chaebols received subsidized credit but faced explicit export targets. Japanese keiretsu enjoyed

**Table 1:** East Asian Developmental Configurations

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Japan (1950s–1990s)</b>	<b>South Korea (1960s–1990s)</b>	<b>China (1978–present)</b>
Political System	LDP hegemony	Military rule → Democracy	One-party state
Nationalist Frame	Post-war recovery	Anti-colonial, security	Century of humiliation
Democratic Constraint	Minimal (managed)	Absent until 1987	Absent
Growth Achieved	8-10% (1950s-70s)	8-12% (1960s-90s)	8-11% (1978-2010s)
Key Institution	MITI coordination	EPB planning	State Council

administrative guidance but had to meet world market standards. Chinese state-owned enterprises underwent painful restructuring in the 1990s, with millions laid off to improve efficiency. This external discipline prevented the rent-seeking that plagued other nationalist economic experiments.

The institutional insulation of economic technocracy proved essential (Evans 1995). Japan's MITI officials, recruited from Tokyo University's law faculty, enjoyed high prestige and autonomy from political interference. Korea's Economic Planning Board reported directly to the president, bypassing legislative oversight. China's State Council technocrats, many trained as engineers, could pursue long-term plans without electoral considerations. This insulation allowed patient investments in education, infrastructure, and technology that might not yield returns for decades—precisely the time horizons democratic politics struggles to sustain.

It must also be emphasized that East Asian developmental success required deep integration with American-led security and economic architecture. Japan and South Korea developed under U.S. military protection, with American bases providing security guarantees that obviated massive defense spending while ensuring preferential market access during the Cold War (Cumings 1984). China, despite ideological differences, achieved integration through pragmatic accommodation—Deng Xiaoping's 1979 visit to America initiated decades of engagement that culminated in WTO entry in 2001 (Vogel 2011). The United States accepted massive trade imbalances, technology transfer, and currency manipulation from these countries during their high-growth phases, viewing economic development as serving broader strategic interests. Thus, nationalism and civilizational assertions were channelized towards economic growth, even as the U.S. controlled military in the case of

Japan and South Korea, and China kept its militarist ambitions quiet, not having any democracy to contend with, as it built its economic might.

### ***Why India Cannot Replicate the East Asian Path***

India's structural conditions differ fundamentally from the East Asian cases in ways that make their developmental path unavailable. These differences are not mere policy choices but deeply embedded institutional and social realities.

First, India's democratic institutions create genuine constraints that East Asian states could avoid or suppress (Bardhan 1984; Mehta 2003; Kohli 2004). As analyzed in Section 2, 75 years of competitive democracy have created path dependence that cannot be reversed. Elections occur regularly at national, state, and local levels, with reasonably frequent change of power. The courts, while imperfect, maintain sufficient independence to check executive overreach, as seen in their intervention on electoral bonds and environmental regulations. Civil society organizations, despite facing restrictions, continue to mobilize protests that can force policy reversals, as the farm laws demonstrated (Section 3). These democratic features, absent during East Asia's high-growth periods, fundamentally alter what policies are politically feasible, especially on economic reforms that may generate short-term distributional costs.

Second, the timing of India's developmental push creates fundamentally different international constraints. The WTO agreements that India itself

signed limit the policy tools available—tariffs face binding constraints, local content requirements invite challenges, and subsidies must navigate complex dispute mechanisms (Wade 2003). More critically, India lacks the deep integration with Western economies that enabled East Asian export-led growth. The patient American accommodation that tolerated Japanese and Korean mercantilism during the Cold War, and later welcomed China into global value chains despite its authoritarian system, is unavailable to India today. Where the United States once saw economic development as serving strategic interests—strengthening anti-communist allies or encouraging Chinese liberalization—it now views economic interdependence through security lenses. Arguably, India's multi-alignment stance prevents the deep strategic integration that would unlock comprehensive economic partnership (Tellis 2023), while trade negotiations with both America and Europe stall repeatedly over agricultural access and labor standards—frictions overlooked for earlier developers (Subramanian and Kessler 2014; Baldwin 2016).

This creates a paradoxical environment where India faces pressure to follow multilateral rules just as the rule-makers themselves embrace protectionism. The United States imposes tariffs on allies and rivals alike, Europe contemplates strategic autonomy, and industrial policy returns to fashion in developed countries. Meanwhile, technological and environmental contexts add further constraints: automation has

reduced manufacturing's employment intensity, modern supply chains require deep integration rather than sequential import substitution, and climate commitments impose carbon constraints that East Asian developers never faced. The result is an impossibly narrow pathway—India cannot embrace 20th-century protectionism due to WTO rules and climate commitments, cannot access the preferential treatment that made East Asian development possible, yet must navigate a 21st-century order fragmenting into geopolitical blocs. India cannot be the “China alternative” while maintaining strategic autonomy, yet abandoning autonomy would violate civilizational assertions central to domestic legitimacy.

Third, India's extreme diversity prevents the unified nationalist mobilization that East Asian states achieved. With 22 official languages, six major religions, and thousands of caste groups, India lacks the social homogeneity that facilitated Japan's post-war consensus or Korea's mobilization against the northern threat. Hindu nationalism, as discussed in Section 4, alienates 200 million Muslim citizens and creates tensions with neighboring countries. Regional identities remain strong—Tamil Nadu's dravidian politics, Bengal's cultural pride, and Punjab's distinct history all resist homogenizing narratives. This diversity is constitutionally protected and politically expressed through India's federal structure, where states control key developmental functions like education, land, and law enforcement. Unlike China, which can sup-

press minority identities in service of Han-dominated development, or Japan and Korea with their relative homogeneity, India must accommodate diversity even when it complicates economic strategy.<sup>16</sup>

Fourth, India's economic structure has already evolved along a different trajectory. Manufacturing never exceeded 17 percent of GDP, while services account for over 55 percent (Nayyar 2012; Rajan and Lamba 2024). This service-led pattern, unusual for a country at India's income level, reflects comparative advantages in English fluency, technical education, and perhaps even legal and regulatory frameworks inherited from British institutions. Attempting to force manufacturing growth through protection conflicts with this established structure. The PLI scheme's mixed results (Section 3) illustrate how difficult it is to create manufacturing competitiveness through subsidies when the broader economy is oriented toward services. The skilled workers prefer IT companies to factories, the infrastructure favors office parks over industrial zones, and the financial system better understands service businesses than manufacturing operations.

Fifth, demographic pressures create urgency that undermines patient institution-building. India adds more than 10 million people to its workforce annually, requiring massive job creation. Unlike East Asia during its demographic dividend, India cannot employ these workers in labor-intensive manufacturing at scale. The window for reaping demographic benefits is nar-

rowing—India will begin aging by 2040 or the latest by 2050, potentially getting old before getting rich. This urgency drives political leaders toward quick fixes and grand announcements rather than the patient capability-building that development requires.

***The Default Equilibrium: Democracy Plus Civilizationalism***

Given these structural constraints, India has settled into what Section 2 identified as the Democracy + Civilizationalism configuration, sacrificing full developmental transformation. This represents not a policy failure but the political-economic equilibrium that emerges from India's specific conditions.

This configuration proves politically stable even while developmentally suboptimal. Electoral victories continue—the BJP has won multiple national and state elections since 2014 and so has the Congress party and many other regional parties at the state level. Social stability is maintained despite economic disappointments through the compensatory satisfaction of welfare delivery (made more effective by technology) and civilizational pride. Growth at 5-6 percent prevents crisis even if it cannot deliver transformation. The key insight is that this equilibrium, once established, becomes self-reinforcing through the mechanisms analyzed in Section 4.

The contrast with China is particularly instructive. Both countries invoke civilizational narratives—China's "great rejuvenation" mirrors India's vishwaguru aspirations. Both pursue technological self-reliance and strate-

gic autonomy. Yet China can suppress democratic pressures that constrain India. When China's zero-COVID policy demanded economic sacrifice, the population had no electoral recourse (D. Wang 2025). When state-owned enterprise reform eliminated millions of jobs, workers could not vote out the government (Vogel 2011). India's democracy makes such painful adjustments politically impossible, forcing reliance on civilizational symbolism to maintain legitimacy when material delivery disappoints.

Historical precedent suggests this equilibrium can persist indefinitely. Many middle-income countries have maintained similar configurations for decades—contentious mass politics, nationalist rhetoric, and moderate growth—without either breakthrough or breakdown. Argentina since Perón, Mexico under PRI dominance, and Malaysia's bumiputera policies all show how populist mobilization fused with nationalism can produce stable political coalitions but middling economic outcomes (Acemoglu and Robinson 2019). India may be settling into a similar pattern at a lower income level, trapped not by the traditional middle-income trap but by a premature political-economy equilibrium that emerges from its unique trilemma.

The implications extend beyond India. As other diverse, democratic developing countries confront similar challenges—Indonesia with its island diversity, Nigeria with its ethnic divisions, Brazil with its regional disparities—India's experience suggests that

the East Asian path may be historically specific rather than universally applicable. The combination of democracy, diversity, and late development may require different models that accept more modest growth in exchange for political stability and social cohesion. Whether such models can deliver prosperity before demographic windows close remains an open question, one that India's trajectory will help answer.

### **International Consequences: Strategic Opacity and Isolation**

**L**ike other rising powers, India seeks international status and recognition (Mukherjee 2022). Yet the trilemma's domestic operation generates systematic international costs that further constrain India's developmental options. While India articulates a vision of multi-alignment and strategic autonomy, the interaction of democratic pressures and civilizational assertions produces strategic opacity that undermines international partnerships precisely when they are most needed for development.

#### ***The Multi-Alignment Paradox***

India's foreign policy doctrine, articulated most clearly by External Affairs Minister Jaishankar, posits that India can engage all major powers simultaneously without choosing sides (Jaishankar 2020). This multi-alignment strategy—distinct from non-alignment's ideological distance—promises to maximize partnerships while maintaining autonomy. The civilizational framing adds another dimension: India's an-

tiquity enables it to transcend binary choices that constrain ordinary nations.

Yet the practice of multi-alignment reveals fundamental contradictions. With the United States, India seeks strategic partnership through the Quad and defense agreements while resisting the democratic solidarity framework that Americans expect. India welcomes U.S. technology and investment but rejects pressure on democratic backsliding. The strategic relationship depends increasingly on China containment as the sole point of genuine convergence, a narrow foundation for comprehensive partnership (Tellis 2023; Madan 2025).

The Russia relationship exposes multi-alignment's costs most starkly. India's abstentions on Ukraine resolutions, expanded oil imports despite sanctions, and continued defense procurement including the S-400 system despite CAATSA threats all reflect genuine strategic calculations—defense dependence, energy needs, and China balancing. Yet these positions, however rational from India's perspective, erode trust with Western partners who view Ukraine as a fundamental test of international order. The attempted balance satisfies neither side: Russia sells advanced weapons to China while the West questions India's reliability (Madan and Raghavan 2022).

With China, the contradictions become almost paradoxical. India simultaneously treats China as a territorial threat requiring military mobilization and as an economic partner from whom it imports over \$120 billion annually. The border standoff since

Galwan coexists with deepening trade dependence—Chinese components remain essential for Indian manufacturing, from pharmaceuticals to electronics. This incoherent strategy—banning apps while importing the components of phones that run them and restricting important FDI in crucial industries such as electronic vehicles—reflects the trilemma's bind: democratic pressures demand tough posturing, developmental needs require Chinese inputs, and civilizational pride prevents acknowledging dependence (Scobell and Markey 2023; Reuters 2024; Sullivan and Bateman 2025).

The May 2025 Pakistan clash, analyzed in Section 3, crystallized multi-alignment's ultimate limitation: when India needed support, no major power strongly backed its position. The United States issued neutral statements, Russia abstained at the UN, China predictably opposed, and Europe urged restraint without acknowledging India's security concerns. This isolation wasn't random but reflected accumulated skepticism about India's strategic choices. Partners who feel India won't support their core interests reciprocate that transactional approach (Chellaney 2025c, 2025b, 2025a).

The deeper problem is that multi-alignment assumes India possesses sufficient weight to maintain contradictory positions without consequences. This might work for a \$10 trillion economy or a military superpower, but at India's current capacity, it appears less like strategic sophistication and more like strategic confusion. Demo-

cratic volatility, as discussed in Section 4, makes positions unpredictable, while civilizational rhetoric makes them seem non-negotiable, a combination that exhausts partners' patience.

### ***Regional Alienation: The Structural Dilemma***

India's size—population, economy, military—creates inevitable regional dominance, yet the trilemma prevents it from exercising benevolent hegemony that might generate willing followership. Democratic politics empowers domestic constituencies that constrain regional generosity, while civilizational assertions trigger sovereignty anxieties among neighbors.

The structural challenge is that India cannot escape geography. It shares borders with all South Asian states except Afghanistan and Maldives, accounting for over 70 percent of regional GDP and 80 percent of military capacity (Malone 2011).<sup>17</sup> This asymmetry means India's choices disproportionately affect neighbors, yet neighbors' concerns barely register in Indian domestic politics except as irritants. The resulting dynamic—consequential for them, marginal for India—breeds resentment.

Bangladesh illustrates the pattern. Despite India's crucial role in Bangladesh's independence and extensive development assistance, public opinion has soured dramatically. The Citizenship Amendment Act and National Register of Citizens, driven by domestic political calculations, were perceived as questioning Bangladeshi nationhood itself—implying that real Bangladesh-

is would naturally seek Indian citizenship (Chakravarty 2019; Ranjan 2020). Water-sharing disputes persist because West Bengal's political dynamics prevent concessions that would ease Bangladesh's seasonal crises (Crow and Singh 2009). The current relationship seemed to have depended precariously on personal equations with Sheikh Hasina, who was the long serving Prime Minister till the recent coup in 2024, rather than institutional foundations, making it vulnerable to political change.

Nepal's alienation reflects similar dynamics. The 2015 economic blockade—whether officially authorized or not—created lasting trauma about Indian bullying (Sharma 2019). The incorporation of Kalapani in India's new maps, responding to domestic political pressures after Article 370's revocation, inflamed Nepali nationalism (Nayak 2020). When Indian politicians invoke cultural connections—claiming Buddha as Indian or referencing shared Hindu heritage—it triggers fierce backlash from Nepalis asserting distinct identity (Times of India 2020). Young Nepalis increasingly, many of whom were instrumental in organizing a recent rebellion that overthrew the current government in 2025, view India as a hegemon to resist rather than a neighbor to embrace, opening space for Chinese infrastructure and influence.

Sri Lanka navigates between economic dependence on India and political wariness of Indian dominance. Tamil Nadu's regional interests intersect with New Delhi's Sri Lanka policy, particularly regarding fishing rights and most importantly issues of justice

for the ethnically Tamil population post the civil war (Basrur 2023). The Hambantota port episode, while primarily about Chinese debt-trap diplomacy, also reflected Sri Lanka's desire to balance Indian influence (Pande 2025). Even Bhutan, traditionally India's closest partner, now explores options with China, partly to gain leverage in hydro-power negotiations with India.

Pakistan represents the extreme case where democratic politics and civilizational narratives make normality a difficult proposition. Pakistan's existence as an Islamic state carved from ancient Bharat wounds civilizational narratives about undivided India. Any attempts at rapprochement must be balanced with realpolitik back home, in addition to, of course, complete unpredictability on who actually speaks for the Pakistani people. The May 2025 dynamics showed how this bilateral dysfunction exhausts international patience.

China exploits these regional tensions systematically. It offers infrastructure without political conditions, alternative markets without historical baggage, and most importantly, leverage against Indian dominance. The Belt and Road Initiative's regional success—every South Asian country except India and Bhutan participates—demonstrates neighbors' desire for options (Pande 2025). India cannot match China's financial resources, and the trilemma prevents matching China's strategic patience. Democratic pressures demand sharp edges in negotiations, while civilizational pride prevents the humility that might ease neighbors' concerns.

### ***The Democracy Perception Gap***

Perhaps the most consequential international cost emerges from the growing gap between India's democratic self-image and external perceptions of democratic decline. This perception problem transcends specific indices or Western bias—it reflects substantive concerns that affect India's soft power and partnership possibilities.

International assessments paint a troubling picture. Freedom House downgraded India to “Partly Free,” V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index places India below Bangladesh and Nepal, and Reporters Without Borders ranks India 161st of 180 countries in press freedom (Reporters Without Borders (RSF) 2023; Freedom House 2024; V-Dem Institute 2024). While methodological debates, and frankly allegations of outright bias, about these indices have merit (Sanyal and Arora 2022); however, the trend across multiple measures does point toward a genuine problem.

India's responses often worsen perception problems. When BBC offices were raided following a documentary critical of Modi, it confirmed narratives about media intimidation (Committee to Protect Journalists 2023). FCRA restrictions on civil society organizations, however justified by sovereignty concerns, appear to external observers as suppressing dissent (Al Jazeera 2020). Academic researchers facing visa denials or detention—even those sympathetic to India—create influential critics in Western universities (TRT World 2025). These tactical responses to spe-

cific irritants generate strategic costs to India's reputation.

The democracy debate matters because it was India's key differentiator from China. During the Cold War and after, India enjoyed attention and sympathy disproportionate to its economic weight because it represented democratic possibility in the developing world. Indian Prime Ministers traveling abroad could claim moral authority partly because India, whatever its flaws, remained democratic. This soft power asset enabled India to punch above its weight diplomatically (Aiyar et al. 2021).

Current trajectories risk squandering this historical advantage. When Western leaders meet Prime Minister Modi, they increasingly compartmentalize—strategic partnership despite democratic concerns rather than because of shared values. The Quad's emphasis on “democratic” cooperation becomes awkward when one member's democratic credentials face questioning. European parliamentarians pass resolutions on Kashmir and religious freedom that complicate trade negotiations (European Parliament 2019). American watchers on religious freedom try to designate India to be a country of “special concern” (Congressional Research Service 2024).

The civilizational defense—that Western democracy indices reflect colonial mindsets and India follows its own democratic traditions—has intellectual merit but diplomatic costs. When every criticism is dismissed as Western bias, genuine problems go unaddressed. When Jaishankar lectures

Western audiences about their hypocrisy, YouTube clips may go viral in India but diplomatic capital erodes. The defensive posture suggests insecurity rather than confidence.

Yet legitimate grievances exist. Western countries do apply double standards—Saudi Arabia and Pakistan face less criticism than India despite far worse human rights records. Business continues with authoritarian regimes while India faces scrutiny. The focus on India's religious tensions ignores Europe's own struggles with pluralism. These hypocrisies deserve recognition, but dwelling on them doesn't address India's actual challenges or rebuild damaged perceptions.

### ***Synthesis of Impediments to International Engagement***

The international consequences analyzed here—strategic isolation through multi-alignment's contradictions, regional alienation despite overwhelming power, and perception costs from democratic erosion—directly result from the trilemma's operation. Democratic pressures that turn populist drive performative toughness that alienates partners. Civilizational assertions trigger sovereignty anxieties and value conflicts. Both prevent the patient institution-building and consistent engagement that developmental partnerships require. These aren't temporary diplomatic setbacks but structural consequences of India's political-economy configuration, further constraining the international cooperation necessary for breaking out of middling outcomes.

### **Path Forward: Realistic Adjustments Within Constraints**

The trilemma's binding nature does not condemn India to stasis. While the simultaneous pursuit of developmental transformation, democratic responsiveness, and civilizational assertion remains impossible, realistic adjustments within these constraints could improve outcomes. This section examines feasible pathways that work with India's political-economic structure rather than against it.

#### ***Why the Trilemma Persists***

Before examining alternatives, we must acknowledge why the current configuration proves so durable. The Democracy + Civilizationalism equilibrium, while developmentally suboptimal, exhibits remarkable political stability. Electoral victories validate the strategy—the BJP has won multiple national elections and expanded its state-level presence, even as many other smaller parties have managed to hold on to power in their regional bastions. When growth disappoints, civilizational pride and simplistic welfare doles provide compensatory satisfaction. The opposition, rather than offering alternative economic visions, and often found short on competitive nationalism engages in competitive populism that reinforces the framework.

International developments paradoxically strengthen this equilibrium. Deglobalization trends make Indian protectionism seem less deviant. China's assertiveness validates strategic

autonomy rhetoric. Democratic backsliding worldwide (Diamond 2015) reduces pressure for liberal reforms. The configuration that seemed anomalous in the 1990s liberal moment now appears aligned with global trends toward populist nationalism (Fukuyama 2022).

Path dependence has also deepened. Years of civilizational rhetoric and short-term distributional fixes rather than sustained public goods provision create sunk costs that make reversal politically expensive. Atmanirbhar Bharat cannot be abandoned—it is too politically entrenched as a rhetorical and cognitive device. Protected industries have organized to defend their privileges. Welfare delivery above and beyond minimal social protection has also become an expectation, especially with increased effectiveness at targeting through digital technology. Bureaucrats have adapted to the prevailing framework, making alternative approaches seem unrealistic. These accumulated commitments create lock-in effects that persist even when original justifications weaken.

### ***Realistic Pathways for Improvement***

Given these constraints, three pathways offer potential for improvement without requiring fundamental political-economic transformation.

First, India could reframe its development strategy to align with structural realities rather than fighting them. Instead of forcing manufacturing through protection, India could embrace its service-led trajectory while embedding manufacturing within ser-

vice strengths. Engineering services, product design, and pharmaceutical research leverage India's human capital advantages while creating higher-value employment than assembly operations. The global capability centers that already employ over two million Indians demonstrate this model's viability (Ghani and O'Connell 2012; NASSCOM 2024; Rajan and Lamba 2024). More low skilled service jobs will accumulate through multipliers effects of rise in tradable services jobs, and greater degrees of urbanization, a claim bolstered by recent research (Avdiu et al. 2022).

This reframing need not abandon civilizational rhetoric and certainly not civilizational aspirations. "Knowledge economy" aligns with ancient India's intellectual traditions better than factory assembly. Nationalist terminology could celebrate innovation rather than import substitution. The Vishwaguru narrative fits better with India becoming a global knowledge and high-tech services hub than a manufacturing platform competing with Bangladesh and Vietnam for low-wage assembly. To be sure, India would do well to capture those industries as well, but it does not need to go all guns blazing on attempting to mimic the East Asian model, what (Pritchett, Woolcock, and Andrews 2013) call isomorphic mimicry. Democratic politics could claim credit for wealth creation through high-skill jobs and tradable services and services embedded in manufacturing, and the concomitant distribution through the expansion of the welfare state.

Second, human capital investment represents the binding constraint regardless of development strategy. India's learning crisis—documented extensively in ASER reports—undermines both manufacturing and service overlook. Yet addressing this requires patient investment that democratic cycles discourage and civilizational projects displace. The solution lies not in grand schemes but in incremental improvements that generate visible benefits within electoral timeframes. Commitment to decentralization in governance through funds, functions and functionaries seems like the optimal solution (Rajan and Lamba 2024).

Technology offers possibilities here. Digital education platforms could improve learning outcomes more quickly than traditional infrastructure development. The JAM trinity (Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile) that revolutionized welfare delivery could be repurposed for education and health. Direct benefit transfers for learning outcomes could align incentives. These approaches could work with democratic pressures for visible delivery while building long-term capabilities.

Third, federal experimentation could bypass central government constraints. States like Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Telangana have pursued distinct development strategies despite national rhetoric. Their success in attracting investment and creating employment demonstrates that sub-national units retain policy space. The trilemma binds less tightly at state levels where pragmatic governance some-

times trumps ideological positioning.

This federal pathway requires accepting greater divergence in outcomes (Singh 2015). Successful states would pull further ahead while laggards stagnate. Yet this inequality might prove more politically sustainable than uniformly middling outcomes. Dynamic states could demonstrate alternative models that, if successful, might gradually influence national policy.

### ***Managing International Relationships***

Within multi-alignment's contradictions, pragmatic adjustments could reduce costs. Rather than claiming strategic sophistication, India could acknowledge tradeoffs more honestly. With the United States, focusing on specific areas of genuine convergence—technology cooperation, China balancing—while acknowledging values differences might prove more sustainable than pretending comprehensive partnership. With Russia, accepting that the relationship is historic but still transactional rather than strategic could reduce disappointments.

Regional relationships require particular recalibration. The civilizational rhetoric that alienates neighbors serves little purpose—Bangladesh and Nepal won't accept Indian hegemony regardless of historical narratives. Pragmatic engagement focused on mutual benefits rather than cultural claims could reduce tensions. The Gujral Doctrine's non-reciprocal generosity, while politically difficult domestically, generated more regional goodwill than current transactional approaches.

### ***Synthesis towards a Productive Path Forward***

Most importantly, India needs internal clarity about priorities. The attempt to simultaneously be a democratic exemplar, civilizational state, and developmental success story creates strategic confusion. Choosing priorities—even implicitly—would enable more coherent policy. If growth matters most, some civilizational rhetoric must be softened. If democratic values are paramount, certain efficiency losses must be accepted. If civilizational assertion is essential, developmental disappointments, at least in the short to medium term, become inevitable. The current attempt to maximize all three guarantees achieving none fully.

These adjustments, while modest, could improve outcomes within structural constraints. They require no constitutional changes, no abandonment of democracy, and no revolutionary transformation. They work with India's federal structure, service-oriented economy, and democratic politics rather than against them. Most importantly, they acknowledge that the trilemma cannot be solved, only managed. The choice is not between transformation and stagnation but between pragmatic adaptation and ideological rigidity. India's future prosperity depends on recognizing this distinction.

### **Conclusions**

**T**his essay has argued that India faces a governance trilemma—three irreconcilable imperatives

that cannot be simultaneously satisfied given its institutional context. The developmental need for rapid economic transformation requiring sustained 9-10 percent growth conflicts with democratic pressures for immediate redistribution and accommodation of diverse interests. Both clash with civilizational assertions that frame economic policy as identity statements about India's distinctive path. The result is a politically stable but developmentally suboptimal equilibrium: Democracy plus Civilizationalism without full Development. This configuration, reinforced through feedback loops of policy path dependence and institutional degradation, explains why economic nationalism persists despite disappointing outcomes and why it cannot be channelized to rally around economic growth as in the East Asian and arguably even earlier in European narratives. The impossibility of satisfying all three imperatives simultaneously is not a policy failure but a structural constraint arising from India's specific conditions—premature democracy, extreme diversity, service-led economic structure, and late development in a fragmenting global order.

### ***Limitations and Caveats***

Any attempt to explain phenomena as complex as India's development trajectory through a single theoretical framework inevitably involves simplification. This essay covers enormous empirical ground—from trade negotiations to industrial policy, from regional relations to global perceptions—through the lens of the trilemma. Such breadth necessarily leaves loose ends that don't fit neatly

into the framework and invites counterarguments about alternative explanations. The trilemma is offered not as a complete theory of everything about India but as a useful analytical tool for understanding why certain patterns persist despite their apparent irrationality, at least from an economic perspective.

Most importantly, this analysis should not obscure India's remarkable achievements. As Lamba and Subramanian (2020) document, India's sustained growth while maintaining democracy represents a historical anomaly. Among countries that were poor in 1960, India is virtually alone in maintaining both sustained economic growth and continuous democracy for over four decades (since 1980). This "improbable" achievement—growing at 4.5 percent per capita for 40 years while preserving democratic institutions and pulling hundreds of millions out of poverty—deserves recognition. That India achieved this while managing extraordinary linguistic, religious, and cultural diversity makes the accomplishment even more remarkable. The European Union struggles to maintain cohesion with 27 member states; India manages comparable diversity within a single democratic polity.

This essay should be read as a positive account rather than a normative exercise. The Democracy plus Civilizationalism configuration may be entirely rational given India's constraints. Prioritizing democracy over developmental transformation may be the only way India can manage its contradictions

and maintain national cohesion. Without democratic pressure valves, the tensions from rapid economic change could tear apart a society as diverse as India's. China can suppress regional and ethnic tensions through authoritarian control; India lacks this option and perhaps should be grateful for that constraint. Democracy may slow growth, but it prevents catastrophic errors—no Great Leap Forward, no Cultural Revolution, no forced population controls (for the most part) with devastating social consequences.

Similarly, civilizational assertions, while constraining economic optimization, may serve essential psychological and social functions. When the temporal horizon extends to infinity—thinking in civilizational rather than quarterly earnings timeframes—cultural continuity may rationally override economic maximization. India's five-thousand-year civilizational consciousness creates a different calculus from societies thinking in decades or even centuries. The Vishwaguru aspiration isn't merely about GDP rankings but about sustaining a distinctive worldview through historical time. Economic power matters, but perhaps not enough to sacrifice democratic accountability or civilizational identity. After all, the Soviet Union achieved rapid industrialization but disappeared in seventy years; India's civilizational continuity can claim to span millennia.

The framework may also underestimate adaptation and learning. While the current configuration appears locked in, political-economic

equilibria can shift. The 1991 reforms seemed impossible until crisis made them inevitable. The demographic transition now underway—India’s fertility rate has fallen below replacement—will ease some pressures while creating others. Technological change, particularly in services where India has advantages, might enable growth through different channels than manufacturing-led industrialization. The trilemma binds tightly now but might loosen under different conditions.

### ***Theoretical Implications and the Global Order***

The theoretical implications of India’s trilemma, initially outlined in Section 2.5, contribute to three established literatures—democratic development theory, studies on nationalism and civilizational states, and late development. Having examined the empirical evidence, transmission mechanisms, and comparative cases, we can now see how India’s experience illuminates broader transformations in the contemporary global order.

Beyond the specific contributions to these three literatures discussed earlier, India’s trilemma reveals something more fundamental about the emerging world system. India represents a democratic variant of the civilizational state, contrasting sharply with authoritarian versions in China, Russia, and Turkey. While Xi Jinping’s “Chinese Dream,” Putin’s “Russian World,” and Erdoğan’s “New Turkey” deploy civilizational narratives to justify concentrated power and suppress dissent, India’s civilizational assertions must operate within

democratic constraints (Coker 2019). This creates fundamentally different dynamics—civilizational rhetoric in India requires electoral validation and faces parliamentary opposition, media scrutiny, and judicial review. The result is civilizational democracy rather than civilizational authoritarianism, a distinction with profound implications for both domestic governance and international behavior.

This distinction matters because civilizational assertions are proliferating globally, even in societies without India’s historical depth. From Orban’s “illiberal democracy” invoking Hungary’s Christian heritage to Trump’s “Make America Great Again” reimagining American exceptionalism, political movements increasingly frame contemporary policy choices through mythologized history (Krastev 2018). This represents what Larry Diamond calls the “democratic recession”—democracy retreating not through military coups but through elected leaders systematically undermining liberal norms while maintaining electoral legitimacy (Diamond 2015). India’s experience suggests this isn’t simply democratic failure but perhaps the emergence of a different democratic form—one that prioritizes identity over efficiency, historical continuity over economic transformation, cultural authenticity over technocratic optimization.

For the post-1945 multilateral order, these trends pose existential challenges. International institutions from the UN to the WTO were designed assuming states would prioritize eco-

conomic welfare and security cooperation over identity assertions. The architects of Bretton Woods and San Francisco expected nationalism to fade as interdependence deepened. Instead, we see multiple powers simultaneously pursuing civilizational rather than interest-based foreign policies. The WTO cannot adjudicate between different conceptions of historical justice. The UN Security Council cannot reconcile incompatible aspirations when permanent members see their roles as civilizational rather than merely sovereign representatives. Climate negotiations exemplify this challenge. Technical solutions exist for emissions reduction and adaptation financing, but they founder on historical battlegrounds.

Yet India's trilemma also suggests possibilities for navigating this new landscape. If civilizational democracy represents a stable equilibrium—neither rapidly transforming into prosperity nor collapsing into authoritarianism—then patient engagement rather than transformative pressure might be appropriate. Understanding why democratic developing countries choose identity over growth, stability over

transformation, civilizational framings over economic optimization, might enable more realistic cooperation. Rather than assuming all countries will converge on similar developmental paths, recognizing different political-economic equilibria might permit more modest but achievable coordination.

### ***A High Level Take Away***

A key insight is that the trilemma isn't merely India's challenge but increasingly a global condition. As more societies face tensions between economic optimization, democratic pressures, and identity assertions, India's experience becomes less exceptional and more exemplary. The question isn't whether countries can escape these trade-offs but how they manage them. India's particular resolution—accepting slower growth to maintain democratic accountability and civilizational pride—may frustrate economists and disappoint developmentalists. But in a world where purely technocratic governance has lost legitimacy and purely authoritarian models face their own contradictions, India's imperfect balance might offer lessons for other diverse democracies navigating similar pressures.

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## Notes

- 1 See (Lamba and Subramanian 2020) and references therein for the claims made here, including on the improbability of India's success as a democratic country at low levels of per capita income and high levels of diversity, still achieving high enough economic growth. The only other country along with India that managed sustained high economic growth with reasonable levels of democracy is Botswana.
- 2 The trilemma framework in that sense is inspired from Dani Rodrik's political trilemma of democracy, national sovereignty and deep global economic integration (Rodrik 2011).
- 3 References to academic scholarship backing assertions made here and in the preceding paragraph are provided in Sections 2 and 3.
- 4 There are various numbers on this and because of poor data quality it is hard to say with certainty. But, most estimates in the last few years peg the number of new entrants into the labor force at more than 10 million.
- 5 Civilizational framing has long shaped Indian policy, but its character has mutated over time. Nehruvian India invoked ancient heritage for nation-building yet embedded these assertions within a syncretic framework that prioritized minority protections (Khilnani 1997). For instance, while the Hindu Code Bills of the 1950s modernized Hindu personal law, Muslim and Christian personal laws were largely left in their traditional forms to avoid deepening post-Partition insecurities. However, critics argue the status quo has remained for reasons of electoral politics and that this approach suppressed the articulation of historical trauma stemming from centuries of Islamic rule—specifically regarding iconoclasm, discriminatory taxation (*jizya*), and religious violence (Naipaul 1977; Majumdar 1951–1977). Under Narendra Modi's leadership since 2014, civilizational assertion has shifted toward a clearer Hindu-centric nationalism, drawing on historical grievances, and signaling a majoritarian departure from the previous consensus on minority accommodation.
- 6 One can argue that Rao's time saw the demolition of the Babri Mosque and demands for Ram Temple, and may not fit this configuration precisely. However, two factors diminish its impact on democracy and development. First, as with Gandhi's murder in 1948, the fact that mosque had actually been destroyed reduced the moral force of the Hindu nationalist movement in practical and secular matters of governance, even if temporarily; and second, both the Rao and Vajpayee governments largely kept the agenda of technocratic reforms separate from culture wars (Sitapati 2016, 2021; Choudhary 2025).
- 7 In fact, Liah Greenfeld has also argued that even before democratic demands became a norm, nationalism, and the dignity that it brought the masses, was a driving force behind economic growth in England, France, Russia, Germany and the United States (Greenfeld 1992, 2001).
- 8 It is important here to underscore selection bias in choosing East Asian countries for Configuration 2—there is a long list of autocracies or semi-autocracies where in-

cumbents do not face democratic contestations and also do not produce sustainable development. The argument is not that Configuration “does,” but that “it can” deliver development at the back of a civilizational glue.

- 9 If the primary objective of the state is stability, to keep the nation together, then deepening democracy at the cost of any development would be optimal, for it can be argued that given India's size, diversity and poverty at the time of independence, democracy was the only pressure valve through which social mediation could be designed while keeping firm the contours of the nation.
- 10 Data here are based on World Development Indicators, World Bank and Government of India reports.
- 11 This is, of course, before the renewed tariff wars across the globe, initiated in part by the US under President Trump in the beginning of 2025.
- 12 This has been widely reported in the media—for example, the Prime Minister invoking slavery to foreign goods in speeches in 2022 and 2023 and Gandhiji's Talisman to withdraw from RCEP in 2019, etc.
- 13 The current Chief Economic Adviser of India, V. Anantha Nageswaran, has also pointed out the suboptimality of this strategy—continuously surging imports from China, even as Chinese FDI remains barred (Reuters 2024).
- 14 Many scholarly studies analyze pieces of the mechanisms asserted here. For example, (Chhibber and Verma 2018) argues Indian politics is, and has been, deeply ideological. However, this ideology is not based on the traditional left-right (class-based) spectrum of Western Europe. The Indian party system is structured by two stable competing ideological cleavages that have their roots in the country's founding debates: the politics of statism and the politics of recognition.
- 15 The feedback loop reflects Hirschman's “exit-voice” dilemma (Hirschman 1970). Indian citizens facing disappointing outcomes have no meaningful exit options, making democratic voice through electoral channels their only response mechanism. However, short electoral cycles channel this voice into demands for immediate welfare relief rather than patient capacity-building. Unlike developmental states where authoritarian control suppressed political voice but export discipline created market-based exit pressure forcing efficiency, India faces intense domestic voice with weakened exit discipline from international competition. The result is a voice trap where democratic pressure itself degrades the state capacity needed to address the problems generating that pressure.
- 16 To be clear, this is not a value judgment for the diversity described here is fundamental to the Indian conceptualization of its own core, the pluralism inherent in the culture. The argument is the tension of its co-existence with the development and democratic imperative of the modern nation state, especially in comparison to the rapid growers of the twentieth century.
- 17 To be formally correct, India shares a maritime border with Maldives and a 106 km land border with Afghanistan in the region of Gilgit-Baltistan, which is currently administered by Pakistan but is disputed land claimed by both India and Pakistan.

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# The Stack and the State: India's Digital Governance Model as Technopolitical Power

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## ABSTRACT

Since 2014, India has made digital infrastructure central to its governance and diplomacy, positioning itself as a model for the Global South through platforms such as Aadhaar, UPI, and India Stack. This paper argues that India's digital transformation constitutes a distinct form of technopolitical power: one that consolidates authority domestically while projecting modernity and self-reliance internationally. Tracing continuities between earlier techno-scientific statecraft and contemporary Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), the paper shows how efficiency and rationality are mobilised as political ideals that obscure questions of exclusion, surveillance, and accountability. Drawing on secondary data across sectors such as health and education, it highlights how digital systems reshape welfare delivery, bureaucratic discretion, and citizen participation, producing uneven outcomes and new modes of resistance. Internationally, India's export of DPI and AI partnerships reflects both an assertion of sovereignty and a dependence on foreign computational infrastructures. The paper situates these tensions within broader debates on technocratic governance, democratic backsliding, and digital sovereignty, arguing that India's model exemplifies how states use infrastructure to mediate legitimacy, power, and global influence in the algorithmic age.

**Keywords:** Digital governance; Technopolitical power; India Stack; Digital public infrastructure (DPI); AI and sovereignty; State capacity and legitimacy

## La pila y el Estado: el modelo de gobernanza digital de la India como poder tecnopolítico

### RESUMEN

Desde 2014, India ha hecho de la infraestructura digital un elemento central de su gobernanza y diplomacia, posicionándose como

modelo para el Sur Global a través de plataformas como Aadhaar, UPI e India Stack. Este artículo argumenta que la transformación digital de India constituye una forma distintiva de poder tecnopolítico: uno que consolida la autoridad a nivel nacional a la vez que proyecta modernidad y autosuficiencia a nivel internacional. Al rastrear las continuidades desde la política tecnocientífica anterior hasta la Infraestructura Pública Digital (IPD) contemporánea, el artículo muestra cómo la eficiencia y la racionalidad se movilizan como ideales políticos que oscurecen cuestiones de exclusión, vigilancia y rendición de cuentas. Basándose en datos secundarios de sectores como la salud y la educación, destaca cómo los sistemas digitales reconfiguran la prestación de asistencia social, la discreción burocrática y la participación ciudadana, generando resultados desiguales y nuevas formas de resistencia. A nivel internacional, la exportación de IPD e IA por parte de India refleja tanto una afirmación de soberanía como una dependencia de infraestructuras computacionales extranjeras. El artículo sitúa estas tensiones dentro de debates más amplios sobre la gobernanza tecnocrática, el retroceso democrático y la soberanía digital, argumentando que el modelo de la India ejemplifica cómo los Estados utilizan la infraestructura para mediar la legitimidad, el poder y la influencia global en la era algorítmica.

**Palabras clave:** Gobernanza digital; Poder tecnopolítico; India Stack; Infraestructura pública digital (IPD); IA y soberanía; Capacidad y legitimidad del Estado

## 堆栈与国家：作为技术政治力量的印度数字治理模式

### 摘要

自2014年以来，印度已将数字基础设施置于其治理和外交的核心地位，并通过Aadhaar、UPI和India Stack等平台将自身定位为全球南方国家的典范。本文认为，印度的数字化转型构成了一种独特的技术政治权力形式：它既巩固了国内的权威，又向国际展现了现代化和自力更生的形象。本文追溯了从早期科技治国方略到当代数字公共基础设施(DPI)的延续性，揭示了效率和理性如何被动员为政治理想，从而掩盖了排斥、监控和问责等问题。本文利用卫生和教育等领域的次级数据，着重阐述了数字系统如何重塑福利供给、官僚自由裁量权和公民参与，从而导致结果不均和新的抵抗模式。

在国际上，印度对DPI和人工智能合作的输出既体现了其对主权的维护，也反映了其对外国计算基础设施的依赖。本文将这些矛盾置于更广泛的、关于技术官僚治理、民主倒退和数字主权的辩论框架下进行探讨，并指出印度的模式体现了国家如何在算法时代利用基础设施来调和合法性、权力和全球影响力。

关键词：数字治理，技术政治权力，印度堆栈，数字公共基础设施 (DPI)，人工智能与主权，国家能力与合法性

**A**round the world, governments are turning to artificial intelligence not just to modernise public services, but to reshape how authority is exercised. In the United States, the declaration that a second Trump administration would be “artificial intelligence (AI)-first” reflects a trend where emerging technologies are seen less as tools for reform and more as instruments of centralised control (Metcalf and Young 2025). This turn is driven in part by the hype that surrounds digital innovation: the belief that data systems, automation, and platforms can deliver frictionless, efficient governance while bypassing the messiness of politics. Rather than emphasising public deliberation or institutional accountability, digital governance agendas often privilege speed, scale, and executive control. While national trajectories differ, the global convergence around digital systems raises critical questions about how states construct legitimacy, manage dissent, and reshape citizen–state relations in the digital age.

Since 2014, India has expanded its digital infrastructure in governance, accompanied by a broader political shift toward centralised leadership

and majoritarian rhetoric. This digital transformation of governance has become a defining feature of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s tenure, both in terms of domestic policy and in how India presents itself on the global stage. This paper focuses on citizen-facing infrastructural layers, such as Aadhaar, Unified Payments Interface (UPI), and India Stack<sup>1</sup> as the programmable substrate through which the Indian state performs rule (i.e., identity authentication, payments, and data flows).<sup>2</sup> Initiatives such as “AI for All” and the international promotion of India Stack reflect how digital infrastructure and private-sector innovation are framed as tools for inclusive development. This export of governance models and technical expertise is increasingly central to India’s diplomacy, positioning itself as an alternative to Silicon Valley’s corporate-driven platforms, Europe’s regulation-first approach, and China’s highly centralised, surveillance-oriented model of digital governance.

Yet India’s use of technology as a tool of governance is not new. From the nuclear program to the Green Revolution, to Aadhaar and now, to AI For All, the Indian state has relied on

techno-scientific expertise to shape its development while projecting its technological ambitions globally. The post-2014 period is thus not distinguished by the presence of tech governance, but the consolidation of digital infrastructure as a central instrument of both domestic administration and global export. Platforms such as Aadhaar, UPI, and the India Stack (a suite of interoperable digital infrastructure layers) are increasingly positioned as models of efficient governance and form the core of India's exportable Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) initiative. Where earlier phases of South-South cooperation focused on showcasing technical capability, the current moment marks a shift toward the export of complete governance architectures as development templates. This digital self-imagining aligns with the BJP's broader worldview of a self-reliant, globally ascendant India, blending modernist aspirations with nationalist pride. Rather than seeing the Modi-era as a break from the past (Awasthi et al. 2024), we can trace how it intensifies long-standing technocratic traditions while adding a new layer of global digital diplomacy and centralised data power.

This digital turn has intensified anxieties and contestations around what is left out of increasingly automated, data-driven governance. While scholars have long asserted the capacity of technological progress to improve public service delivery (Sindakis 2024), they have also warned that it can flatten pluralism and neuter democratic institutions (Kreps and Kriner 2023). Civil society groups and activists have raised

significant concerns about surveillance, exclusion, and the erosion of democratic deliberation in favour of technical decision-making. Dattani (2020) compels us to look at Aadhaar, India Stack, and strategies of e-governance in continuity with colonial forms of governmentality. In this analysis, digital tools see people not as citizens but grouped into populations that are legible to the state through empirical and behavioural categories, giving officials a set of "rationally manipulable instruments" through which to target policy (Chatterjee 2004). These technologies, she argues, reduce interactions into digital transactions and enable "the weaving of corporate into government" (Dattani 2020). This framework, however, risks us overlooking the lived realities of digital governance: from everyday exclusions and structural violence (Dreze et al. 2017) to the possibilities it opens for participation and contestation (Kulal et al. 2024; Sánchez-Cacicedo 2024).

This paper, then, considers whether the government's use of digital infrastructure accelerates existing tendencies in the Indian state (such as centralisation of authority and bureaucratic opacity) or whether it introduces qualitatively new forms of control through automation, predictive governance, and infrastructural power. I also ask how these domestic dynamics, far from being isolated, are now actively shaping India's international relations. Here, I do not intend to collapse technology and its adoption by the Indian state into mere surveillance, sovereignty, or miracle, but rather to understand the symbolic role that AI, digital gover-

nance, and its accompanying discourses of techno-utopianism<sup>3</sup> play in India's domestic and international leadership. In the process, I build on scholars who show how digital infrastructures in the Global South often serve as instruments of centralised statecraft as well as markers of aspirational modernity (Philip 2016; Irani 2015).

In what follows, I unpack how digital infrastructure in India operates as a domestic technology of rule and a globally exported model of governance. I open by invoking mid-century critiques of technology to show how ideals of efficiency (as a performance ideal) and rationality (as justification for technocratic decision-making) have long served to obscure the political stakes of technological power. I then situate India's contemporary digital turn within a longer history of technocratic statecraft, showing how earlier configurations of planning, statistics, and computational governance laid the groundwork for today's DPI. The next section examines how these systems are unevenly embedded across sectors such as welfare, health, education, and policing, revealing both their enabling potential and their exclusions, as well as the bureaucratic improvisations and civic contestations that shape their implementation. The final section turns outward, analysing India's promotion of DPI and AI partnerships as instruments of diplomatic strategy and norm-setting, particularly within the Global South.

Across these sections, the paper argues that India's digital transformation is not simply a story of techno-

logical progress, but one of political legitimacy, symbolic projection, and assertive geopolitical positioning through digital infrastructure. Domestically, the expansion of platforms like Aadhaar, UPI, and India Stack consolidates authority in the executive branch by embedding data-driven oversight into welfare, policing, and education, often at the expense of institutional checks and democratic deliberation. Symbolically, digital governance is framed as proof of India's modernity and self-reliance, reinforcing the BJP's broader vision of a technologically advanced, globally respected Hindu-majority nation. Digital India's narrative of modernity is intertwined with majoritarian nationalism, where technological prowess is cast as civilisational revival. Internationally, India promotes its DPI as an exportable model for the Global South, aiming to compete with Silicon Valley's corporate platforms and China's state-led surveillance systems, and to position itself as a leader in setting norms for AI and digital development. However, these ambitions face significant constraints. Politically, the centralisation of authority has provoked resistance from civil society groups and exacerbated democratic backsliding. Symbolically, the narrative of inclusive digital empowerment is undermined by persistent exclusions, surveillance concerns, and uneven implementation across states. Globally, India's aspirations are complicated by its reliance on foreign-owned compute power, proprietary AI models, and cloud infrastructure, which expose tensions between sovereign ambition and structural dependency.

I use terms such as AI, DPI, and technoscientific governance to analyse the evolving entanglements between the Indian state, digital systems, and international legitimacy. The term AI suffers from a persistent terminological ambiguity. It is often used as an umbrella term encompassing a broad spectrum of technologies, from rule-based automation and statistical modelling to machine learning and neural networks. In practice, AI can refer to everything from simple decision trees to complex systems trained on large datasets to detect patterns, make predictions, or simulate human reasoning. DPI refers to modular platforms, such as Aadhaar, UPI, and India Stack, that enable identity authentication, payments, and data integration across state services. While often portrayed as scalable tools for development, I approach DPI as both infrastructural and ideological: a socio-technical form that encodes normative assumptions about citizenship, legitimacy, and governance.

Terms like AI and DPI are often used interchangeably in policy discourse, but they refer to distinct systems. DPI does not include AI systems per se, but rather the infrastructural layer upon which AI applications may later be built. Without DPI, AI applications in governance often lack the data inputs, institutional access, and interoperable systems they require to function effectively. Conversely, once DPI is in place, it becomes the substrate for integrating AI tools across sectors like healthcare, welfare, policing, and education. This distinction is important: India's global promotion of DPI is not

a direct export of AI capabilities, but of the institutional and technical scaffolding that makes AI deployment at scale possible. Following Jasanoff's (2015) work on sociotechnical imaginaries, I consider how such infrastructures are mobilised to project national visions of modernity and state capacity. Rather than treating these terms as static, this paper attends to how they are translated, adapted, and contested in practice across domestic policy and international diplomacy.

### **Technoscience and the Pursuit of Efficiency**

**A**nxiety and hope about technology's expanding role in the state are rooted in decades of cultural and political storytelling about the rise of autonomous machines. This duality is marked by technology's ability to increase efficiency, which has been touted as a benefit by some and a blindness by others. In the aftermath of World War II, technological advances (such as atomic weapons and tools of mass surveillance) revealed their potential for dehumanisation and authoritarian control. Historian Lewis Mumford (1970) maintained that ideas of tech-centred progress obscured the significant human and environmental cost emerging from its relentless pursuit of productivity. While the practical benefits of technological advancement are widely accepted, he argued that they do not operate towards a social purpose but towards building a bureaucratic-technologic "megamachine" to keep "the corporate apparatus itself in a state of

power-making, profit-yielding productivity” (Mumford 1970, 127).

Following from this prognosis, Jacques Ellul (1973) saw technology not as material artefact, but as deeply entangled with governance and the rationalising logic of technocracy. For Ellul, this is captured in the notion of “technique”: the sum of all rational methods devised to maximise efficiency. His primary concern was that autonomous technology was in the process of removing diversity and pluralistic thought, “subverting and suppressing these values to produce at last a monolithic world culture in which all non-technological difference and variety is mere appearance” (Ellul 1973, 10). “The only thing that matters technically,” he says, is “yield, production.” At the same time, technology’s supposed ability to respond to this capitalist and, in some cases, spiritual desire to be better than human has been crucial to its development. It possesses an almost fantastical, magical, and unknowable quality (Williams 2024). Since the 1940s, for example, AI researchers have worked to create machines that think “like human minds” (Wilson 2011). Early researchers in Dartmouth’s AI team were divided on what functions to prioritise yet agreed that the key was to create “beings of pure rationality” to act as efficient problem task solvers. Yet while ostensibly privileging rationality, developers have often also used the language of magic to refer to AI tools: concealing the power of tech companies and obscuring their infrastructure to conjure and encourage faith in unknowable systems (Nagy and Neff 2025).

At a broader level, these cultural and political anxieties endure: does technology serve democratic and human needs, or does its pursuit of efficiency and control ultimately reinforce extractive economies and authoritarian power? Indeed, where efficiency measures performance, rationality concerns the legitimacy of decisions; conflating the two has historically allowed technological projects to appear both optimal and politically neutral. In postcolonial contexts like India, the line between science and technology often collapses into a state-driven pursuit of techno-scientific legitimacy. To illustrate a global cultural logic here, Nandy (1988) cites Kennedy’s 1962 speech on the space race, where science is presented not as open-ended inquiry but as a spectacular, state-owned technology that ultimately leads to the moon landing. Kennedy’s speech gestures to significant trends in discourses of techno-science: one, it makes the practical pay-off of science connected specifically to technology, and two, it ties this to the aims of the state. Drawing from this, the nuclear program championed by the Indian state in the 1960s became emblematic of how sovereign techno-scientific expertise was positioned as central to India’s identity. The domain of practical expertise in development shifted, “giving technological discourses a public voice more powerful now than at any time since the industrial revolution” (Philips 2016).

Yet competing schools of thought about the relationship between technology and development were influential in post-colonial India, straddling

non-alignment, state-driven poverty alleviation, and the diffusion of international development models. Free-market liberals (and Marxist modernists) favoured the development of large-scale industrial and military technology to teleologically “catch up with the west” (Philip 2015), while Gandhians and revolutionary leftists pursued alternative visions of progress rooted in ecological, local, or vernacular knowledge systems. Eventually, decisions around techno-governance became increasingly insulated from democratic debate, reinforcing a developmental model in which legitimacy was conferred through technical mastery and the pursuit of the digital entrepreneur as ideal citizen-subject.

Indeed, the story of technological development in India is deeply entwined with state-led infrastructure, stretching from early post-independence planning and population science to today’s expansive digital governance initiatives. Madon (2009) identifies two key phases in this shift: first, from Independence to the 1990s, where IT served internal bureaucratic automation; and second, the post-1990s phase, where public and private actors rebranded technology as the engine of “good governance,” improving service delivery to citizens, enhancing transparency, and fostering accountability. In the second phase, Madon critically notes that these initiatives often prioritised technical solutions over addressing the complex socio-political dimensions of governance, sometimes leading to unintended consequences. The following section traces the contours of this history, pri-

marily to illuminate how present-day digital governance draws upon and departs from earlier developmental logics.

## **From Planning to Platforms: Projections of Modernity and Self-Reliance**

India’s digital governance model cannot be understood without its genealogy in mid-century technocratic planning. From the outset, the postcolonial state imagined statistical and computational tools as central to its developmental ambitions, using it to “leapfrog over its historical underdevelopment” (Philips 2015). Soon after Independence, the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) and its founder, physicist P.C. Mahalanobis, were at the forefront of this vision, forging a political logic in which quantification, expertise, and state capacity became intertwined: an epistemic template that contemporary digital platforms inherited.

Mahalanobis launched the National Sample Survey (NSS) to generate detailed demographic and economic data and spearheaded the Second Five-Year Plan, which emphasised heavy industrial investment guided by continuous statistical adjustment. In this context, statistics emerged as India’s first state-backed techno-science, used both to measure and manage the economy. The state also invested significant funds in training engineers, developing the Indian Institutes of Technology in collaboration with the Soviet Union, Germany, and the United States (Philip 2015). By the 1980s, the “economic

miracle of computing” (Samdub 2025a) had begun to proliferate beyond the central bureaucracy into regional and local governments. With the adoption of relational database management systems, state officials increasingly became data workers, tasked with recording and managing growing volumes of information (Hasan 2023). Over time, much of this data-related work was contracted out, and the management of information systems became more fragmented but also more embedded in routine governance. These early data regimes prefigured the later pursuit of data-driven governance: where the ISI sought to render the economy legible through statistics, today’s DPI renders the citizen legible through code. Planning’s promise of rational mastery has become the platform state’s promise of algorithmic efficiency.

Economic liberalisation, driven by the International Monetary Fund (IMF)’s loans in the 1990s, transformed India’s technological landscape, heralding a telecommunications revolution and the rise of its IT sector. Policies promoting deregulation and foreign investment spurred the rapid development of digital infrastructure, and urban centres like Bangalore became an iconic part of India’s global IT prowess, celebrated as the “Silicon Valley of India.” During a visit to Bangalore, political commentator Thomas Friedman noted fantastically that he found “brain power, software, algorithms, knowledge workers, call centers, transmission protocols, [and] breakthroughs in optical engineering—the sources of wealth in our day” (Friedman 2006). The Aad-

haar project, born within the nexus of corporate innovation and state authority, exemplifies this shift (Belorgey and Jaffrelot 2024). Conceived by private IT firms and spearheaded by tech entrepreneur Nandan Nilekani, Aadhaar is a biometric identification system launched by the Indian government in 2009 that assigns a number to residents based on their fingerprints, iris scans, and demographic data, and serves as the foundational layer for accessing a wide range of public and private services. It was promoted as a solution to bureaucratic inefficiencies and corruption, claiming to deliver governance that was simultaneously more efficient and more inclusive. In his book *Rebooting India* (2015), Nilekani describes the state as a platform: “[W]e are talking about radically reimagining government, its purpose, its role and the way it carries out its functions, with technology at its core.” His overarching vision for Aadhaar reflected this belief: that software and digital infrastructures should permeate all levels of governance.

Aadhaar’s implementation depended on an unprecedented partnership between the state and private technology firms. The government sought to scale the system to India’s vast population, and private companies (such as Nilekani’s Infosys) contributed the technical expertise and infrastructure. Economically, proponents argue that Aadhaar has facilitated the growth of a data-driven economy, reducing costs for financial institutions and enabling new forms of financial inclusion (Awasthi et al 2024). However, its broader economic benefits remain contested,

with some viewing it as a speculative bubble rather than a transformative innovation (Belorgey and Jaffrelot 2024). For many, Aadhaar has not facilitated welfare delivery but instead created barriers to food rations, healthcare, and even basic recognition by the state (Khera 2019). At the same time, Aadhaar's data-driven infrastructure has raised profound concerns about privacy and surveillance. Weak regulatory safeguards and a series of data breaches have left citizens vulnerable, while the centralisation of biometric information has granted the state unprecedented surveillance capabilities (Lyon 2014).

While the BJP strongly opposed Aadhaar when it was spearheaded by the Congress–UPA government, they embraced it as part of their core mandate once they gained power in 2014. Under the Modi administration, the Digital India initiative launched in 2015 further sought to modernise governance through the aggressive adoption of digital tools. Framed as a vision of “minimum government, maximum governance,” the initiative emphasized innovation and public–private partnerships. The government's rhetoric situates technology as a depoliticised intermediary capable of “bridging gaps between government and the people” (Digital India 2021), with AI in particular “turning into the biggest means of shaping our new future” (PIB 2023). In promoting Digital India, Prime Minister Modi has invoked technology as a universal solution, embedding computational logics at the heart of statecraft: “We can build an entire ecosystem of technology-based solutions to address

the challenges faced by humanity. All it needs from us are the four Cs—Conviction, Commitment, Coordination, and Collaboration” (Singh 2023).

The promises are vast: Digital India focuses on building robust digital infrastructure to facilitate efficient public service delivery. Aadhaar provides a biometric identification system aimed at streamlining welfare distribution and reducing corruption. Meanwhile, AI for All seeks to harness AI to address challenges in sectors like agriculture, education, and healthcare, positioning it as another tool for inclusive growth. The 2018 National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence (NSAI) by the NITI Aayog formalised India's ambitions to leverage AI across key sectors. At the core of this governance model is a growing reliance on modular digital infrastructures, called Application Programming Interfaces (APIs), developed for specific public domains: identity, payments, health records, agriculture, and mobility. As Samdub (2025b) notes, these discrete systems form an interoperable composite infrastructure managed by a unified digital backbone. Collectively, they are branded as “India Stack,” and have become central to India's international reputation as a provider of DPI. Unlike previous phases in which technology supplemented governance, the current moment positions digital systems as governance itself.

## **Digital Governance in Practice: Centralised Authority and Resistance**

Over the past decade, platforms like Aadhaar, UPI, and the broader India Stack have been framed not only as tools of domestic administration, but as exportable models for inclusive development. This narrative positions India as a digital leader, offering a public interest pathway distinct from Silicon Valley's corporate-led model, Europe's regulation-heavy model, and China's state-centric surveillance infrastructure (Matthan 2023). The idea of DPI is increasingly promoted in global forums as a democratic, replicable alternative to proprietary digital ecosystems. However, DPI is loosely defined and often functions more as an aspirational framework than a settled institutional model (Samdub 2025b). While it is praised for its openness and technical adaptability, such language tends to obscure the political, economic, and legal architectures through which these infrastructures are assembled and contested.

At its core, DPI in India is not “meaningfully public” (Samdub 2025a). It is in practice shaped by contingent relationships between regional bureaucracy, the state, private technology firms, and global philanthropy. It was initially promoted by the think tank iSPIRT (Indian Software Products Industry Roundtable) to give the private sector access to state platforms and, as of now, many India Stack platforms are run by private companies that elide public accountability (Samdub 2025a).

More recently, the National Informatics Centre (NIC) has made deals with private firms to manage and improve the government's cloud services, adding to the questionable control that private companies can exert over data and governance (Economic Times 2023). Regardless, India has managed to rally global support for its DPI, leading to strong financial and symbolic commitments from the UN, World Bank, Gates, and Rockefeller Foundations to export it.

What distinguishes post-2014 governance, then, is not simply the extent of technological adoption, but the way digital infrastructure has been consolidated as a core instrument of political authority and global ambition. While earlier decades framed technology primarily as a tool for planning and development, the current phase deepens and extends its use toward continuous datafication to brand and export a model of governance. Platforms such as Aadhaar and UPI have become central not just to welfare delivery or administrative reform, but to India's diplomatic narrative as a modern, efficient state. These technologies are increasingly portrayed as universally applicable, even as they are introduced within a political environment marked by growing executive power and weakened democratic oversight.

The deepening centralisation of power, declining transparency, and erosion of democratic institutions in India since 2014 complicate the celebratory story of digital empowerment. This matters when we consider how

digital systems operate across different domains of governance, domestically and internationally. While the broader governance narrative foregrounds efficiency and inclusion, the actual effects of technology vary sharply across sectors. Crucially, these variations are not reducible to technological design. They are shaped by the broader architectures of power in which these systems are embedded, and vary according to institutional capacity, accountability mechanisms, political incentives, and histories of exclusion. In some cases, digital systems have enabled new forms of participation or grievance redress; in others, they have amplified exclusion and opacity.

Despite sectoral differences, the following variations in implementation and experience are all scaffolded by the shared technological architecture of DPI, which standardises how data is collected, identities are verified, and services are delivered across domains. As previously mentioned, the use of Aadhaar in welfare distribution has led to well-documented exclusions, where biometric mismatches and authentication failures have prevented access to essential subsidies such as food rations or pensions, particularly for marginalised groups (Khera 2019). Local ration dealers, facing pressure to meet digital targets, have sometimes denied food to those unable to authenticate themselves, including the elderly and manual labourers with worn fingerprints (Shagun 2024).

In education, the National Digital Education Architecture (NDEAR) and

platforms like DIKSHA (also founded by Nandan Nilekani) illustrate both the promise and contradictions of DPI. Designed to standardise curriculum delivery and teacher training across India, DIKSHA integrates lesson repositories, learning analytics, and real-time dashboards for monitoring performance. The breadth is impressive: more than 250 bilingual teachers, and 30 private and public organisations, including NGOs and state governments, have collaborated to develop curriculum materials and training resources under the supervision of national boards of education (Verma et al. 2024). Yet state-level adoption has been uneven, in large part due to the proven digital divide i.e., the gap in digital access, literacy, and infrastructure across region, gender, caste, class, and religion (Chaudhuri 2024). These platforms have been more successful in states with strong public schooling networks and active teacher engagement, such as Kerala and Himachal Pradesh (India Report on Digital Education 2020). In Rajasthan and Bihar, by contrast, limited internet access, scarce technical support, and gendered digital divide constrain uptake (Verma et al. 2024). Even when awareness is high, registration hurdles and data-entry errors routinely disrupt use.

These challenges are not purely technical. Gujarat has instituted a Command-and-Control centre (a term often reserved for military operations) that monitors and tracks students' and teachers' enrollment, test scores, attendance, and real-time movement through GPS, extending the DPI-logic of data-driven oversight into everyday

pedagogy. The data is even used to predict which students are at risk of dropping out and which teachers are failing to maintain student test scores (Sharma 2022). While officials present this as evidence-based management, teachers describe it as intrusive and demoralising. The other part of this story, however, is that teachers can also exercise agency and sustain pedagogical autonomy through non-state digital tools, reportedly using social media (such as Facebook, WhatsApp etc) independently to communicate with students and share pedagogical practices (India Today 2022). This creates a paradoxical situation where global tech platforms (e.g., Google, Meta) offer more flexibility and autonomy than bureaucratic state systems while being deeply extractive, profiting from user data, and reinforcing corporate monopolies.

In healthcare, the eSanjeevani telemedicine platform has facilitated over 276 million consultations, improving access for patients in remote areas and representing one of Digital India's most celebrated successes (Dastigar et al. 2024). Like outcomes within the education sector, telemedicine has been more effectively embedded into primary healthcare in states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu (Ummer 2021; Jose et al. 2024), where public health systems have greater institutional capacity. In contrast, in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (Anand 2014; Singh et al. 2023), platform uptake has been patchy, hindered by weak digital literacy among patients and inadequate staffing at health centres. These discrepancies underscore how digital health solutions are more

likely to succeed where they are layered onto robust pre-existing service delivery ecosystems. In moving more specifically to AI in service delivery, autonomous AI tools are being trialled in diagnosing chest X-rays, spine MRIs, and detecting diabetic retinopathy (Dey et al. 2025; Subramanian et al. 2025a, 2025b). Bihar's state health department has launched an intensive AI-driven tuberculosis screening program and state hospitals have begun to offer orthopaedic robotic surgery (Times of India 2025), while Telangana is piloting AI-based cancer screening (Vadlapatla 2025). For the most part, these have been welcomed as innovations that augment overstretched systems. The developmental framing, coupled with anonymisation of medical data, has made health-based AI less politically fraught. Yet they also expose dependence on proprietary algorithms and cloud infrastructures owned by foreign firms, resulting in a layered system where local innovation coexists with global dependency.

Policing presents a starker contrast. Predictive policing initiatives (i.e., "smart policing") have been trialled in cities like Hyderabad to make the police more "efficient and omnipresent" and have drawn criticism for targeting Muslims and oppressed caste groups (Sonavane et al. 2023). Unlike health, where digital systems interface with citizens as beneficiaries, policing technologies operate with opacity and coercive power. These sectoral variations stem not only from technical features but illustrate how digital governance reinforces different forms of legitimacy:

in health, as technocratic competence; in welfare, as managerial control; and in policing, as coercive surveillance. These distinctions underscore the political stakes of modular infrastructure beyond questions of efficiency. The centralising logic of digital surveillance is amplified in such domains, with fewer counterweights from civil society or institutional oversight.

These effects are mediated not just by institutions, but by the people who translate and implement digital systems in practice. Bureaucrats, often working with limited resources and high expectations, are central to adapting digital infrastructures to local realities (Madon 2009). Far from being passive enforcers, many negotiate competing demands from political leaders, consultants, and citizens, while trying to make new technologies usable within the constraints of existing state machinery. In several states, bureaucrats have adapted digital tools to enhance citizen feedback and accountability. These result in often invisible acts of repair, negotiation, and discretion that challenge the idea of a rigid, top-down technocracy. For instance, Rajasthan's Jan Soochna Portal (launched in 2019) proactively discloses real-time data on welfare schemes at the village level. Civil society groups like the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) worked with officials to co-design the platform, which helps citizens verify entitlements such as MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005) wages and food rations (Singh 2024). In Madhya Pradesh, local bureaucrats and officers often reinterpret official mandates

and selectively implement digital monitoring tools not only to meet targets, but also to maintain trust with communities (Sharma 2024). While national systems required computerised data on beneficiary attendance and savings, some field officers maintained parallel manual records to ensure that women who missed meetings due to illness or work were not unfairly penalised. In some regions, state governments and NGOs have held digital literacy camps specifically for women-led self-help groups to adopt UPI and QR-based transactions (Women's World Banking 2024). Among street vendors, gig workers, and women entrepreneurs, UPI enabled economic transactions in the absence of physical mobility, especially during and after the COVID-19 lockdowns (Dhanush and Swathi 2023).

These instances of adaptation and grassroots innovation reveal how digital systems are constantly negotiated on the ground, but they exist alongside growing concerns about how the same infrastructures are used to suppress dissent. Over the years, civil society-based groups have fought to protect citizen rights in the digital sphere, running advocacy campaigns against executive orders and proposed legislation to impose internet censorship, shutdowns, and secret surveillance (Pandey 2023). Digital-rights collectives such as the Internet Freedom Foundation, SFLC.in, and MKSS have contested DPI's opacity through litigation and public campaigns, challenging mandatory linkage of welfare to Aadhaar, filing petitions on internet shutdowns, and organising digital literacy workshops. These

micro-acts of contestation expose how civil society re-politicises the technical.

This fight for digital liberties is particularly urgent as the government increasingly censors activist organisations from online platforms, watches critics, and imprisons dissenters—to the point where private corporations such as Meta and Twitter have pushed back in defence of user rights (Freedom House 2022). India has recorded more internet shutdowns than any other country for six consecutive years (Access Now 2024), often justified on grounds of “public order” but used to silence protests such as those against the Citizenship Amendment Act and the farmers’ movement. Amendments to the Information Technology Rules (2021) empower government agencies to demand removal of content deemed “false or misleading” (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology 2022) and require platforms to appoint local grievance officers, giving the state unprecedented leverage over intermediaries. Journalists and digital-rights activists have faced arrests under anti-terror and sedition provisions, while reports of Pegasus spyware surveillance on opposition leaders and human-rights lawyers have intensified fears of a digitally enabled police state (Amnesty International 2023). These examples complicate the image of India as a “digital democracy,” raising questions about whether the systems it promotes internationally uphold the values it claims to represent.

Rather than treating digital governance as a uniform or monolithic

force, we need to understand how their meanings, uses, and effects are shaped by the local contexts in which they are embedded. As DPI systems become sites for AI deployment (automated eligibility checks, biometric authentication, diagnostic tools) the risks escalate. AI tools, when layered on already-fragile DPI systems, can amplify exclusions, encode bias, and further depoliticise welfare by turning claims-making into a matter of technical legibility. Across sectors, the promise of efficiency masks deep asymmetries of capacity and accountability. Acts of resistance—whether teacher improvisation, bureaucratic repair, or rights-based litigation—do not stand outside digital governance but actively reconstitute its contested terrain.

Indeed, efforts to institutionalise Indian models of digital governance globally carry with them the weight of older anxieties around technological power. While early critics like Mumford and Ellul warned of centralised infrastructures eroding pluralism under the guise of efficiency, those fears are refracted today through the rise of modular systems branded as democratic and open. DPI is not simply a platform for development, but one that mediates legitimacy and sovereign leadership in the international arena. This is especially relevant at a time when India’s digital transformation is increasingly linked to its global influence and soft power. The authority of these governance models depends not only on their technical scalability, but also on the normative values they encode and the social realities they produce. Indeed, while such

digital platforms enhance India's ability to project power, they also expose gaps in sovereignty and resource asymmetries that limit India's global leverage.

### **Exporting Governance: Straddling Sovereignty and Dependence**

**A**s India expands its digital diplomacy, AI has emerged as the next frontier in its projection of technological leadership. This ambition aligns with India's broader geopolitical strategy to expand its influence within the G20 and other international forums, and is evident through substantial investments, strategic collaborations, and policy initiatives aimed at fostering a robust DPI and AI ecosystem. As Modi noted at an NDTV World Summit in 2024, "India is powered by two AIs. For the world, it is Artificial Intelligence but in India, it's Aspirational India plus Artificial Intelligence. When the two meet, it accelerates India's growth" (NDTV 2024). Yet despite its burgeoning AI ecosystem, India occupies a peripheral position in the global hierarchy with limited computational infrastructure. Unlike DPI, which India has largely developed in-house, AI development exposes sharper asymmetries: balancing aspirations to sovereignty and leadership within a global architecture of technological dependence.

A central component of its strategy is the pursuit of "Sovereign AI," aligning with the BJP's broader doctrine of self-reliance. This approach seeks to reduce dependence on foreign

technologies by bolstering domestic capabilities in AI development, including efforts to promote AI solutions tailored to local needs. As a part of this, the Ministry of Education's "Make AI in India, Make AI Work for India" campaign has established several Centres of Excellence devoted to AI research (ET Education 2025), while the AI Research Analytics and Knowledge Dissemination Platform (AIRAWAT) aims to provide AI-specific cloud computing resources. Yet India's current capacity is constrained by limited access to advanced AI chips which are often subject to export restrictions, hindering the development and deployment of advanced AI models. The United States, for instance, has implemented a tiered framework regulating the export of advanced AI chips. India falls into the second tier, which imposes crucial limitations to how many chips India can import. India's outward posture, then, conceals a deeper tension between its domestic constraints and its efforts to shape the rules and standards of global AI systems.

In this context, the export of India Stack functions as both an assertion of self-reliance and a strategic workaround: a means to claim influence in global tech governance despite depending on external platforms, cloud services, and AI tools largely developed by U.S.-based firms. While the foundational components of India Stack are largely domestically developed, its integration with AI services (such as facial recognition in policing or AI-based diagnostics in healthcare) often relies on foreign-owned compute power and

proprietary models. Reports from the Global Technology Summit 2023 (Mohanthy and Sahu 2024) suggest that the Indian government is grappling between using customised, open-source models (which can be tailored and potentially be hosted and managed locally) and using proprietary models that are general-purpose, compute-intensive, and mostly of foreign origin.

Indeed, India's AI ecosystem remains entangled in the ambitions of US-based tech giants: Amazon, Microsoft, Meta, and Google. Big tech companies may advocate for the "democratisation" of AI by making its tools accessible to a broad audience, but by integrating AI into existing industries through products and services, developers are "unknowingly contributing to Big Tech's infrastructural objectives" (van der Vlist et al. 2024). By offering extensive resources, specialised AI training, technical support, and access to AI expertise, Big Tech creates an environment where small players and startups are incentivised to build on their platforms, and dependent on their extensive cloud computing resources (van der Vlist et al. 2024). These companies do not merely provide technical tools; they shape the platforms and data infrastructures that public services increasingly rely upon. Microsoft, for instance, announced a \$3 billion investment over two years to enhance AI and cloud services in India, aiming to train 10 million individuals in AI skills by 2030. Similarly, Nvidia has deepened its partnerships with major Indian firms, including Reliance Industries, while Google has partnered with India to develop AI applications

for healthcare, including models for detecting diabetic retinopathy (Economic Times 2025). This reliance on foreign tech also highlights the potential commodification of anonymised personal data and the risks of data colonialism, wherein foreign entities and large private firms extract economic value from Indian data with limited accountability (Couldry and Mejias 2019; Muralidharan et al. 2021). The 2023 Data Protection Act introduces consent norms, but grants broad exemptions to the state, effectively institutionalising asymmetry between citizen and sovereign. Data-storage localisation and transnational cloud dependencies remain unresolved, underscoring how sovereignty is asserted symbolically but outsourced materially. These concerns underscore the need for stringent data-sharing agreements, increased localisation, and ethical safeguards in international collaborations.

With compute constraints limiting high-end AI innovation, India is leaning on its existing strength: governance infrastructure, institutional interoperability, and a compelling narrative of low-cost scalability. Modi has referred to aspirations to turn India into a "vishwaguru," that is, teacher to the world, offering a low-cost, software-based alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (The Economist 2023). Homegrown digital platforms like UPI, ShareChat, and Koo can be seen as part of a broader attempt to insulate India's digital ecosystem from the dominance of US-based firms, particularly since they function both as nationalist counter-platforms and as symbols

of self-reliance. While these platforms do signal growing technical capacity, their significance lies equally in the geopolitical strategy they embody. As Farrell and Newman (2019) argue, global digital networks can be harnessed for weaponized interdependence, that is, a condition where states or firms gain strategic leverage through control over critical informational or infrastructural chokepoints. In response, India's development and export of India Stack represent attempts to reconfigure this asymmetry: not only by insulating its domestic digital ecosystem from external coercion, but by presenting itself as an infrastructural provider rather than a dependent node. At the same time, they serve as vehicles of soft power, positioning India as a provider of replicable infrastructure for the Global South.

India's push to export DPI is not merely rhetorical. Frameworks like DIVOC (Digital Infrastructure for Vaccination Open Certification),<sup>4</sup> originally developed as part of CoWIN for vaccine certification, have been adapted by countries such as Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Indonesia. The Modular Open Source Identity Platform (MO-SIP), a non-profit initiative hosted by the International Institute of Information Technology, Bangalore (IITB) has been applied in twenty countries and has more than 121 million active users. The World Bank's DPI initiative has also drawn heavily on India Stack's architecture, with Ethiopia and Morocco exploring UPI-style payment systems (Sánchez-Cacicedo 2024). Yet questions remain about the normative content of this model—whether it promotes par-

ticipatory digital governance or simply offers a more state-led alternative to Western platforms. What forms of participation are enabled, and which ones are foreclosed? Who sets the terms of digital legitimacy and who is left to adapt to them? India does not simply export a fixed model but embeds infrastructural templates that are reshaped (and sometimes contested) in their new environments. The success and function of such technologies, then, depend less on technical design than on local capacity and infrastructure.

India's digital diplomacy reproduces the logic of its domestic governance model: infrastructures that centralise data authority internally are marketed abroad as efficient, transparent, and easily replicable. This model resonates most strongly with governments that prioritise administrative control and rapid service delivery over participatory oversight—often semi-authoritarian or highly centralised regimes in the Global South. For example, Sri Lanka's adoption of CoWIN infrastructure for vaccine certification reshaped how public health was managed, moving from paper-based consent and community outreach toward biometric identification and centralized data dashboards. In Ethiopia, the proposed introduction of UPI-style systems (facilitated through partnerships with India's Ministry of Electronics and IT and supported financially by the World Bank (World Bank 2025) hinges on building national ID infrastructure first. This sequence of reforms mirrors India's pathway, in which identity infrastructure is treated as prior to (and

enabling of) rights and access. But in settings where citizenship is contested or state presence uneven, this architecture risks reinscribing the exclusions it aims to resolve (Zuboff 2019). Kenya expressed early interest in India Stack and was in discussion with the Indian government and private partners about adapting elements of Aadhaar and UPI. However, adoption has been cautious due to a combination of strong local fintech ecosystems (like M-Pesa), regulatory resistance to centralised ID systems, and pushback from civil society groups concerned about surveillance (Gopaldas 2024). This reflects an important counterpoint: Indian DPI exports may stall or be reshaped where existing digital infrastructures are more decentralised or where governance institutions resist centralisation.

The global circulation of Indian digital models often brings with it infrastructural ambition and normative friction. The interaction between India's domestic and international dynamics, then, is reciprocal rather than parallel. Domestically, DPI consolidates authority within the executive by embedding digital control into welfare, payments, and identification systems. Internationally, this centralising design becomes a selling point: it offers other governments a ready-made template for extending administrative reach while projecting efficiency and modernity. India's DPI diplomacy therefore tends to gain traction in political environments where state capacity and central control are prized (such as in parts of the Gulf and Southeast Asia), rather than in more plural or decentralised democra-

cies. In this sense, India's "stack diplomacy" exports not only software but also a particular theory of the state: one that equates data integration with governance legitimacy. It also aligns with broader global trends in development governance, where centralised digital records and biometric identity systems have become shorthand for "good" policy. These technologies are increasingly treated not as controversial choices, but as best practices and standard components of efficient, modern governance, sometimes at the expense of investing in local institutional capacity or democratic fit. This paper, thus, joins scholars in arguing for a form of DPI that goes beyond software and governance frameworks towards developing the material and social conditions that underpin effective implementation. It also advocates for open, democratic debate about the diverse purposes DPI can serve, rather than treating its goals as singular or predetermined (Samdub 2025b).

### **Conclusion: International Projection and Domestic Illiberalism**

**B**y positioning itself as a normative leader capable of providing replicable governance solutions, India is shaping how tech is imagined and operationalised in the Global South. Partnerships with U.S. government and tech firms (such as the newly established Transforming Relations Utilising Strategic Technologies (TRUST) initiative) and participation in groups like GPAI are more than vehicles for investment

or knowledge-sharing; they are arenas where geopolitical influence is brokered, regulatory models are contested, and sovereignty is redefined. The export of DPI thus reflects an institutional effort to embed Indian infrastructures and frameworks into emerging digital orders, often in direct response to U.S. or Chinese alternatives. As such, India's digital ascent is not just about exportable platforms or AI capabilities; it is about the social, political, and symbolic work that technology performs at home and in the world. It mobilises a vision of national modernity tied to data legibility, compliance, and scalability, all discursively positioned as necessary and benevolent. Attending to these genealogies helps situate India Stack not just as a solution to governance gaps, but as a symbolic and material consolidation of state power through digital means.

As India asserts itself as a digital leader, the gap between its international projection and domestic illiberalism is increasingly stark. Through platforms like Aadhaar and India Stack, the state consolidates authority while projecting a model of efficient, exportable governance. Yet these ambitions are constrained by domestic exclusions, democratic erosion, and international dependencies on foreign tech infrastructure. Understanding India's digital turn requires attention not only to its

technical architecture, but to the political forms and global asymmetries it seeks to reshape. In the 1980s, sociologist Ashis Nandy argued that technology can represent an escape from "the dirtyness [sic] of politics ... a form of social change which ensures a place in the sun for portions of the middle classes whom the democratic process otherwise tends to marginalise, an anxiety-binding agent in the public realm, and often a media-based exercise in public relations" (Nandy 1988). This critique remains relevant. In treating technology as apolitical infrastructure rather than as a site of contestation, we risk overlooking how it legitimises authority and redistributes power, both within and beyond the nation-state.

As scholars, we need to pay attention not simply to accounts of technological capacity or digital ambition, but to how these systems are embedded in political life, how they shape who is seen, who is served, and who is silenced. The fears articulated by Ellul and Mumford—of rationalisation without reflection, and power without participation—are not relics of mid-century techno-critique. They reverberate through today's algorithmic decision systems and exported digital architectures, refracted through newer idioms of efficiency, scale, and "public interest technology."

## Notes

- 1 India Stack refers to a set of modular, open digital infrastructure layers including Aadhaar (identity), eKYC (electronic know-your-customer), UPI (payments), Dig-iLocker (document storage), and eSign (digital signature). These are designed to enable paperless, presence-less, and cashless delivery of services. It serves as the technical backbone of India's Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) and is promoted as a scalable model for digital governance globally.
- 2 By contrast, the JAM (Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile) trinity is a political assemblage that uses these tools to route benefits, while MyGov is a participation interface. They are analytically distinct: MyGov and JAM are applications and administrative workflows, whereas Aadhaar, UPI and India Stack are the tools that make machine-verifiable transactions possible at scale
- 3 Techno-utopianism denotes a belief that technological innovation inherently leads to social progress, often downplaying the political and distributive consequences of digital systems.
- 4 DIVOC is an open-source platform developed under India Stack to issue, verify and share digital vaccination certificates, later adapted for other health credentialing systems globally.

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## Book Review

Adnan Naseemullah. 2017. *Development after Statism: Industrial Firms and the Political Economy of South Asia* (South Asia in the Social Sciences). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, ISBN: 978-1107158634; pp. 350.

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### State vs. Industrial Firms: The Puzzle

**D**evelopment after statism triggers a provocation around prevailing assumptions on economic development. Statism, central to the book's debate, entails the view that the *state* holds a dominant position in directing economic life (Colburn 1988). Developmental state theory argues that industrialization requires strong state intervention to provide capital and coordination, predicting that weak state capacity leads to poor economic performance. East Asian developmental states or import-substitution industrialization in Latin America positioned the state capacity to pursue developmental goals (Johnson 1982; Amsden 1989; Wade 1990; Cardoso and Faletto 1979; Hirschman 1958). Free-market theory views statism as a hindrance to growth and pushes for economic liberalization and private enterprise. Scholars still deliberate the state capacity notion, not through intervention but by guiding the economic shift. India's economic growth by embracing globalization was viewed not as decline of the state ca-

capacity but institutional and ideational transformation within it (Mukherji 2014). Institutional theory argues that economic outcomes hang on "rules of the games" and are capable of efficiently providing credible commitments (North 1990).

Adnan Naseemullah observes that India's manufacturing industry presents a puzzle for these theoretical assumptions, as they grew under ineffective state governance, as well as thrived despite high costs in the market environment. Finally, "rules of the game" would suggest that the same formal and informal rules should require adopting similar strategies and consistent firm behavior within the same country. However, firms show divergent strategies across sectors and regions.

These anomalies imply that neither strong state nor market frameworks fully explain growth in manufacturing industries. And institutional theory does not explain why, despite being in the same region, firms exercise observable divergent practices. The author then proposes an alternative model called *governing firms* around industrial governance.

## Methodological-Empirical Aspects

The author employs Mill's method of agreement carrying out the empirical study on two comparative country cases, India and Pakistan, and analyzes key variables on sectors, garments, pharmaceuticals, and automotive components. A qualitative approach is built on field visits, observations, and interviews with industrialists, managers, and workers blended with archival materials. Chapter 1 lays out the research puzzle; Chapter 2 delves into theoretical underpinnings. Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 covered over two hundred qualitative interviews in seven states in India, roughly 160 firms' owners, directors, and managers, and Chapters 7 and 8 involve more than 70 interviews in Lahore, Faisalabad, Sialkot, and Gujranwala in Punjab and Karachi in Sindh.

### *The Concept of Firm-Level Governance*

The conceptual innovation of the book encounters *the state capacity* by replacing *firms' capacity* through the prisms of the manufacturing industry. Economic shifts compelled that the state no longer provide coherent direction, coordination, or investment cooperation; industrial associations are too fragmented and weak to shape coherent national policy; and markets alone cannot coordinate the complex production processes, skill requirements, and technological innovations that the manufacturing sector demands. Globalization disseminated structural change; global linkages forged a new kind of governance environment, leaving a far-reaching impact

on investment decisions, and industrial organization. Whether in technology, auto parts, or emerging managerial and skill requirements, firms needed to encounter international standards of quality, safety, and efficiency. To remain competitive in global markets, they had to develop skills and technological capabilities through targeted training, strategic recruitment, and continuous innovation. This means firms have adapted and learned by training workers internally, innovating process technologies locally, and building relational ties with international partners. The state no longer provides coordinated training or research and development infrastructure; firms themselves must create these capacities, often informally or in partnership with global firms. In the absence of credible, coherent institutions such as state or global markets as to how production should be organized, firms established their own channels and relationships with other stakeholders in acquiring capital and recruiting, training, and the like. Variables such as how firms secure finance, hire labor, and conduct training, how they procure materials, and how norms vary across sectors yet support the theoretical claim.

Empirical chapters' historical narratives display that firm-level governance evolved and entrenched in the local, regional, national, and international networks of the manufacturing regime, as path dependent and evolutionary pattern. During the statism epoch, the state was heavily involved in licensing, credit allocation, industrial organization, and the like. Firms' owners and managers have skillfully learned how

to handle bureaucracy, build networks and trust, and develop informal relationships with suppliers, officials, and financiers. After statism, as state control declined, they repurposed those relational and organizational skills. Strategies that are developed for handling the state restrictions are transformed into adaptive strategies for self-organization. Facing uncertainty and weak state capacity, firms gradually developed their own governance systems shaped by their global linkages but embedded in local and regional norms and practices. Driven by structural constraints, owners and managers build and maintain a long-established relationship with workers, agents of global markets, and sources of capital. The state remains as a central regulatory body, however, at the firm level, norms and practices are isolated from formal rules and regulations. This highlights how conventional wisdom overlooked or failed to recognize these norms, as the author discovers.

## Findings

State-led industrial governance structured a conformed access to capital, credit, and investment that was largely determined by state-led financial institutions, and firms being seen as *institution-takers*. This structure terminated in post-globalization transitional phase without fully developing a market-based financial system. Firms could no longer predict finance either from state or market channels. In this condition, owners and managers proactively negotiated their own networks to secure finance by building relationships and networks with banks, suppliers, in-

vestors, and other external actors. Firms no longer operate fully by the state or market, but their informal institutional norms and practices. This adaptation strategy suggests that for their own survival, they transformed themselves into *institution-makers*.

India's automotive sector, for example, shows a path through the network of supplier-producer linkages, quality standards, and export-oriented collaborations that internalized forms of coordination once mediated by state planning. Sectoral institutions, such as the Automotive Component Manufacturers Association (ACMA), are seen as role players. This kind of sectoral organizational and governance mechanism is evident elsewhere as well. Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), for instance, played a historic role in shaping global competitiveness (Mostafizur Rahman 2024).

The state agencies continue to issue authoritative rules to oversee efficient use of capital and labor; however, findings suggest that the state hardly function as *agency* at the firm level. In other words, the state is not source of influence over how firms operate. Instead, firms develop their own internal systems of coordination and governance in order to manage production challenges, forming a new kind of industrial governance, one shaped more by firm-level systems than by state directives.

## **Reflections on India–Pakistan Comparison**

**W**hile problematizing conventional debate on development, the author rejects a long-standing narrative by claiming that the state under Nehru discriminating against or trying to eliminate private enterprise was “unfounded” (Naseemullah 2017, p. 80). The Second Five-Year Plan provided 48.9 percent industrial investment, and in the third plan, 45.6 percent industrial investment came from the private sector. India’s high statism development epoch was private industry dominant. This historical interpretation seems to be problematic for the author’s persuasion in the conceptual base.

Primarily, scholarly consensus has not been whether the private industrial sector was substantial during the Nehru era. Rather, the development trajectory was the state-controlled nature. The License Raj era, from the 1950s–1980s, was substantially rigid. Imports, foreign exchange controls, and import licensing were restricted. Foremost political economy scholars describe India during this period as state-dominated industrialization, state-led development, or restrictive dirigisme (Bardhan 1984; Amsden 1989; Kohli 2004; Jalan 1996; Harriss-White 2003; Das Gupta 2016). Most of the industrial private sector survived through subsidies and rents, but not through competitiveness. Furthermore, many industries and sectors were strictly reserved for the state. India’s telecommunications, for example, opened for

the private sector not before the early 1990s, which later became a global economic player owing to competitiveness (Mukherji 2014). Thus, establishing private-sector dominance solely on investment shares, while overlooking the deep institutional setting, places doubt on the author’s core claim.

In the Pakistan case, the author claims that during the 1950s–1960s, the concentration of industrial power was tied to political power under authoritarian auspices, which could easily coordinate industrial policy, with capitalist oligarchs working together with administrative technocrats, referring to Peter Evans’s embedded autonomy notion. In fact, Pakistan’s economy was largely private-sector-led during the 1950s–1960s, until Bhutto launched the nationalization policy in 1972. Mahbubul Haq revealed that the 22 families who controlled 66 percent of the industries and owned an 87 percent share of the country’s banking and insurance industries also controlled state policy (Hussain 2007).

The author utilizes Pakistan as a mirror case. That’s where things seem to become complex. India followed a coherent and persistent trajectory of statism through nationalized industrialization during the 1948 and 1980 period and then moved towards neoliberal policy (Bhattacharjea 2022; Sen 1982.) While Pakistan first followed a strongly private-sector trajectory during the 1950s–1960s, followed by nationalization, and then a mixed economic model, and eventually, liberalization. India’s political-economic path diverges sharp-

ly from Pakistan's sequence. The two countries, therefore, have rather different industrial trajectories and outcomes that are historically and institutionally distinct.

On the concept, the author is certain that India and Pakistan show structural similarities and differences, yet firms develop *firm-level governance*. Why have India's manufacturing sectors become globally competitive while Pakistan's have not? Does it mean there is more to be taken into consideration other than the firm-level governance alone?

The author does counterintuitively leave a hint, though: at the exit of the British, the formation of the new country Pakistan required building institutions from scratch, causing "systemic vulnerability." India, on the other hand, inherited bureaucratic institutions and governance capacities.

The Pakistani state is defined as a military-bureaucratic oligarchic nature, whereas India's dominant proprietary notion suggests that all social groups created scope for competition in development (Alavi 1974; Bardhan 1984). These conditional, political variables could draw a thin line between why Pakistan—despite developing the governing firm mechanism—has not achieved similar economic growth like India.

Finally, the author identifies the Maruti-Suzuki collaboration, "path-clearing" for India's auto sector. However, other scholars view "triggering mechanism" diffusing Japanese production techniques, management practices, and supplier capabilities throughout the Indian auto sector, laying the ground-

work for export orientation (D'Costa 2004; Motohashi 2009; Becker-Ritterspach et al. 2008). If India's manufacturing benefited from a global linkage while Pakistan's did not, this may help understand India's rise.

In essence, India's firms achieved international collaborations and absorbed cognitive globalization. Pakistani firms display weak institutional patterns, are labor-intensive and domestically-oriented, relying on relational, kinship-based provincial bourgeoisies and moral economies; they are also lagging in technological improvement and integration into global value chains.

These reflections indicate that even Pakistani firms developed firm-level governance; however, they cannot be considered equivalent to India's. While firm-level governance exists in both countries, the techniques, types of capacities developed, and intensity of competition differ, shaped by divergent political economies.

## Implications and Relevance

Donald Trump's tariff war caused global economic uncertainty. Furthermore, political turmoil shaping geopolitical realignments in South Asia. Bangladesh emerged to become India's largest trade partner in South Asia (Govt. India 2024). However, relationships between two countries soared after political change in Bangladesh (Economic Times 2025). India put a ban on road trade. Reports suggest that from large-scale to local industries are affected (Ethirajan 2025). The gar-

ment sector has the largest dependence on India's yarn. A ban on road trade is threatening supply chains. Conglomerates like Pran-RFL Group, whose products are exported to northeastern states, have severely affected (France24 2025). Small-scale factories that produce for domestic demand are facing lack of raw material: crucial chemicals (Seraj 2025).

In this milieu, firm-level governance assumes that firms can thrive autonomously of state policies, socio-political, regional, and global geopolitical forces. Firms would then be able to overcome these political dimensions and devise their mechanisms to secure and sustain their production networks. Adaptability capacity and tactics are key in the way the firm-level governance interprets.

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## Book Review

T.V. Paul. 2024. *The Unfinished Quest: India's Search for Major Power Status from Nehru to Modi*. New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN: 978-0197669990; pp. 280.

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In 2023, India became the world's most populous country, with 1.4 billion people, and has made rapid economic and technological growth since the 1990s. It has the second-largest standing armed forces with 1.46 million personnel, possesses a nuclear arsenal, and plays a key role in confronting China's great power aspirations. Yet despite India's accomplishments, it is not a major power, its status is not institutionalized, lacking a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

In *The Unfinished Quest: India's Search for Major Power Status from Nehru to Modi*, T.V. Paul examines the historical efforts by India's leaders to obtain higher status in the international system and the constraints and opportunities they have experienced in that pursuit. Paul contends that Sino-Indian differences are part of a larger disagreements over international status in the Indo-Pacific region.

The book is structured with an introduction, followed by chapters on India's pursuit for international status, hard power, soft power, great powers,

the neighbors, state capacity, and the future. Since India's independence in 1947, its leaders from Jawaharlal Nehru to Narendra Modi have sought higher status for India at the global stage, making great inroads, yet this quest is incomplete and has been impaired by several international, domestic, and societal constraints.

At the international-level, India missed out on two occasions: in 1945 when India was not included in the permanent five members of the UNSC, and in 1968 when the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty came into force with India as a non-nuclear state because it had yet to conduct a nuclear test. Domestic challenges have inhibited the attainment of higher international status which includes creating an inclusive, developmental state, especially in wealth distribution and the provision of public services such as universal education and healthcare, and infrastructure development. The book identifies two powerful cultural and historical factors that coalesce in India: the hierarchical caste ideas and the inherited British-era colonial class-based education system,

which both reinforce inequality especially in the country's heavily populated Northern states.

Paul identifies ten key elements of hard and soft power that are essential for state to claim major power status and make up its overall national power capabilities. Meeting or exceeding these criteria would help a state move on from regional influence into a potentially higher status with global influence. A state's hard power resources consist of four elements: military, economic, technological/knowledge, and demographic. Soft power includes six elements: normative position, leadership role in international institutions, culture, state capacity, strategy and diplomacy, and effective national leadership.

The book analyzes India's hard power achievements and the challenges it has faced. India has the world's third largest defense budget, and its nuclear forces include a triad and can target China and Pakistan. India lacks the ability to project its military globally, which limits its status as a military power. India's military has been constrained by countering China and Pakistan, internal security threats, weak civil-military relations, challenges with weapons procurement and military service jointness. Paul notes a key game changer for India is to build a globally significant naval strength, which could challenge China's naval expansion in the Indian and Pacific oceans.

India's economic reforms, in 1991, made it one of the world's fastest-growing major economies. India's rapid economic growth occurred

through international trade, facilitated by infrastructure development, smart regulatory prices, foreign direct investment, and overall global economic prosperity. India's space technology, such as landing a craft on the moon, information technology, pharmaceuticals, and new technologies show progress in India's hard power markers. Demographically, India should benefit from having the world's largest population of the age group of 20-55. However, India has struggled with making the most of its population, particularly in the states that are falling behind in economic growth, skills development, and inclusive human development.

Hard-power markers are essential for status enhancement, accommodation by established powers, and recognition by non-great-power states. However, the primary question is whether these markers of hard power are of any consequence to other leading international actors. In sum, India's material assets are a work in progress, and it remains an international second-tier power.

Since the 1990s, India's soft-power attributes have become more well-known due to the state's growing economy and the globalization of information. This includes India's civilization and culture such as major religions originating in India, yoga, art, music, cuisine, literature, and film. India's political system consists of four institutional structures: democracy, secularism, federalism, and the three-language formula. The Hindutva (Hindu-ness agenda) project, although highly ambitious on

status acquisition for India on its own religious/nationalist terms, is likely a net negative for India's status aspirations as it is exclusive, state status is not solely based on civilization or religion, and neighboring states that have gone the religious route have become illiberal. The spread of illiberal values in India is likely to negatively affect its soft power and the durability and sustainability of its international status ranking.

Paul argues that soft-power resources alone will not bring influence or status but rather it is the confluence of hard- and soft-power resources that offers a country an enduring leadership role and status in the global arena. Further, states should not rely on soft-power alone, such as in 1962 when India's reliance on soft-power status was tarnished when it suffered a humiliating military defeat by China.

A new power requires acceptance from its peers before it can gain status. India's acceptance by almost all leading powers as a candidate great power and the recognition of such a role through their statements, increased diplomatic engagements, and visits by leaders, as well as accordance of membership in most international organizations. The rise of China initially challenged India's status aspirations, but China's increasing hostilities with the West resulted in India's receiving enhanced status from the U.S. and other powers, such as Japan. India's hard power and soft power strengths will be crucial in gaining peer acceptance and may lead to increased Chinese challenges on the border and in the Indian Ocean. The key dilemma

for India is how to become swing state an important ally to the West, while balancing its identity as leader of the developing world and its autonomy as a post-colonial, independent country with its own destiny to achieve.

Historically, a state needed to become status-dominant in its immediate region before it gained global power status. While India outmatches other South Asian states in status and material capabilities, its influence and activities have not always been welcomed by its neighbors, not just Pakistan. India has recognized that it must move beyond South Asia into other regions to achieve a higher status through peaceful strategies. Relative to increasing Chinese influence in South Asia, India's influence in the larger Indo-Pacific region, to include Southeast Asia, is likely to grow.

India's status quest is hampered by the continued prevalence of a weak state with a highly uneven socioeconomic development of the population. Despite achieving many status markers, there are three critical factors in India's developmental challenge. The first is weak state capacity; the second is the often-ineffective policies of inclusive economic growth; and the third is the increasing intolerance of the polity, especially toward minority Muslims and lower castes.

How India responds to these constraints to achieving its quest for higher status is tentative. Paul assesses that Indian will most likely remain a "truncated-major power," or a "partial power" in the short and medium terms. For India to realize its status goals, it

may need to do more in the economic arena and must also pursue deft diplomatic and military strategies. Status attainment is not a linear process, where gains and losses in status occur. Further, legitimacy and peer group recognition are crucial for a rising power to obtain major power status.

It is a puzzle as to how a state obtains higher international status, recognition by others, and enters the major power club in the absence of a major war, which was the most prominent mechanism through which a state gained or lost status. A peaceful Indian ascent to major power would challenge the dominant theoretical and empirical narrative that great power is achieved only through war.

Since the book's composition, India continues to face challenges with status enhancement. India's soft power credentials took a hit with India al-

legedly conducting assassinations and plotting against Sikh activists in Canada and the United States which strained relations with those respective countries.<sup>1</sup> U.S.-India relations started off on high note under the Trump administration in 2025 with Modi's visit to the White House, but spats over trade, India's reliance on Russian oil, and disagreements on the U.S. role in mediating a cease-fire between Indian and Pakistan have disrupted expected closer ties between India and the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Paul's book is an important analysis of India's unfinished quest for status enhancement to become a major international player. India has made great strides in both hard and soft powers since achieving its independence, but it must address domestic constraints while navigating international challenges if it wants to achieve major power status and acknowledgement by its peers.

**Disclaimer:** The views/statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this research are strictly my own and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense (DoD), or the U.S. Government. Review of the material does not imply DoD or U.S. Government endorsement of factual accuracy or opinion.

## Notes and References

- 1 Das, Anupreeta. 2024. "Facing Murder Plot Accusations, India Aids U.S. but Is Stern with Canada." *The New York Times*, October 18.
- 2 Jacob, Happymon. 2025. "The Shocking Rift Between India and the United States: Can Progress in the Partnership Survive Trump?" *Foreign Affairs*, August 14.





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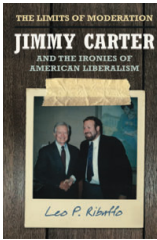




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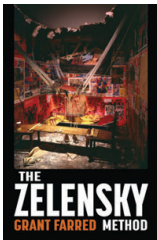
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## The Limits of Moderation: Jimmy Carter and the Ironies of American Liberalism by Leo P. Ribuffo

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The Limits of Moderation: Jimmy Carter and the Ironies of American Liberalism is not a finished product. And yet, even in this unfinished stage, this book is a close and careful history of a short yet transformative period in American political history, when big changes were afoot.



## The Zelensky Method by Grant Farred

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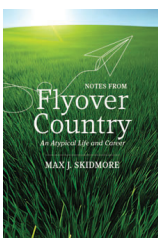
Locating Russian's war within a global context, The Zelensky Method is unsparing in its critique of those nations, who have refused to condemn Russia's invasion and are doing everything they can to prevent economic sanctions from being imposed on the Kremlin.



## Sinking into the Honey Trap: The Case of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict by Daniel Bar-Tal, Barbara Doron, Translator

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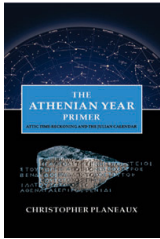
Sinking into the Honey Trap by Daniel Bar-Tal discusses how politics led Israel to advancing the occupation, and of the deterioration of democracy and morality that accelerates the growth of an authoritarian regime with nationalism and religiosity.



## Notes From Flyover Country: An Atypical Life & Career by Max J. Skidmore

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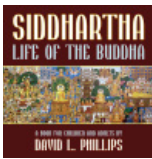
In this remarkable book, Skidmore discusses his "atypical life and career," and includes work from his long life in academe. Essays deal with the principles and creation of constitutions, anti-government attitudes, the influence of language usage on politics, and church-state relations.



## The Athenian Year Primer: Attic Time-Reckoning and the Julian Calendar by Christopher Planeaux

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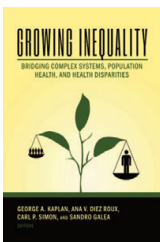
The ability to translate ancient Athenian calendar references into precise Julian-Gregorian dates will not only assist Ancient Historians and Classicists to date numerous historical events with much greater accuracy but also aid epigraphists in the restorations of numerous Attic inscriptions.



## Siddhartha: Life of the Buddha by David L. Phillips, contributions by Venerable Sitagu Sayadaw

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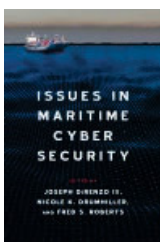
Siddhartha: Life of the Buddha is an illustrated story for adults and children about the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and work for social justice. It includes illustrations from Pagan, Burma which are provided by Rev. Sitagu Sayadaw.



## Growing Inequality: Bridging Complex Systems, Population Health, and Health Disparities Editors: George A. Kaplan, Ana V. Diez Roux, Carl P. Simon, and Sandro Galea

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Why is America's health is poorer than the health of other wealthy countries and why health inequities persist despite our efforts? In this book, researchers report on groundbreaking insights to simulate how these determinants come together to produce levels of population health and disparities and test new solutions.



## Issues in Maritime Cyber Security Edited by Dr. Joe DiRenzo III, Dr. Nicole K. Drumhiller, and Dr. Fred S. Roberts

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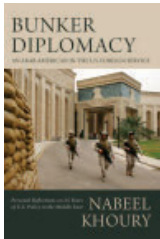
The complexity of making MTS safe from cyber attack is daunting and the need for all stakeholders in both government (at all levels) and private industry to be involved in cyber security is more significant than ever as the use of the MTS continues to grow.



## Female Emancipation and Masonic Membership: An Essential Collection By Guillermo De Los Reyes Heredia

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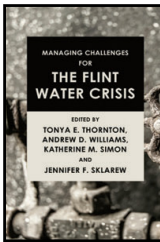
Female Emancipation and Masonic Membership: An Essential Combination is a collection of essays on Freemasonry and gender that promotes a transatlantic discussion of the study of the history of women and Freemasonry and their contribution in different countries.



## Bunker Diplomacy: An Arab-American in the U.S. Foreign Service by Nabeel Khoury

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After twenty-five years in the Foreign Service, Dr. Nabeel A. Khoury retired from the U.S. Department of State in 2013 with the rank of Minister Counselor. In his last overseas posting, Khoury served as deputy chief of mission at the U.S. embassy in Yemen (2004-2007).



## Managing Challenges for the Flint Water Crisis Edited by Tonya E. Thornton, Andrew D. Williams, Katherine M. Simon, Jennifer F. Sklarew

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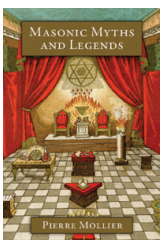
This edited volume examines several public management and intergovernmental failures, with particular attention on social, political, and financial impacts. Understanding disaster meaning, even causality, is essential to the problem-solving process.



## User-Centric Design by Dr. Diane Stottlemeyer

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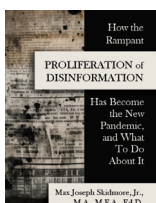
User-centric strategy can improve by using tools to manage performance using specific techniques. User-centric design is based on and centered around the users. They are an essential part of the design process and should have a say in what they want and need from the application based on behavior and performance.



## Masonic Myths and Legends by Pierre Mollier

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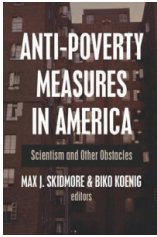
Freemasonry is one of the few organizations whose teaching method is still based on symbols. It presents these symbols by inserting them into legends that are told to its members in initiation ceremonies. But its history itself has also given rise to a whole mythology.



## How the Rampant Proliferation of Disinformation has Become the New Pandemic by Max Joseph Skidmore Jr.

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This work examines the causes of the overwhelming tidal wave of fake news, misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda, and the increase in information illiteracy and mistrust in higher education and traditional, vetted news outlets that make fact-checking a priority

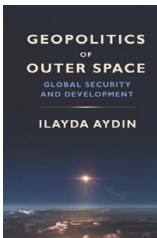


## Anti-Poverty Measures in America: Scientism and Other Obstacles

Editors, Max J. Skidmore and Biko Koenig

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Anti-Poverty Measures in America brings together a remarkable collection of essays dealing with the inhibiting effects of scientism, an over-dependence on scientific methodology that is prevalent in the social sciences, and other obstacles to anti-poverty legislation.



## Geopolitics of Outer Space: Global Security and Development

by Ilayda Aydin

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A desire for increased security and rapid development is driving nation-states to engage in an intensifying competition for the unique assets of space. This book analyses the Chinese-American space discourse from the lenses of international relations theory, history and political psychology to explore these questions.

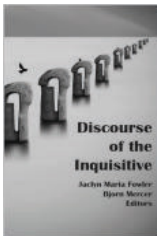


## Contests of Initiative: Countering China's Gray Zone Strategy in the East and South China Seas

by Dr. Raymond Kuo

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China is engaged in a widespread assertion of sovereignty in the South and East China Seas. It employs a “gray zone” strategy: using coercive but sub-conventional military power to drive off challengers and prevent escalation, while simultaneously seizing territory and asserting maritime control.



## Discourse of the Inquisitive

Editors: Jaclyn Maria Fowler and Bjorn Mercer

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Good communication skills are necessary for articulating learning, especially in online classrooms. It is often through writing that learners demonstrate their ability to analyze and synthesize the new concepts presented in the classroom.



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