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Indian Diplomacy: Caste, Ambedkar and Buddhist Diplomacy

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Abstract

In postcolonial nations like India, foreign policy and diplomacy have traditionally held a normative space apart from the supposedly "hard" power politics of the Cold War era. Following Pt. Nehru, also referred to as Nehruvian Socialism, the ruling elites in India have historically hegemonized discourse and policies in accordance with the subcontinent's hierarchical Brahmanical framework. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's departure from the Nehru administration signalled his disapproval of Indian diplomacy that was tilted towards authoritarian communism and socialism. The pragmatic approach, advocacy for the unity of "leagues of democracies," and his conversion to Buddhism further underscored the need for an alternative perspective of the Indian state in handling international affairs. While the Indian establishment tried to understand the importance of Buddhism in reaching out to other worlds especially South-East Asian societies, the current regime went one step further in displaying its keen interests to engage other world with the ideals and identity of Buddha. Interestingly, the Modi regime and his ideological underpinnings not only have serious limitations over Buddhist philosophy but it mischievously propagated Brahmanical Hinduism in better light through Buddhist roots and civilisation.

Keywords

Diplomacy, Buddhism, Caste, Ambedkar

Introduction

In the 1950s and 1960s, the process of decolonization saw the emergence of numerous independent nations all over the world. For the first time, the world recognised India as an independent country with several other Asian and African countries. At that time,

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the globe was divided ideologically into two camps: the Soviet Union and the United States of America. Realism and neo-realism were the major approaches and paradigms developed to comprehend world power politics and international diplomacy up until the collapse of the USSR. In order to promote South-South collaboration with African and Asian nations, India, the young state, did so under Pt. Nehru's leadership. Since India's independence, Pandit Nehru has promoted his foreign policy under the auspices of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), attempting to provide newly emerging African and other third world communities with an alternative to the Communist and Capitalist blocs.

A new paradigm emerged in international politics, i.e. State-security (realist/neo-realist) versus constructivist and culturalist or societal security, especially after the demise of the USSR. New questions were raised such as: can we perceive the state always as a universal and singular identity across the world? Are these states with reference to their nature, grievances and demands similar to Afro-Asian states?

After the 1990s, people were being brought in the centre of global political discourse rather than the state in the globalised new world order. Furthermore, new social realities such as ethnicity, religion, culture, and caste, began to emerge, providing a normative response to existing ideas of global diplomacy.

In the Indian context, a major challenge is how to analytically incorporate caste, a profoundly ingrained hierarchal social structure, into international relations. This poses an additional question: to what extent do prevailing, mostly Eurocentric theoretical frameworks have the conceptual imagination to take on caste-based structures on a global scale? However, is the caste question commonly disregarded in diplomatic language under the guise of "neutrality" and "objectivity," revealing underlying Brahmanical epistemic dominance?

Andrew Tan (2002) rightly observes: "National identity is invariably defined in terms of "the dominant group's values and culture, with other groups on the periphery tending to be left out". Global institutions related to international relations have long transgressed the watertight disciplinary boundaries. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, scholars have been devising interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary approaches specially in the arena of International Relations to engage with the various burning issues of the time.

Interestingly, Indian foreign policy has lately been cited as an appropriate illustration of how, under the cover of 'methodological restrictions', introducing caste problems into the subject is something highly unusual and unwanted.

Braj Ranjan Mani, the author of Debrahmanising History, assertively reacts with this sort of argumentation questioning the 'established Knowledge' system and raising the problems of recorded history. In the same manner that historian *E. H Carr*[1] asked,

[1]See E. H. Carr: All historical facts come to us because of interpretative choices by historians influenced by the standards of their age. Yet if absolute objectivity is impossible, the role of the

in 'What is history?': 'Nothing can be more hypocritical than the claims of academic neutrality and objectivity (with the tantalising premise of not 'stating' anything) that is often invoked by 'disinterested' social science. There is a writer behind every writing, and it matters from where one writes, to whom one writes, and with what objective and perspective.'[2]

What impact has caste had on Indian diplomacy, which is viewed as a puritan endeavour that uses strategic thinking and objective concepts to further national interests abroad? There hasn't been much research done in this area, however Priya Chacko and Vineet Thakur's recent works attempted to comprehend the institutions like the 'Ministry of External Affairs' and 'bureaucracy' involved in the conceptualizing and making of Indian Diplomacy.

They state that 'P.N. Haksar, himself a Kashmiri brahmin, called the MEA bureaucracy 'Brahmanical' in their mentality'. Digging deeper, they state, 'When Chokila Iyer became the foreign secretary in 2002, she was the first woman and the first SC/ST candidate to rise to the top position' (2025, 385).

In the same line, Gopal Guru explains how Hindu culture has been seen and upheld over the years while upholding the principles of "theorizing Brahmin" and "Empirical Shudra".

It is noteworthy to highlight the significant role that institutions like the Prime Minister's office, the Ministry of External Affairs, and ambassadors play in conceptualising and executing any policies pertaining to international actors.

As a result, the role of social elites and their socio-political orientation in designing, disseminating, and justifying diplomacy in today's world events has been called into question.

Methodologically, this study would focus on the historical analysis of Indian foreign policy and diplomacy form critical caste perspective. A analytical method would be devised to explore the production of Brahmanical knowledge system, historically. The knowledge based on experience will be utilised to understand how Indian diplomacy was created in order to understand the systematic marginalisation and deterrence of new knowledge generation in the South Asian setting.

Caste Beyond the Border

Caste has always been considered and portrayed as an 'archaic' concept in mainstream Indian intellectual and political discourses. At the global level, this inertia has been broken by a galaxy of academics from each burgeoning discipline. Interestingly, caste has now transcended national borders and spread around the world. However, in order to traverse the roots of Indian diplomacy and strategic thinking, disciplines such as

historian need in no way suffer; nor does history lose its fascination.

[2]See also 'Beyond the Fairy Tales of India' by Braj Ranjan Mani, 07 March 2015, https://countercurrents.org/mani070415.htm

International Relations and diplomacy often condemn, disregard, and reject any form of critical approach established on the premise of "locating" caste.

Gajendran Ayyathurai elucidates that "it is time for a new subfield: Critical Caste Studies" in his ground-breaking proposal. 'The global academy needs a new interdisciplinary field, Critical Caste Studies, to rethink caste-power in civil society, state, and academy in India and overseas,'[3] he asserts. When asked, 'What is Critical Caste Studies?' he replies that 'It is an interdisciplinary field in which caste is seen as an entrenched social crisis'.

The exclusion of marginalised communities, particularly Dalit lives and their value system at a pedagogical level is a product of the Indian educational system. On the nature of methodology and hierarchy of social sciences in India, Gopal Guru emphasises that 'Social science practice in India has harboured a cultural hierarchy dividing it into a vast, inferior mass of academics who pursue empirical social science and a privileged few who are considered the theoretical pundits with reflective capacity which makes them intellectually superior to the former. To use a familiar analogy, Indian social science represents a pernicious divide between theoretical Brahmins and empirical Shudras' (Guru, 2002: 5003).

It's intriguing how Indian academics has upheld the *Chaturvarna* system, which Ambedkar emphasizes is based on the notion of "graded inequality," while the fixity of place, duty, and occupation is predetermined.

The Indian sociologist, Vivek Kumar, aptly elucidates that "even after completing a hundred years, Indian sociology is practised in the milieu of domination. British, European and American domination has been well documented while the domination of the so-called twice-born castes has not been analysed" (Kumar, 2016: 33).

Although, Indian social elites maneuverer very carefully to make International relations caste- neutral yet the ideology of caste pervades every field. In his seminal work, 'Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development', in 1916, during his studies at Columbia University, New York, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar asserts that, it is a local problem, but one capable of much wider mischief, for "as long as caste in India does exist, Hindus will hardly intermarry or have any social intercourse with outsiders; and if Hindus migrate to other regions on earth, Indian caste would become a world problem[4]" (1916, pp. 5-6). More than a century after Ambedkar's warning, the footprints of castes are being felt, in a more nuanced but upsetting way.

Ambedkar's prophecy has been successfully brought to light by the inclusion of caste abuse and prejudice in the California (State Board of Education) curriculum in

[3]Ayyathurai: 'It is time this new field sees the caste-free and anti-caste cultural, religious, economic, historical, and cosmopolitan aspects of vernacular communities in India and in the Indian diaspora.' at LSE, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2021/07/05/it-is-time-for-a-new-subfield-critical-caste-studies/-

[4]https://akscusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/lecture-2-collated-readings.pdf

USA. The conflict started when the upper caste Hindu Group of America challenged the Board to exclude caste from the curriculum because it denigrates India. Human rights advocates and Dalits lobbied for the system to incorporate caste, a severe feature of Indian society.

Michael Witzel, a Harvard University professor of Sanskrit who has also been pressing California for changes that Hindu advocates have objected to for nearly a decade, said the entire controversy was one of image protection. "Castes are a hot-button issue, and people living in the United States don't want to talk about it or want to deny it," he said. "But it's ingrained in the society, and it has its roots in sacred texts" (*The New York Times*, May 4, 2016). 'On May 19 (2016), the California education officials "approved a curriculum that includes teachings about the caste system and uses the term India rather than South Asia[5]''.

Caste-based prejudice against Dalit-Bahujan by caste-Hindus in the American multinational technology company CISCO exploded on a global scale. The Dalit diaspora's 'Equality Labs' made it abundantly evident that caste-Hindu workers in firms often discriminated against and degraded their fellow Indians in the country. '40% of Dalits and 14% of Shudra respondents were made feel unwelcome at their place of worship because of their caste. 60% of Dalits report experiencing caste based derogatory jokes or comments'. 'Equality Labs', who conducted this study, argues that this report came out of a community-driven survey conducted in 2016, surveying more than 1,500 respondents, and has now emerged as a crucial document that both presents the first evidence of caste discrimination in the US and helps to map the internal hegemonies within Indian communities.'[6]

Interestingly, caste-based discrimination and exclusion is not only ancient, but it is now worldwide, with Hindus migrating across the globe.

The historical fight was for the "Equality Act," which Britain attempted to enact in 2011 to make caste discrimination and untouchability illegal. However, stubborn caste-Hindus prevented it from occurring there. The promised "Equality Act" encompassed discrimination based on gender, race, and ethnicity. However, the UK (United Kingdom) government was only able to incorporate caste as another criterion of discrimination into the Equality Act in 2017 as a result of the Dalit-Bahujan community's persistent efforts and persuasion.

It is not surprising that now caste-based discrimination has become a global issue. Thus, Seattle has become the first US city to ban discrimination based on caste after a vote by the city council in 2023. According to the Migration Policy Institute think tank, the US is the second-most popular destination for Indians living abroad and thus the banning of any caste-based discrimination outside the Indian soil is a remarkable victory of Dalits/Bahujan groups.[7]

[5]https://thewire.in/education/caste-wont-be-erased-from-california-textbooks-says-committee
[6]https://www.equalitylabs.org/castesurvey/#key-findings
[7]https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-64727735

While highlighting caste and its function in the Indian Diaspora, Vivek Kumar categorises caste-Hindus in three groups in USA. According to him, 'However, caste is not totally absent. Three different shades of caste can be observed among Indians in the US. One, caste exists among Indians as an endogamous grouping….Second, caste also exists as an institution of discrimination...The third shade of caste among Indians in diaspora in the US can be seen as different castes cut across their caste and regional and religious boundaries and transcend to form a community for emancipation and assertion'. (Kumar, 2021, p. 2).

Nonetheless, Dr. Ambedkar attempted to politicize and internationalize untouchability throughout his lifetime, lobbying for Dalit rights with British politicians like as Churchill. For Ambedkar, internationalism was the solution to India's inequalities. Prior to India's partition and independence, Ambedkar lost faith in the so-called upper-caste leadership of the Indian National Congress. Thus, he approached the British leaders to address the issues of caste and Dalits before leaving the country. Ambedkar had three main demands for Attlee: first, he wanted Dalits to be recognised as a political minority in their own right, just as Muslims and Sikhs were; second, he demanded the provision of constitutional safeguards for Dalits; and third, he demanded that at least two representatives of the Schedule Caste Federation (SCF) should be included in the interim government. However, Attlee dismissed the demands.

Moreover, Ambedkar left no stone unturned for raising issues of Dalits globally. He reached out to the UN as well but failed. 'Ambedkar failed to find enough support within and outside the UN to present his case because the international system was more interested in Gandhi's fight for independence than untouchability' (Chairez- J., 2019, p. 22).

Similarly, in the famous Durban Conference debate (2002) where human right activists and Dalits raised their concerns, they demanded the recognition of castiesm and humiliation of Dalits as considered similar to racial discrimination across the globe. The Indian government has denied these allegations arguing that they are India's domestic issues. It was in 2009 that the UN recognized discrimination and humiliation of Dalits as a major problem. The UN draft, which has been opposed by India, pledges to work for the "effective elimination of discrimination based on work and descent". The Indian government had lobbied heavily at the Human Rights Council to remove the word "caste" from a draft earlier this year" (*The Telegraph*, 29 September 2009).

Historically, India had the upper hand prior to independence, when Mahatma Gandhi became well-known for fighting a war against racism and apartheid in Africa. This heritage was continued in the form of the Non-Aligned Movement, following independence, evoking the a *Gandhian* past. Nonetheless, Indian diplomacy and the Indian state proudly demonstrated themselves as the head of a third-world nation in such a powerful historical heritage. However, when Dalits made such demands during

the Durban Conference,[8] the Indian state's higher moral standards and diplomacy were startled.

'We were official advocates condemning racism, colonialism, apartheid in every international conference. Suddenly our great role is being threatened and threatened from within. India is being condemned in the name of universal freedoms as a violator and all along for what we glibly thought was 'an internal affair'-caste' (2001, p. 2512).

Ambedkar the Pragmatist and Indian Diplomacy

Ambedkar's interest in more direct aspects of foreign policy had emerged in his resignation letter from the Union Cabinet on 10 October 1951. Ambedkar questioned Nehru over several issues including his idealism and NAM (Non-Alignment Movement) policy. He repeatedly expressed the desirability of a 'league of democracies' in Asia and beyond. He asserts: "Do you want parliamentary government?... If you want it, then you must be friendly with those who have parliamentary government".

On 8 November 1952 while addressing the students of Lucknow University he remarked, "Nehru's foreign policy has remained unsuccessful in strengthening India …. India would now have to make a choice between Pro-Democratic America and Western countries or countries like China or Russia where the system of dictatorship is prevailing."[9]

Ambedkar was not only in favour of 'league of democracies' but he confronted the communist system for its authoritarian nature, i.e. 'dictatorship of Proletariat'. While questioning Pt. Nehru, the first Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of India for his idealist foreign policy through NAM, the editors of *Kesari* and *Maratha*, Poona wrote a letter to Dr. Ambedkar on 5 July 1954, to which Dr. Ambedkar replied on 15 July 1954. Accordingly, '[in] the present day with one man's traffic in public affairs it is very difficult to maintain one's interest in the foreign affairs as the country is not prepared to listen to any view which does not concur with that of the Prime Minister' (Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings And Speeches Vol. 17 Part II:, p. 386).

During a parliamentary Session on August 26, 1954, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar warned Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru against taking an excessively conciliatory approach toward Communist China.

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[8]See Thorat (2008). '*Dalits in India: Search for a Common Destiny: Cambridge University Press*'. The World Conference (WCAR) held at Durban in South Africa in 2001 gave an opportunity for Dalits in India to represent the issue of caste discrimination and practice of untouchability on an international platform. With their demand that the UN should recognize caste and caste-based discrimination on par with racial discrimination.

[9]https://kashmirobserver.net/2022/04/16/prophetic-ambedkar-and-indias-current-foreign-policy/

He states that, 'Communism is like a forest fire; it goes on burning and consuming anything and everything that comes in its way. Stay away from China. Even if not today, danger of invading India by China will about to occur in the future.'[10]

The social elites of India did not pay attention to Ambedkar's thought and India faced the 1962 war with China. Additionally, it shows how the term "*Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai*," which was popularised during the Nehruvian era, signified an idealist internationalism based on anti-colonial solidarity and a normative vision of Asian unity that could not last for a longer length of time.

In his writings and speeches, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar emphasized the importance of both newly independent India's foreign policy and worldwide trends. Important ideas that consistently appear in his entire approach were pragmatism, national interest, solidarity with democracies, and fraternity.

'The All India Scheduled Caste Federation (AISCF), in its election manifesto in 1951 authored by Ambedkar, had a column titled 'Problems of Foreign Policy', referring to the collapsing state of the Indian foreign programme' (Yengde, 2018, p. 88). Moreover 'in it, Ambedkar made suggestions about the Kashmir issue that had been plaguing the South Asian region. He had also proposed India getting permanent membership of the United Nations Organization way back in 1951, making him perhaps the first person who considered India had a legitimate and rightful place in the international body' (ibid.: 88-89). He observed 'foreign affairs' to be the 'most important subject from [a] social, political and financial point of view'.

It is lesser known fact that Ambedkar's prime reason for his resignation from Nehru's cabinet was on the direction of Indian Foreign Policy. The resignation made headlines the world over, with even *The New York Times* reporting the incident. Ambedkar stated in his resignation letter dated 10 October 1951: 'It may be said that my resignation is out of time and that if I was dissatisfied with the Foreign Policy of the Government and the treatment accorded to Backward Classes and the Scheduled Castes I should have gone earlier' (ibid,. p. 93).

On the India-China relations, Communist regime, *Panchsheel* agreement and Tibet, Ambedkar warned Nehru and suggested pragmatic and realistic measures to be dealt with.

"I am indeed surprised that our Hon'ble Prime Minister is taking this '*Panchsheel'* seriously… If Shri Mao had even an iota of faith in *Panchsheel* (both the agreement as well as the Buddhist code) he would have treated the Buddhists in his country in a different manner."[11]

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[10]See Prof. Hari Narke: China is a Forest fire for democracy: Threat of Chinese aggression to India https://harinarke.blogspot.com/2020/06/china-is-forestfire-for-democracy.html

[11]See Haris Rashid and Anuraag Khaund: 'Prophetic Ambedkar and India's Current Foreign Policy,. https://kashmirobserver.net/2022/04/16/prophetic-ambedkar-and-indias-current-foreign-policy/

Moreover, he too highlighted the nature of international relations, power politics and idealism in the Nehruvian approach to deal with global affairs. According to Haris Rashid and Anuraag Khaund (April 16, 2022), Ambedkar asserts that "*Panchsheel* (The Buddhist code of five principles) has no place in politics. The truth inherent in *Panchsheel* is that Morality is forever changing. There is nothing called Morality. You can abide by your promises in accordance with today's Morality and by the same propriety you may violate your own promise simply because tomorrow's morality will have different demands."

While addressing the issues of foreign policy in his resignation letter Dr Ambedkar raised some pertinent questions:

'First, he notes that in 1946 he had prepared a report on the condition of the scheduled castes for submission to the UN but did not do so because he felt that "it would be better to wait until the constituent assembly and the future Parliament was given a chance to deal with the matter". Second, he wrote that the foreign policy of the country has given him "cause, not merely for dissatisfaction but for actual anxiety and even worry". He opined: "How dangerous it has been to us this policy of doing the impossible and of being too good". Third, he expressed deep dissatisfaction with "our quarrel with Pakistan" that he termed "a part of our foreign policy".

He wrote: "There are two grounds which have disturbed our relations with Pakistan- one is Kashmir and the other is the condition of our people in East Bengal. I felt that we should be more deeply concerned with East Bengal-than with Kashmir. My view has always been that the right solution is to partition Kashmir... Or if you like, divide it into three parts; the cease-fire zone, the Valley and the Jammu-Ladakh Region and have a plebiscite only in the Valley[12].'

Mahatma Gandhi was promoted by the Indian regime from early on as an ambassador to form an alliance in the name of an historically strong Black-Indian unity and South-South cooperation. However, there has been a new phenomenon in African nations where Black people have destroyed Gandhi sculpture in the continent. In 2016 in Ghana, Black people raised the slogan, "Gandhi must fall," to protest his racial profiling. Notably, 'During Mahatma Gandhi's South African days, he distanced the struggle for equality of the Indians from that of the Black Africans, Gandhi has characterised Africans as uncivilised, troublesome, dirty and living like animals' (Brown, 2018, p. 49).

The first-generation leadership was sharply criticised by academics and politicians, especially those from India, on numerous issues following the fall of the Soviet Union.

However, it was B. R. Ambedkar who cautioned Jawaharlal Nehru about several foreign policy complexities both inside and outside of Parliament. Rather than relying on the frameworks of Mahatma Gandhi or others, India's engagement with Black

[12]http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/what-if-ambedkar-had-shaped-india-s-foreign-policy-/434288/

people should be based on Dalit intellectual and ethical traditions, notably those expressed by Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule.

Furthermore, Dr. Ambedkar's personal historical linkages, his demanding academic background at Columbia University, and strong relationships with academics like Professor Seligman and John Dewey might have greatly benefited India's democratic structure, institutional development, and educational system. Similarly, it is said that Dr. Ambedkar brought the "concept of supreme court" and "fundamental rights" from the American constitution to the Indian one through his American experiences.

On the pattern of 'black lives matter', Dalits are also mobilizing under the banner of 'Dalit lives matter' across the globe. But the root of the analogy between the Blacks and Dalits goes back to American and Indian History. Afro-American scholar and activist, W.E.B. Dubois and Dr. Ambedkar exchanging their letters is one such historical episode in human history where two scholars exchanged their thoughts and empathy to each other. 'The Black-centric magazine the Crisis, started by W.E.B. Du Bois and later edited by Roy Wilkins, carried stories of the 'Negroes of India' in its 1942 and 1943 editions, explaining the resonance between Indian Untouchables and the Negroes in the US. It credited Ambedkar for being 'one of the finest scholars of the country' and a 'single leader of sixty million untouchables' (Yengde, 2018, p. 96).

The analogy between racism and the caste system has a much longer and sustained history. In 1873, Jotirao Phule, dedicated his book *Gulamgiri* (*Slavery*) to American abolitionists. It did not end here, but in the 1960s, a 'Dalit Panther,' organization came into existence under the leadership of radical Dalit writers who named themselves in reference to the Black Panthers in the U.S. In their manifesto, issued in 1971, the Panthers wrote: 'From the Black Panthers, Black Power was established. We claim a close relationship with this struggle.'

'Black Capitalism' is cited by several scholars as the source for the concept of 'Dalit Capitalism,'[13] which aims to economically liberate the oppressed Indian masses.

From Nehru to Modi and Buddhist Diplomacy

During Jawaharlal Nehru's tenure as Prime Minister of India, he employed a diplomatic approach known as "Buddhist diplomacy" to foster relations with other Asian countries, particularly those with Buddhist traditions. This approach aimed to emphasize common cultural and philosophical ties rooted in Buddhism. Even if there aren't any particular allusions to "Buddhist diplomacy" during Nehru's administration, the values of promoting intercultural understanding and regional cooperation are reflected in his policies and interactions. Here are some notable instances:

[13]See Chandra Bhan Prasad, author of '*Dalit Capitalism, A Memoir: A Self-Respect Movement*'- emphasise that the urbanisation and market economy have played better and emancipatory role from feudal society.

Asian Relations Conference (1947): Nehru organised the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi in 1947 to bring Asian nations together to discuss shared issues and foster cultural interaction. Similarly, for the International Buddhist Conference of 1952, while Jawaharlal Nehru was India's prime minister, Sanchi played host, drawing over 3,000 Buddhist nuns, monks, and historians to promote communication among members across sectarian and national boundaries. Scholars find the *Panchsheel* Agreement with China (1954) that has its root in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence which were founded on Buddhist ideals, placed an emphasis on respect for each other's sovereignties, non-interference, and peaceful coexistence.

However, the Nehruvian era and succeeding governments were distinguished by a consistent emphasis on Third World solidarity, active engagement in the Non-Aligned Movement, and the methodical strengthening of strategic and diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union.

Current Scenario under Modi Regime

In an attempt to strengthen India's cultural diplomacy and solidify its place as a moral and spiritual centre of Buddhism, the Modi administration hosted several Buddhist conferences to enhance India's soft power and standing abroad. The Prime Minister inaugurated the Hindu-Buddhist Initiative on Conflict Avoidance, which was organised in Bodh Gaya (2015) by the Tokyo Foundation and the Vivekananda International Foundation. The Ministry of Tourism's 5th International Buddhist Convention in Varanasi (2016) and the Buddhism in the 21st Century conference in Rajgir (2017) came next. Of particular note was the March 2017 worldwide Buddhist summit held at Nalanda by the Ministry of Culture, which was attended by prominent monks from over 30 nations, including Bangladesh, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam. These initiatives were designed to consolidate India's image as a nation committed to the principles and teachings of the Buddha. Prime Minister Modi at UNGA, 27 Sept 2019 said that 'India has given the world not '*Yuddh*' (war) but 'Buddha'.

Buddhism has drawn a huge following despite emphasising the importance of religion in each person's individual faith. The significance of Buddhism and its applicability in the modern world have been succinctly stated, 'the established transnational network for Buddhism, and the important role played by the faith in the lives of millions across the world, is what gives it potential for Indian foreign policy. The pan-Asian presence of the religion and its importance for national identities in the region, coupled with its image as a peaceful religion makes it ideal for soft power diplomacy, with its focus on non-coercive power.'[14]

The ascendance of Narendra Modi in 2014 marked a renewed emphasis on Buddhism as a cornerstone of India's soft power diplomacy. Modi's official visits

[14]https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/07/the-growing-role-of-buddhism-in-india-s-soft-power-strategy/

to Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Mongolia, Japan, and Korea strategically foregrounded Buddhist heritage as a shared civilizational bond. P. Stobdan asserts that after 2014, 'the Modi government undertook several diplomatic measures, mainly organising Buddhist cultural festivals—gathering Buddhist leaders and experts from Asian countries to attend conferences, conventions and shows. But two years down the line, these efforts show no mark of desired progress on the ground. The reasons could be many, but India's lack of a credible institution for espousing Buddhism or a traditional sangha order leads to the recurring failure of Indian cultural diplomacy.'[15]

China is fostering Buddhism as a form of future religious diplomacy through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Given its history, it has been noted that India isn't leveraging its legacy as China promotes a "Buddhist" globalisation. The Belt and Road Initiative, which was launched in 2013, has a number of ambitions. In its efforts to assert dominance over Buddhist heritage and pilgrimage networks, China has begun developing and promoting Buddhist pilgrimage sites to strengthen its influence over the global Buddhist community.

Under this project, P. Stobdan, former ambassador and a scholar of Asian affairs argues that 'Nepal is proposing to link the OBOR with Buddha's birthplace, Lumbini. Pakistan is reviving the '*Gandhara* trail' to link the Lahore, Taxila and Peshawar networks. Taxila relics are being sent to Sri Lanka for a public exposition during the Vesak month. If Sri Lankan monks visit Taxila to celebrate Purnima, top Bhutanese monks visit the Saidu Sharif monastery in Swat Valley (the birthplace of Guru Padmasambava).'[16]

India might beat everyone for obvious reasons even if any nation, like China or Nepal, tried to advance Buddhism and develop a diplomatic tool. The fact that Buddhism originated in India gives it a special claim to historical legitimacy. Second, Buddhism places a high value on a number of India's sites, such as Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, and Nalanda. The Dalai Lama and the Tibetan parliament-in-exile are both present in Dharamshala, which has contributed to India's international reputation as a sincere supporter of Buddhist beliefs and a saviour of the oppressed Buddhist minority. Significantly, the mass conversion of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and his followers to Buddhism in 1956 represents not only a revival of Buddhism within India but also a reinterpretation of the faith as a vehicle of social justice and emancipation. This development provides India with a renewed platform to project Buddhist diplomacy as both a civilizational heritage and a contemporary ethical resource in international affairs.

Moreover, the Modi regime recently brought back India's sacred Buddhist relics, *Piprahwa* after 127 years, thus making headlines among the few Buddhist organisations and media. The relics were successfully repatriated to India on July 30,

[15]https://thewire.in/uncategorised/buddhism-soft-power-india-china

[16]https://thewire.in/diplomacy/india-china-buddhist

2025, through a public-private partnership involving the Government of India and the Godrej Industries Group.[17]

Remarkably, there has been a slight noticeable incorporation of Buddhist theory and Buddha in Indian diplomacy from the Nehru era to the current Modi rule. The explanations are clear. It was important for Indian social elites to periodically promote Buddhism globally through polemics because of ethical and civilizational benefits. With disastrous results, India's ruling elites attempted to strategically link with other Buddhist countries in South East Asia. Yet, this appropriation is not without tension, as the current regime often articulates Buddhist diplomacy through a Brahmanical idiom that risks diluting its egalitarian and universalist appeal.

'Hindutva therefore revises India's diplomatic identity: away from a Nehruvian postcolonial Indian-ness premised on transnational solidarity across the global South and towards a saffronization of the Indian self, insistent on uniform civilizational and religious identity' (Hall, 2019, p. 428).

Hardline Hindu religious preachers have historically attempted to preserve Hinduism while labelling it as '*Sanatan*' (ever-existing), which refers to closely adhering to the Vedas and Smritis. Nevertheless, ideologues and other reformists are constantly willing to appropriate any previous revolutionary, like Buddha, and claim him as the tenth Avatar of the Hindu deity Vishnu. In politics, the Modi government attempted to present Buddhism as part of the same comprehensive Hindu umbrella.

In effect, Modi made the Buddha into a national asset by incorporating his life into a Hindu context: "Buddha is the crown jewel of the Indian nation [...]. So, Hinduism after the Buddha's advent became Buddhist Hinduism or Hindu Buddhism" (Scott, 2016, p. 150).

Moreover, it is unsurprising that the current establishment—particularly under Prime Minister Modi—tends to temporarily sideline contentious social issues during both domestic and international negotiations. While the symbolic veneration of B. R. Ambedkar, ranging from *Dandavat Pranam (prostrated obeisance)* to parliamentary tributes, is prominently displayed, the structural marginalization of historically oppressed communities persists. Indeed, over several decades, such inequities have often been exacerbated by the continued entrenchment of Brahmanical hierarchies, reflecting a persistent gap between symbolic gestures and substantive social reform.

Globally, talks and speeches on Buddhism and the push of Buddhist diplomacy in the Modi regime has followed the same path of co-option and distortion of philosophy and teachings of Buddhism. 'Modi has publicly embraced the Buddha as a reformer whose message has been reabsorbed back into Hinduism. Of course, this devalues the independent development of Buddhism as a religious tradition, but it enables Modi to

[17]See A Joyous Homecoming India's Sacred Buddhist Relics Return After 127 Years https://www.pib.gov.in/PressNoteDetails.aspx?NoteId=154972& ModuleId=3&reg=3&lang=2

use the Buddha to portray Hinduism in a better light and to shape a more Indian focus for Buddhism' (Scott, 2016, p. 150).

The similar argument could be seen in the his piece, 'How Ambedkar Bridged the gap Between Religious Identity and Western Modernity Through Buddhism' by an Ambedkarite scholar, Harish Wankhede:

'Though Ambedkar envisaged that the Dalit-Bahujan groups would utilise the ancient religious resources to counter the Brahmanical cultural hegemony effectively, it is the conventional social elites who have instrumentalised the Hindu religious and cultural symbols more effectively, including the appropriation of neo-Buddhism than the others.' (Wankhede, 2023)

At home, however, Buddhism and the Buddhist community have been relentlessly disowned. Hindu festivals, Bollywood, and Hindu cultural and religious linkages with South-East Asian civilizations have been portrayed as 'Soft Power'. Engagement with foreign governments on the 'Buddhist-cultural' legacy and the use of Buddhist principles in Indian diplomacy was uncommon, and if it did occur, it was only for display.

Ambedkar and Conversion to Buddhism: Significance for IR

By formally converting to Buddhism in 1956 and garnering a substantial following, B. R. Ambedkar effectively reinterpreted and revitalized the tradition for contemporary India. Today, the Asian continent remains a central locus for Buddhist practice, encompassing nearly 97 per cent of the region's Buddhist population. In this context, Ambedkarite Buddhism functions not only as a site of social reform but also as a potential conduit linking India to the broader Buddhist world.

'Even though I was born a Hindu, I shall not die one', Dr. Ambedkar said in 1935 at the impoverished classes conference in Yeola, Nasik district. His statement had a significant impact. The conversion not only brought new facets to Buddhist theory but also revived Buddhism in India. At a press conference on October 13, 1956, he declared that his brand of Buddhism would be Navayana rather than Hinayana or Mahayana. Moreover, representatives of the Buddhists of Burma, Thailand, Tibet and China welcomed Ambedkar's decision and invited him to join the Buddhist community. The Mahabodhi Society, Sarnath, secretary sent a telegram saying, "You with your community are most cordially welcome to embrace Buddhism which is professed by the greater part of Asia".

India's international relations with Buddhist nations were greatly impacted by the conversion of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and his supporters to Buddhism, which promoted a more cordial interaction. Major Buddhist nations around the world took notice of this historic conversion. Ambedkar attended conferences in Ceylon (1950), Myanmar (1954), and Nepal (1956) before and after his conversion, when he urged the Buddhist community to focus on India in their attempts to bring Buddhism back to its birthplace. India was perceived positively with Buddhist countries and regional

Buddhist groups as a result of these efforts. Additionally, this movement promoted tourism to important Buddhist locations, drawing tourists from abroad to the Buddha's birthplace. Along with giving recognition of India as a Buddhist country, the neo-Buddhism of Ambedkar has a social and philosophical significance too. 'Thus, the impact Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism and impact of his conversion is said to be the liberation of the untouchables from the Hindu social order'[18].

The hard power—economic and military—count as the source of strength that make up a state's whole capability to endure in the crude realist dimension of international politics. By bandwagon, each state aims to maximize its full capability. However, Buddhism has helped the downtrodden by giving them access to philosophical and economic opportunities. Ambedkar also suggests that Buddhist thought may be a cure-all for the new world.

'In other words Buddhism is the only religion which world can have. If the new world-which be it realised is very different from the old-must have a religion-and the new world needs religion far more than the old world did-then it can only be religion of the Buddha (Ambedkar: 105).

Furthermore, in the business of global politics, India has long presented itself as a civilization state striving for a fair role in global power structure. The phrase 'Vaisdhaiva Kutumbakam' (The World is One Family) is commonly used in Indian diplomacy and global discourse, and has been reflected in India's philosophical attitude in forums such as the G20. Nonetheless, caste and other Indian social structures have clashed with Hindu *Dharmashatra* teachings like the one described above. Rhetorically, Indian officials—most notably Prime Minister Modi—often use Buddhist principles to settle issues in foreign nations, 'The world needs Buddha, not *Yuddha*.'

While in the context of conversion: 'Buddhism has also exposed communities in Maharashtra to Buddhist societies around the world and fostered connections with them. This exposure to the broader global context, along with a sense of welcome from international Buddhist organisations, has significantly boosted the confidence of Buddhist communities in Maharashtra'[19].

Therefore, Buddhism can be used as a tool and, moreover, may be conceptualized as a form of soft power to connect broader Buddhist communities and foster stronger diplomatic bonds through people-to-people engagement.

To highlight the strategic significance of Buddhism, Stobdan (2016) emphasised:

'Buddhism is now definitely gaining a strategic dimension and, to be a serious player in the game, India needs more than posturing. Initiatives like fixing events

[18]https://www.dailypioneer.com/2014/state-editions/ambedkar-embracing-buddhism-a-social-event-of-major-significance.html

[19]https://thewire.in/caste/how-ambedkars-vision-on-buddhist-conversion-has-changed-dalit-lives-in-maharashtra

and conferences through NGO-style outfits that enjoy neither the spiritualism nor the depth of Buddhist scholarship are doomed to end in failure. For India to seriously reaffirm its central role, it must facilitate its own Buddhist sangha (Buddhist council) to emerge in strength'.

Furthermore, it is ironic that the current leadership extols India as the birthplace of Buddhism or claims that India as a nation has been endowed with a philosophy of tolerance, compassion, and love. However, it is a truth that the country's Buddhist community has been marginalised by the Brahmanical nature of the governing class and the majority of Hindus. 'But even under a secular government the position of Buddhism remains weakest, for its followers are among the poorest and most disorganised' (Joshi, 2012, p. 7).

The French Revolution gave the world community the idea of "liberty, equality, and fraternity," which Dr. Ambedkar strove to underline as the architect of the Indian constitution. Ambedkar asserts that he holds these principles in the highest regard not because he personally believes in them but rather because they link Buddhism to its Indian origins. Ambedkar, according to Jafferlot, finds the Buddhist philosophy and the Sangh to be the source of all democratic values. According to him. 'If the teaching of the Buddha was democratic, then democracy is not an invention of the West—as the manner in which Dr Ambedkar drew his inspiration from so many European and American scholars and leaders suggested—, but it's a product of the Indian history. In his historic speech of 25 November 1949 where Dr. Ambedkar presented the final draft of the Indian Constitution to the Assembly which was to pass it on 26 January 1950, he pointed out that by becoming a parliamentary constituency "again", India is back to its Buddhist roots.'[20] (Jaffrelot, Dec. 2017).

Conclusion

From the beginning of its diplomatic journey, the post-colonial Indian state was entangled in the "High Politics" of the ideologically conflicted Cold War-era between the USSR and the US. The "Non-Aligned Movement," led by Pandit Nehru in particular, was the route chosen by the first generation of Indian leaders. India's overall diplomatic ties with the USSR and the US, however, are dominated by their Afro-Asian solidarity and balance. The dissolution of the former Soviet Union generated issues regarding how identity, race, and ethnicity may be employed as supplementary sources of knowledge to comprehend international affairs and diplomacy. In India, Indian foreign policy could be sought as the apt example where under the disguise of the 'methodological constraints', bringing caste issues has been unconventional and undesirable in the discipline.

Dr. Ambedkar cautioned about the tendency of post-colonial Indian states to back communist countries such as the USSR and PRC. Moreover, he insisted that the current

[20]https://thewire.in/books/ambedkar-democracy-buddhism

Indian establishment maintain sound relations with the league of democracies in more pragmatic ways to foster the national interest of the country. From a geographical and philosophical standpoint, India's diplomatic failures are brought to light by China's ascent and aspirations to become the world's leading (Buddhist) nation. India's Buddhist tradition was revived by none other than Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's 1956 conversion and his outreach to global Buddhist world.

In post-colonial India, Buddhism as a cultural-religious philosophy may have been employed as a tool and even envisioned as a form of soft power to establish better diplomatic relations and link broader Buddhist communities through people-to-people engagement. Regretfully, from Nehru to Modi, Indian states reluctantly advocated for it but never took a comprehensive approach in diplomatic affairs.

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