

NOTES AND REFLECTIONS

INDIA'S SOFT POWER SIGNIFIERS AND GLOBAL SOUTH'S POLYPHONIC NARRATIVE

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The epistemic unity in global south narratives nourished in its original habitat and attuned to the lived reality of global south stands as an indictment to the Euro-Atlantic narrative. However, a conspicuous absence of coherence in the language and modes of resistance highlighted by the hallowed quarters of international community often becomes the rationale for the dismissal of this shared sense of decoloniality. This sense has taken upon itself the combative role to resuscitate a praxis rooted in culture which does not only inhere from theology but also, politics. Akin to this narrative is the political substratum of South Asian regional blocs that has nourished and sustained different depictions of cultures coming from across the member states of this bloc. This goes beyond the political and economic solidarity of the member nations and witnesses a steady and concomitant decline of confrontational method of establishing supremacy or cementing status hierarchy on the global platform. Decolonized nations have eagerly surpassed their respective language silos and also have converged their cultural fiefdom to find a common ground and be ruled by an independent political ethic. In this context, this paper sets out to map the trajectory of evolution of India's role in developing its cultural signifiers like Yoga, Ayurveda and the festival of Mahakumbh. It will explore the possibilities of cultural rejuvenation and the potency of India's cultural capital while in conversation with other nations of South Asia. It also sets out to evaluate the potential of cultural signifiers in the making of a polyphonic narrative of the global south. This layered cultural edifice of the global south not only validates the economic potential of the countries independent of the west but also their essential worth in protecting the indigenous value system that generates political stability. A sustained effort by the west diminishing the cultural worth of countries in South East Asia had made it incumbent upon these countries to not just rise in defiance but to cultivate strong cultural roots which can bind varied voices signifying the diversity that is endemic to these countries. The position that is argued in this paper is not just a reactionary viewpoint but a proportionate response to rebalance power structures through New Diplomacy.



Introduction

In a post-Westphalian (Newman, 2009) landscape where there is a fight for perceptibility and acceptability of exercise of power within and outside the boundaries of nation-state, the need for legitimacy and cultivation of global image goes beyond the traditional exhibits of power. The conventional methods of power-display (Ilgen, 2016) at the expense of opposition and condemnation coming from the native population and sometimes, from the global community has renegotiated the boundary between multilateral blocs and nation state. The emerging powers and in this case, Brazil, India, China and Russia are trenchant critiques of the post-Westphalian setup (Rajagopalan & Sahni, 2008) that undermines the role of nation-state as independent actors in the larger scheme of things. The post-cold war era has seen international problems ranging from energy crisis to health crisis and to environmental crisis, which can be resolved only with global actors co-opting (Nye, 2023) with each other and not when they are juxtaposed against each other. Be it territorial disputes such as seen in Africa, South-Asia, and Russia or Climate-change issue, a unilateral formula does not carry the recipe to alleviate these problems. The preeminence of US led peace negotiations has witnessed a steady decline (Vanaik, 2006) with countries like Brazil, India and China asserting their sovereignty and independence in deciding how to deal with territorial disputes with their neighbor or any other conflict faced by them. The global dictates on liberalism and democracy has been overturned by regional assertion with a preponderance on independent decision-making. The culture of less developed and decolonized societies has been largely and systematically either devalued or erased from the shared memory (Said, 2016) of the populace residing in those regions. And, therefore the aim of decolonization was not just the overthrow of colonial bondage but a calibrated effort to bring back the lost culture and in effect, the respect and pride that these newly independent countries had. The processes of colonial subjugation had a diabolical intent to distance the individual from their shared past (Bhargava, 2010) which provided social stability and resilience in the face of downright exploitation. This systematic obliteration of any and every means of constituting stable political regime suffocated their chance and opportunity to harness growth and development from the reservoir of resources amply available to them. Such political asphyxiation was not only characteristic of colonial times but has travelled through time cultivating the same fears and insecurity in the psyche of the less developed nations. This has paved way for enforcing a skewed version of democracy (Chomsky & Prashad, 2022) as if it is the universal panacea to all the ills of the society. This narrative has to be flipped and a counter-hegemonic (Gramsci et al., 2011) narrative ought to step in that delivers the countries to its full potential. However, the ruling dictum globally cannot be an overriding decision. On the contrary, it has to constantly and persistently bargain with multiple and intangible sources of power and the said overture can in collaboration with multiple power structure reconfigure the power structure put in place by the erstwhile regime making space for a renewed synergy between development, defense and diplomacy. Development, defense and diplomacy accompanied by a careful amalgamation of soft and hard power are the focal points of global strategies to be deployed by countries in order to manufacture an image that can sustain in the global pressure. Soft power (Nye, 2009), a powerful conceptual category devised in the writings of Joseph Nye has brought on the international forum means and methods to absolve and at the same time, incriminate the nations who have exhibited military strength (hard power) to safeguard their vested interest. Imposing sanctions and



trade tariffs on nations gone rogue was an important means deployed by the US to streamline the ideological warfare it led against the former Soviet Union but its continuation well after the disintegration of USSR and on a country like India is not only reprehensible but a manifestation of a US' standing in the status quo. This unexplained hostility against India in the backdrop of Russia's occupation in Ukraine using the latter's military occupation as a reason for this trade sanction against India is reflective of America's fear of India as an emerging economy with the potential to rebalance power shifts happening globally. India's attempt at carving a niche for itself in the global panorama of nation-states while having a voice and a rooted Indic philosophy that has evolved indigenously is reflective in its refusal to retract its many trade negotiation with Russia accompanied by a conscious effort to display soft power through regional blocs like BRICS+, ASEAN, SAARC, BIMSTEC etc. Soft power coined and popularized by Joseph Nye had a very particular stance on Soft power which clearly demarcated Soft Power and Power exhibited through money and military. This categorically put any attempt at influencing another country through force, compulsion or economic sanction as falling outside the ambit of Soft Power. Therefore, NDB and CRA and other developmental association (Roberts et al., 2018) are not expression of soft power but in this paper and in India's intent, Soft power is not only limited to the deepening of cultural values coming from independent countries to safeguard their status hierarchy but also economic association which has the potential to not just supplement western financial institutions but also, replace them. The need for soft power projection in the language construed by South Asian countries is anything that is not hard power. The three most important means of influencing other nations are money, imposition and attraction. Hence, the use of attraction is often used in soft power to negotiate differences on political lines. In the case of south-south dialogue, economy and attraction are the two main sources of soft power. While cinema and sports have often acted as catalyst in cementing relation between countries of the global south, the use of religion and alternative knowledge system have still not been deployed as dominant cultural themes around which countries rally. A.F.K. Organski has espoused a Power transition theory that in a way, finds solutions to structural limitation of comparatively less developed economies in rebalancing power structures. Any attempt in entrenching the power position of nations who are already situated at the higher level of hierarchy are expected to maintain the status quo while the countries who are emerging as powerful nations are expected to act as revisionist countries. This in turn modifies the international balance of power and revise the structural position of the countries determining balance of power. This is a step further away from the traditional structural realism by reconfiguring the ideational context within which the countries are exercising soft power. The value of culture is directly associated with position of the countries in the larger context of power. Structural Realism propounded by Michael Walzer talked about structural limitation as procedural qualification in the bid to further the self-interest of countries individually as well as collectively. Hence, while campaigning for a self-sustained global south narrative, we are not only assessing the soft power influence of all the countries in the global south collectively but also evaluate India's influence individually yet codependently on other states (Walzer, 2015). The big brother syndrome that seeks to assert the supremacy of one nation superseding the collective political and cultural space of countries while reinstating hierarchies is steadily replaced by an acknowledgement that all countries however small, have fed into and is directly in conversation with the larger global bloc.



The 'regional' bloc as is referred to in modern day Eurocentric understanding, has to be levelled up with the global union such as United Nations, G20, G7 and other organizations. In the interest of India and other 'rising' powers(O'Brien, 2000), the urgency to constitute a globally recognized organization reflective of the changing partnerships across the world is further underscored. This in turn sheds light on the need to pry open cultural crevices that can act as resources for shared cultural capital and establish the foundation of successful economies collaborating with each other defining a distinct dimension of global politics. In this continuously shifting narrative of outmaneuvering and outsmarting the countries of the west, the new 'paradigm' of international politics streamlines the peripheral thinking into the core. The satellite countries(Frank, 1978) are no longer limited to their role as buffer but are now capitalizing on their unique cultural and colonial experience to remodel the global landscape not in accordance with the blueprint offered by the west but a morally vibrant and culturally diverse political landscape. This paper will map the cultural potential India has in establishing an alternate knowledge system around which global south will grow and evolve under four significant signifier of Indian Cultural autonomy which is Yoga, Ayurveda, Indian Diaspora and Mahakumbh. The paper takes up the task of relinquishing the responsibility of rising economies like India, Brazil and South Africa of acting as a conduit between the developed and underdeveloped economies. The paper reimagines the emergence of global south and redraws the boundary between global north and south on its own terms and at the same time, asses the potency of this reimagination to rebalance the power structures. It particularly studies the impact of Indian cultural capital in renegotiating the way global south emerges and rewrites its power trade-offs with the presumably developed economies through international regional blocs. However, this paper does not dismiss or discredit in any way, the contribution made by other countries through their cinema, sports, food and tourism but due to the limited scope of research carried out in this paper, it focuses specifically and primarily on Indian cultural capital.

Yoga and Ayurveda, Indian Diaspora and Mahakumbh: A 'polyphonic' narrative among many narratives

In an age of global pandemic where the resilience of health infrastructure is directly related to a united front of all countries in eradication of the said pandemic, alternative knowledge system around wellness and health helps to build a healthier community of individuals. It also highlights the presence of ancient tradition of Yoga for wellness which is not only an alternative medicinal system but a holistic answer to the mental and physical wellbeing(Mazumdar, 2018)(Marx, 2007). Mahatma Gandhi, devised and popularized a system of well-being that believed in the integration of mind, body and soul(Gandhi, 1997). This integration is reflected through individuals as self-reliant political beings thereby channelizing an ideological viewpoint as an instrument of political unity. Yoga as an ancient tradition is not only an answer to the health crisis that we face today but also a political reply to the growing anomie and hyper individuation as a result of capitalism crusaded by the West. The duality of mind and matter that rules the western philosophy is challenged systematically by Ayurveda that believes in non-dualist nature of human body. This is not just a systematic overthrow of the Western epistemology but also a foregrounding of a self-reliant nation that sustains its political uniqueness by consciously utilizing its cultural capital and sharing its wisdom to attract the admiration



and respect of countries in the regional bloc. However, the larger picture is not just about eliciting respect from the fellow countries but inspiring other South East Asian as well as South Asian countries to build on their indigenous value-systems. These cultural exchanges without any political interference forms the lynchpin of soft power manifestation in the BRICS+, SCO, QUAD, OIS etc. and other powerfully regional yet international organization. Yoga as an ancient wisdom and as a political resource uniquely deployed to further elevate the global image is counteracted by building the perception that it is a political handmaiden of the right-wing politician furthering the cause of Hinduism. There is a concerted shaped narrative that seeks to dismantle any and every attempt made by the ruling disposition to cultivate a global image on, "Sanatan Sanskriti"(Bhargava, 2023) . This closed, non-permeable and neat categorization of religion has not only warped the political imagination of its citizenry but has underscored a need for a redefined and renewed sense of religiosity. There is no clear solution to the problem of accommodating different theological inclination within the fold of religiosity but a wider and flexible model of religion that does not chastise or abhor theism advocating cultural practices could be a way forward. This thought is neither ahistorical nor outside the ambit of scientific rationalism and has surfaced in not only closed echo chambers but also in the thoughts and deeds of nationalist leaders. The foundational element of a nation which values religion stems not just from constitutional morality that is necessarily irreligious but a morality that preaches religious solidarity and its concomitant patron which is nation-state. Hence, the over-emphasis on the constitution and its sanctimony lies not in juxtaposing it with religious morality. With Indian politics progressing into Pilgrims progress , Upendra Baxi has succinctly described the para-legal structures and the unwrittenness(Baxi, 2012) of the Indian constitutionalism coming up with a new language of rights and duties which can never be enveloped by liberal constitutionalism. It is on the contrary, the unfamiliar and uninvited guest amongst the cohort of democratic requirements in a country as diverse and large as India.

From Sardar Patel to Rabindranath Tagore, there is one unifying ideal that brought together mostly all the nationalist thinkers and that was the need to develop an authentic theory of politics which can create alternative political constructs that were strictly indigenous(Mahajan, 2013). As Rabindranath Tagore has wisely put, "**We in India must make up our minds that we cannot borrow other people's history, and that if we stifle our own, we are committing suicide. When you borrow things that do not belong to your life, they only serve to crush your life**". The formidable task was thus, to return to the past but what was to be called authentically 'Indian' still has to bear an interminable series of challenges(Sahu, 2020). Are we to then comprehend, what it means to be an authentic Indian. The magnitude of this question still bears heavily on the way politics is designed today. Is the question of partaking into internationalising a cultural praxis, today a closed circuit which only reaffirms patriotism of a single variant of politics that is rooted in majoritarian religion. This assumption is at the heart of politics today and marginalises the voices that may or may not be overtly religious. The transition of 'cultural' to 'political' is not the fallout of a historical continuum. It reflects the seemingly benign yet subversive elements of the state that detests attempt at uniting tactical forces. However, it would not be right in completely dismissing the liberals, seculars and self-appointed equalisers while striving to render a global image to the nation. The politics of today is the politics of visibility where what is perceptibly seen and is veritable becomes the source of power. This newly acquired power which while



recognizing cultural essentialism, do not slip into political carnage of difference. While preserving cultural particularity is the stronghold of liberal multiculturalism, the present day politics is about finding unity and commonness in the shared culture. In a way, cultural embeddedness has to be replaced by historically situated self (Mahajan, 2013). Individuals cannot be contained in straightjacketed society but in sociality (Bauman, 2013) that has a symbiotic relationship with other communities. The individuals in these communities are encumbered selves who have witnessed the constant interaction between culture of their community and the outside world. The two hundred year rule of the Britishers cannot be papered over for it has perpetual lingering presence on our society as a whole. The reinterpretation of the prefix in post-colonial by Upendra B. serves to establish this connection. Anything that transpired following the period of colonisation seeks to respond to this violent and exploitative regime while using the grammar of politics devised by the west to colonise the masses. **Post-colony** then accepts in its time frame the oppression that was meted out to our country as an indispensable unit of reference. This flawed assumption has made it necessary for the intelligentsia constituting the civil society (Gramsci et al., 2011) to invent a unique frame of reference that can act as potential conceptual source for a sense of belonging. This marks a patriotic and paradigmatic shift in bringing to light a democratic discourse which seeks to rewind the nature and content of nationalism. Anti-Hindu and Hindu apologetics have hitherto, sustained politics of appeasement undermining women's right in minority communities, perceiving outright display of Hindu sentiments as communal, feeding into the disdain of minority communities. This and other allegation have spurred the growth of intellectual as well as political resources by carefully curating a solid frame of references that can dissolve diversionary tactics. This nationalism can not only defy the claims of self-aggrandising cultural apologetics but can help in evolving a strong and structured nation-state that has the resilience to establish stable political union trumpeting any attempt at disintegrating it. The political monopoly on secularism exercised by a certain few seems to be alien if not outright unconnected with political reality. Finding semantical equivalent has come up with ideas of "Dharmanirpekshata", "Sarva Dharma Sambhava", "Vasudhaiva kutumbakam" (Bhargava, 2010) which have helped the intellectuals engage with the Indian insight on Secularism. Unfortunately, such attempts have decontextualized the Indian ancient tradition by studying these concept without the political universe in which it emerged. In the post-truth era, when there is a spurt in the growth of knowledge in and around religion, significance of tangible reserves to propagate and profess religious values is further entrenched. The historical continuum that unifies time and space brings to the world living breathing documents that have manifested into rituals to signify the turn of century old practices. The search of an independent political ethic that is rooted in the glorious past or what is famously referred to as "Virasat" (Heritage) and then, conflating it with "Vikas" (Development) marks a defining shift from the erstwhile method of political association that sought to distance itself from any religious marker. The path towards 'Swarnim Bharat' is paved with great political gusto while searching for a 'common ground principle' that can change the focal point of the socio-political and economic engagement. The intellectual finding of this paper has expanded the aperture of evaluation from individual engagement with spiritual values to a political assessment of an organized form of religion. The rupture has taken inspiration from premodern times where the written word of the mythological text was interpreted with greater flexibility helping the local masses to easily associate with



religious morality. In this backdrop, the crystallization of religious value in codifying beliefs have spawned a rigid classification between what is verifiably and justifiably the 'true' meaning of ritualistic practices and what is not. In an age of digital and social media where information and misinformation coexist together, false narrative impedes the spread of actual meanings associated with religious practices and helps scholars rest in their respective intellectual fiefdoms.

The most unassailable intellectual victory of John Rawls was not in arriving at a 'concept' of Justice as Fairness but in evolving an articulate methodology to arrive at it. In times when the motto of individuals as well as scholars is aimed at usurping each other and furthering their own agenda, the intellectual requirement to rise above and beyond immediate affiliation and gratification to give a 'conception' of justice (Rawls, 2005) seems to elude us. However, the crisis is not about having no encumbrances but to be able to project ourselves despite not being an unencumbered self (Sandel, 1984). In yet another theory, Subaltern (Guha, 1997) authors have articulated in not so vague terms, the idea of cultural essentialism and its inevitable exclusion of those communities that are the foundational building blocks of the newly independent country. This is a fundamental challenge to how democratic discourses are made and its impact on how people perceive politics. The subaltern challenge also challenges the historiography and the making of political memory which has devised a framework that marginalizes a section of the populace just by virtue of the fact that they are at the lower rung of our society. However, it can be argued that the exploitation and historical injustices have not frozen in time and exploitative tendencies have further augmented the demands of representational politics that not only determines the 'what' of the narrative but 'who' will set it and 'how' it has to be brought to the international forum. From Nancy Fraser to Iris Marianne Young, the politics of misrecognition to the politics of misrepresentation, tells us that the model of justice that is predicated on the triumvirate of recognition, representation and redistribution has often helped in securing one to the detriment of the other. We have enlarged the scope and impact of this model onto the global forum. Global south is in common parlance, an inconsistent and incoherent entity that seeks to represent varied voices internationally but it is an honest attempt to find a representational platform that can at the least, project an image which is constantly interacting with multiple power vortices. Countries in the global south has an equal and proportionate reflex for defying the forces that seeks to create exclusive spaces for representation and the growing elite within the circle of South Asian intelligentsia have done just that. Therefore, the politics of dependency looms large even in today's time. The growth in elitism and development blockade was succinctly described by Gail Omvedt in a national context and A.G. Frank in an international context. The political predicament is not just limited to the territory of the nation-state but is slowly permeating through the boundary interacting with global forces. Amidst globalization, aggressive nationalism can take the form of Xenophobia but India's entrenched nationalist model keeps itself from ways that can progress into an outright neglect of those who are deemed as 'other'. It is important to establish a hierarchy of political ideals. It is significant to recognise our own prejudices especially when it comes to dealing with the community belonging to different religion. It is equally significant to see how far our country has come from Panchsheel to Panchamrit. Our largely ignored yet powerful reservoir of teachings in the name of Vedas, Upanishads and the fortuitous materialisation of the late Vedic teachings in the form of Mahakumbh at the length and breadth it was celebrated, tells us the all-



encompassing fervour and spirit of comradery fraternising not just with people domestically but internationally.

Rebalancing Power structures: Rewiring Diplomacy through New Diplomacy

Diplomacy of the yester years was about building trust, reliability, truth and peaceful negotiation (Berridge, 2015). These markers have gone through an irreversible overhaul that has not only revamped these markers but have drained its essence. New Diplomacy strongly detests the older practise of following the formal procedural techniques of moving towards truth, building trust through peaceful negotiation and also, construing narratives that can make the countries reliable. This intense makeover of the Older diplomatic pathways of sending ambassadorial delegation, setting up of embassies as a sign of trust, peaceful negotiation have not just lost its moral traction but also its international viability. In this context, where social media or what was commonly referred to as 'twiplomacy' and now termed 'X' woefully depicts the formation of narrative without nuance and without a careful reflection over facts and opinions. Hasty generalisation, hyperbolic statements and polemical takes on present day international conflicts have increased the volatility of countries involved and sees military occupation as an inevitable consequence. Hard Power is thus, seen to be the only recourse left for countries acting in real self interest with Hobbesian state of nature turning into 'nature' of state. In this backdrop, if soft power is deployed to carve a niche for a country to legitimise its place in the larger international scheme, it is by no means an unjust method of asserting power or dominance. However, its larger impact on the global stage have to be assessed and the just(ness) of international pre-eminence has to be evaluated before the countries aspire to climb up in the hierarchy of countries writing or rewriting the politics of smaller less militarily equipped nations.

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