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Civilisation-Washing

Caste and Indian Diplomacy at the G20 Summit

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Summary

This article analyses Indian diplomacy at the 2023 G20 Summit, which India hosted. It uses a Critical Caste Studies approach to foreground the role of caste in Indian diplomacy, focussing on four prominent discursive tropes at the Summit – the naming of India as Bharat, the promotion of a ‘Sabka Sath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Praya’ associated with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party’s philosophy of Integral Humanism, the philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbatakam (the world is a family/the world is home) and the portrayal of India as the Mother of Democracy. By analysing these tropes, we argue that Indian diplomacy at the G20 Summit constituted civilisation-washing: the external projection of an apolitical and antipolitical civilisational transcendence to obfuscate and naturalise an upper-caste Hindu supremacism. We suggest that civilisation-washing serves a tool of illiberal authoritarianism, justifying the undermining of accountability and individual rights in the name of cultural authenticity and moral superiority.

Keywords

Indian diplomacy – G20 – Critical Caste Studies – Narendra Modi – authoritarianism – Brahminism

1 Introduction¹

G20 Summits are routine affairs where leaders of the world's major economies discuss global issues, making uncontroversial declarations of goodwill before dispersing to reassemble the following year in a new location with a new host. In September 2023 when they gathered in New Delhi, however, the Indian government turned the event into an unprecedented spectacle. The Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government celebrated the rotational presidency as an exceptional achievement for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's New India and a resounding vote for his global leadership. The government allocated US\$1.2 billion for the event – nearly 25 times that of the previous host, Indonesia – and spent US\$5 billion on building infrastructure for the Summit.²

The Summit was choreographed to remedy what, according to India's foreign minister S. Jaishankar, has been a key factor in India's stilted progress towards great power status: 'the inadequate projection of a great civilisation'.³ At the Summit, Modi rebranded his 'New India' with an ancient name, departing from convention to sit behind a placard that read 'Bharat'. Opening the Summit in a sprawling, revamped, complex, *Bharat Mandapam* (temple hall), he informed his audience that India had turned the G20 into a 'People's G-20', which reflected his governance philosophy of 'Sabka Sath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Prayas' (together with all, development for all, everyone's trust, everyone's effort).⁴ To the gathered world leaders, he counselled a 'human-centric' approach to world problems. Calling India the 'Mother of Democracy', the Prime Minister propounded on India's 'belief in dialogue and democratic principles ... unwavering since time immemorial', which was underpinned by the philosophy of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' (the world is one family/the world is home) and guided the country's global conduct.⁵ In the G20 logo, the earth was

1 Priya Chacko's contribution to this article was supported by an Australian Research Council Discovery Project grant DP230100257.

2 Pratama 2022; *Outlook India* 2023.

3 Jaishankar 2023, 5.

4 Modi 2023a.

5 Modi 2023c.

mounted on a lotus, which coincidentally is also the election symbol of Modi's political party.

This article attempts to understand the discursive, visual and symbolic motifs of this choreography. Foreign policy observers often note a distinct difference between Modi's internal and external policies and discourses.⁶ If, internally, the Modi government is exclusionary and Hindu-supremacist, in its external articulations, Modi's India projects an image of India as a great and peaceful civilisational state.⁷ This image has been challenged since 2023 due to Canadian and American government allegations about the Indian government's alleged assassination program targeting Sikh dissidents in their respective countries.⁸ However, we argue that this duality was always misleading as there is a fair degree of continuity and consistency in these visions. The coexistence of an external face of benign civilisational transcendence alongside an internal face of authoritarian upper-caste Hindu supremacism is what is termed in this article civilisation-washing.

In using this term we mean something slightly different to the terms on which it is modelled like 'green-washing' and 'pink-washing'. These terms refer to the use of deceptive marketing by corporations and governments to project environment-friendly and female-friendly images to the public. We understand civilisation-washing as the use of deceptive and suppressive strategies by political leaders to present their polities as authentic, ancient, timeless, benign and advanced. In the Indian case it relies on both deception and ignorance (wilful or otherwise) of caste and its deeply ingrained presence in Indian history, culture and society to project a benign, tolerant and peaceful image. The adoption of a Critical Caste Studies approach – a term coined by Gajendran Ayyathurai – to analysing foreign policy helps us demystify this politics of civilisation-washing to reveal it as underpinned by upper-caste Hindu supremacy.⁹ The stakes of this analysis are significant. Leaders of other countries have reproduced the Modi government's civilisational claims. In the lead up to the Summit, Australian foreign minister Penny Wong praised India as a 'civilisational power' with 'deep history and civilisational knowledge'.¹⁰ As we will show, this performance of civilisational status by the Modi government serves to legitimise authoritarian practices as culturally appropriate and mor-

6 Watanabe 2023.

7 Plagemann and Destradi 2019.

8 Cohen and Kaushik 2023.

9 Ayyathurai 2021.

10 Quoted in Connors 2023.

ally superior and facilitate geopolitical and geoeconomic agendas by portraying India as a benign alternative to China.

This article begins by making a case for a Critical Caste Studies approach to the analysis of Indian foreign policy that foregrounds caste as the original and ongoing form of domination that shapes Indian society and politics. In arguing for this approach, we critique the caste-evacuated use of vedic-era Indian texts such as *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in recent contributions to the field of Global International Relations (IR). Thereafter, utilising this approach, this article shows how the Indian government's projection of India at the G20 constituted civilisation-washing: the projection of an apolitical and antipolitical civilisational transcendence to obfuscate and naturalise an upper-caste Hindu supremacism for both domestic and international audiences. Specifically, we use critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyse four prominent tropes that the Modi government used at the Summit in speeches, invitations, the website, pamphlets, the Summit's slogan and in India's nameplate: Bharat; Sabka Sath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas and Sabka Prayas; Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam; and Mother of Democracy. The CDA approach is an ideal method to deploy in developing a Critical Caste Studies approach because it allows us to understand the ways language contributes to social inequality. It does so by providing tools to denaturalise dominant perspectives through analysis of the selection and historical significance of signifiers (words) in texts.

To understand the broader political and social context in which these tropes appeared, this article undertakes a genealogy, using the CDA tools of intertextuality (the analysis of how a text's meaning is shaped by other texts) and interdiscursivity (the analysis of how discourses are connected to other discourses) to link these tropes to other current and older texts and discourses of historical Hindutva ideologues and politicians.¹¹ In doing so, it is shown that India's G20 diplomacy was used to recontextualise, propagate and naturalise an upper-caste Hindu supremacist discourse. In making these arguments, we contribute to recent literature on India's international civilisational politics and on caste in India's diplomatic practice, distinctively foregrounding the constitutive role of caste in the Modi government's illiberal, authoritarian politics, its international drivers and its effects.¹² In addition, we contribute to debates on continuity and change in diplomatic practice and Indian foreign policy under the Modi

11 Foucault 1977; Reisigl and Wodak 2009; Fairclough 2013.

12 See Chacko 2023; Chatterjee and Das 2023; Sullivan de Estrada 2023; Haug and Roychoudhury 2023; Nartok 2023; Singh and Winter 2023; Srivastava 2023. On caste and international thought and practice, see: Krishna 2014; Birkvad 2020; Kawade and Bharali 2021; Natarajan 2022; Huju 2022; Thakur 2024.

regime, concurring with accounts such as Kira Huju's that show a tangible shift in diplomatic discourse and practice which is in line with the government's illiberal authoritarianism.¹³

2 Civilisation-Washing and Indian Foreign Policy

Critical Caste Studies, Gajendran Ayyathurai argues in his inaugural manifesto, sees caste as 'an entrenched social crisis' and is devoted to an unwavering and interdisciplinary critique of the 'normativisation and naturalisation of domination and subordination' under the caste system. Accordingly, Critical Caste Studies is devoted to unravelling the discursive and non-discursive ways in which caste is entrenched in India's social and political practices. Critical Caste Studies points out the deliberate evasion of caste in even critical scholarship. Indeed, scholars working in the tradition of Critical Caste Studies see Indian anti-colonial thought as brahminical and postcolonial critique as a form of 'brahminical sciolism', which is the promotion of misleading and specious knowledge by self-privileging groups.¹⁴

We extend this critique to the study and practice of Indian foreign policy. The claims of India being a benign civilisational power run deep in Indian foreign policy discourse, going back to the Nehru years.¹⁵ Although scholars have noted the difference in the deployment of this trope from Nehru to Modi,¹⁶ the underlying basis of its continuity (that is, Hindu texts) is rarely put to critical scrutiny.¹⁷ On the contrary, scholars of Global IR draw on the same civilisational discourses and Hindu texts to advocate for an Indian IR tradition. Calls for 'decentering' knowledge are enthusiastically endorsed to excavate a specifically Indian tradition of thinking. There is a proliferation of works on Indian thought, on Indian epics, scriptures, ideas of civilisation, as 'Indic' alternatives

13 Huju 2022.

14 Aloysius 1997; Mani 2005; Ayyathurai 2024. In referring to Indian postcolonial critique as sciolist, Ayyathurai argues that postcolonial scholarship, dominated by brahmin intellectuals, is often shallow and misleading because their gaze is brahminical. For instance, Gayatri Spivak's famous 'Can the Subaltern Speak' celebrates 'learned Brahmins' while dismissing the long histories of subaltern resistance against caste and gender by questioning their ability to even speak. See, Ayyathurai 2024, 104.

15 Chacko 2012; Thakur 2018.

16 Chatterjee and Das 2023.

17 For a separate debate on whether Modi's foreign policy is a continuation of previous governments or *sui generis*, see the special section in Vol. 111, Issue 3 of *The Round Table* as summarised in Ranjan 2022.

to western thinking.¹⁸ However, we would argue, a caste-evacuated reading of these texts, in service of brahminical sciolism, leads to their uncritical celebration.

Scholars suggest that Indian thinking about world order and distinctive relational cosmologies can be discerned from reading Indian texts such as the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, the *Manusmriti* (Code of Manu) and the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*.¹⁹ These texts, for Amitav Acharya, the leading proponent of Global IR, centre the role of virtue and justice in political order. The concept of *Rama Rajya* (the utopian State of Ram), he argues, provides guidance on 'righteousness, justice and ideal rule'.²⁰ But what Acharya elides here is that in these texts, a political order is created to serve a specific social order: *varnashramadharma*.²¹ *Varna dharma* refers to the organisation of society through castes and *ashrama dharma* concerns regulating an individual's life. Together they are referred to as *varnashramadharma* and constitute – according to Bhimrao Ambedkar, a social justice pioneer who led the drafting committee of the Indian constitution – the 'steel-frame of Hindu society'.

Indeed, *Ram Rajya* is fundamentally based on a brutal caste order. In Valmiki's *Ramayana*,²² Ambedkar argues, Ram's life as a king was divided mostly between performing religious ceremonies and living an indulgent life.²³ The only insight we get into Ram's governance is through an instance when on the complaint of a brahmin he promptly beheads a *shudra* (lower caste) named Shambuka for the crime of performing *tapasya* (austerities), an activity restricted to the twice-born (upper caste). Furthermore, the *Manusmriti*, that Acharya approvingly cites, is so abhorrent in how it treats women, Dalits and indigenous communities, that Ambedkar publicly burnt it in 1927, a tradition that continues to this day among Dalit communities.²⁴ Another text, the *Arthashastra*, lauded as a prime example of non-Western statecraft, recommends that '[t]he King shall never allow their people to swerve from their dharma' because transgression of *dharma* 'leads to the extermination of the

18 For a representative sample, see Datta-Ray 2015; Acharya 2023; Jaishankar 2020; Shahi and Dua 2023.

19 Shani and Behera 2022.

20 Acharya 2023, 276.

21 See, Thakur 2024.

22 *Ramayana* is one of the two epic poems in Hinduism, the other being *Mahabharata*. The main version of *Ramayana*, which focuses on the life of Ram, is attributed to Valmiki, although there are several versions. See, Ramanujam 1991.

23 Ambedkar 2016, 228–232.

24 *The Hindu* 2023.

world'. This dharma is maintained by strict patrolling of caste hierarchy, which is the primary duty of the king/sovereign.²⁵

As anti-caste scholars often argue, there is no decolonisation without de-brahminisation.²⁶ Unreflective, upper-caste critiques of eurocentrism partake in sciolism that fosters civilisation-washing by drawing exclusively on texts identified with Vedic Brahminism such as *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Bhagwat Gita*, *Dharmasastras* (such as *Manusmriti*) and philosophical traditions, such as *Vedanta*. Ancient India was not a monolith. In fact, Indian history has been a constant 'struggle for hegemony between the brahmanic and anti-brahmanic traditions'.²⁷ Besides Buddhism and Jainism, there were at least ten other schools of philosophies, and other heterodox, materialist and rationalist traditions – such as *lokayuktas*, *Ajivikas* and *bhakti* – within the Hindu fold, and other religious philosophies that were popular among the lowered sections of society and reflected the ubiquitous revolt of the masses against Vedic Brahmanism.²⁸ In fact, as Mani argues, the very fact that the brahminical texts themselves are replete with references to dalits and shudras as 'hostile, violent, boastful, short-tempered, greedy, ungrateful, undependable and unfit for any responsible work' shows that the latter were unceasingly protesting in one way or another.²⁹

An analysis that works with the category of civilisation without foregrounding caste in India's foreign policy runs two kinds of risks. First, as explained above, it becomes a not-so-subtle endorsement of Modi's foreign policy in the name of decolonisation. Second, and perhaps more salutary for those who are critical of the government's authoritarianism, it leads to an exceptionalist thinking that justifies internal social hierarchies as culturally authentic. Although there is not the space to develop this here, caste-inflected civilisational paternalism was also a feature of Nehruvian foreign policy (modelled on the ideas and interests promoted by India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru) which was long dominant in India.³⁰ Modi's civilisational discourse is certainly different from Nehru's, but as Mani notes there is an underlying continuity from ostensibly secular anticolonial leaders like Mohandas Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Nehru and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan to Hindu nationalists like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Aurobindo Ghose, Vinayak Savarkar and

25 Kautilya 1992, 107–108; Shahi 2019.

26 Mani 2005.

27 Mani 2005, 34.

28 Chattopadhyaya 1959; Mani 2005; Omvedt 2009.

29 Mani 2005, 85.

30 Burton 2012; Natarajan 2022.

Deendayal Upadhyaya.³¹ In drawing on Vedic Brahminism, both conceptions of India/Bharat are hierarchical and paternalistic, positing upper-caste Hindus as core subjects, indigenous to India and tolerant.³² The difference under Modi is its transformation into a caste-inflected illiberal authoritarianism that undermines rights and accountability by legitimising the repression of dissent through the invocation of cultural authenticity and superiority.

3 Discursive Tropes of Modi's G20 Foreign Policy

Whatever one may say about the effectiveness of Modi's foreign policy, the Prime Minister's own fascination for tropes is well documented. A trope is a rhetorical device that conveys meaning beyond its literal sense and is employed for dramatic effect. In his domestic as well as international speeches and pronouncements, Modi's oratory is peppered with discursive tropes; he seems to be particularly fond of playful acronyms for larger rhetorical effect.³³ In our critical scrutiny of Modi's civilisational discourse, we have chosen four main tropes that were assiduously deployed during, or in preparation for the G20 summit: these are 'Bharat'; 'Sabka Sath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Prayas'; 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam'; and 'Mother of Democracy'. These tropes were given prominence in public speeches, policy documents and visual representations relating to the Summit. Although these tropes, or some variants such as Vishwamitra (world's friend) and Vishwaguru (world's teacher), have been employed throughout Modi's regime, we focus on the G20 as a singular event when a constellation of such terms were channelled together for maximal effect. The summit was turned into a spectacle and projected as a definitive statement of India's arrival onto the world stage. Collectively, these tropes represent a certain 'idea of India' that the Modi government wants to project to both its foreign and domestic audiences.

3.1 *Bharat*

When the Modi government advocated the name Bharat at the G20 Summit, it sparked speculation that his government was considering officially changing the name of the country. Incidentally, a few weeks earlier, opposition parties had scrambled together an alliance, cleverly named 'India National Development Inclusive Alliance', abbreviated to INDIA. The Modi government pivot to

31 Mani 2005; See also, Srivastava 2023; Chatterjee and Das 2023.

32 For the similarities between Nehru and Savarkar, see Kumar 2013.

33 Doctor 2019.

calling India 'Bharat' was both a way to counter the opposition's nomenclatural advantage in the 2024 election and an assertion of new India's Hindu identity, which was assertive but benign. The choice of a primarily foreign policy event was crucial to this endeavour. Foreign policy is an important discursive site for the construction of postcolonial national identities.³⁴ The state speaks to the world outside in one voice, challenging international hierarchies, and accordingly the discourse of foreign policy is the one that a state strives to impose inside, establishing domestic hierarchies. In other words, foreign policy is a discourse that not only informs the world about what we are, but also constructs the notion of a singular, hierarchically ordered 'we' for people inside. Seen this way, it is no wonder that the G20 Summit was the event where the BJP government started to nomenclaturally prioritise 'Bharat' over 'India'.

Bharat and India had until then been used primarily as translations of each other. Article 1 of the Indian Constitution states: 'India, that is Bharat, shall be a Union of States' (the Hindi version reads: '*Bharata arthat India, rajyon ka sangha hoga*'). Contrary to the government's portrayal, however, Bharat is not an uncontroversial, authentic name for India, but was from its inception utilised by conservative brahmin politicians to advance a narrative of history that places Brahminism at its core while positioning Muslims as invaders. In the Constituent Assembly debates soon after independence, the two terms were discussed in several meetings. Some members were not satisfied with the Ambedkar-led Drafting Committee's formulation, which placed more emphasis on India than Bharat. They discussed the historical antiquity and cultural sanctity of 'Bharat', referring to its use in Hindu scriptures. On 18 September 1949, twice in the debate, Ambedkar intervened expressing impatience when members H.V. Kamath and Kamalnath Tripathi, respectively, launched into history lessons on the greatness of ancient Hindu India. Tripathi, a conservative brahmin Congressman, waxed lyrical about 'Bharat's' associations with the 'mantras of the Rig Veda' (which laid the ground for the caste order in the *Purusha Sukta* hymn) and India's emergence from 'one thousand years' of slavery, a trope that positions Muslims as invading foreigners of an 'upper caste idyllic apriori',³⁵ and has become a fixture in Modi's speeches. Ambedkar tersely cut them short in both instances, asking 'is this necessary?'.³⁶ His discomfort with the Hinduisation of the name, and the reassertion of traditional forms of authority that this implied was evident. His curt response was

34 For a summary and analysis of postcolonial argumentation on foreign policy, see Chacko and Thakur 2024.

35 Dwivedi, Mohan, and Reghu 2021.

36 *Constituent Assembly Debates* 1949; Modi 2022a.

to point to the fact that perorating on 'Bharat' as an opportune name when it had already been decided was unnecessary.

Bharat was chosen in preference to at least one other contender: Hind/Hindustan. The latter signifies a syncretic Hindu-Muslim heritage.³⁷ Bharat, however, had the advantage of being used in several Indian languages across the breadth of India. In his *Discovery of India* (translated into *Bharat Ek Khoj*), Nehru wrote as he set out to discover the meaning of Bharat/India: 'Often, as I wandered from meeting to meeting, I spoke to my audience of this India of ours, of Hindustan and of Bharata'. India, Hindustan and Bharat, co-existing in each other's company, reflected an ease with plurality.³⁸

However, this nomenclatural plurality or the lack of distinction did not always find ready acceptance, especially as it obscured socio-economic inequities. Ambedkar himself had often used the term Bharat to reveal the deep-seated malaise within Indian culture and society. There were two Bharats he had argued: *Parushkrut Bharat* (Rewarded India) and *Bahushrut Bharat* (Discarded India). In the fortnightly paper *Bhushkrut Bharat*, started in 1924, he critiqued Indian nationalism for representing only the twice-born castes. The Bahushkrut Bharat occupied a separate social and spatial space.³⁹ Instead of a unitarian vision of nation, Ambedkar advocated for a *Prabuddha Bharat* (Enlightened India), a Bharat that was socially and politically inclusive. Charan Singh's agrarian political movement in the 1970s opposed urban 'India' against rural 'Bharat', mobilising land-owning middle castes to agitate for greater state support. Post-economic liberalisation, as the gap between the rich and the poor swelled, U.R. Ananthamurthy distinguished between 'India of the rich and Bharat of the poor'.⁴⁰ In 2013, the chief of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Mohan Bhagwat, elaborated a cultural conception of Bharat, notoriously claiming that rapes happened in India, not Bharat.⁴¹ India was urban and westernised; Bharat was rural and steeped in Hindu traditional values. More recently, Bhagwat asked that people refer to the country only as Bharat and not India, just as the RSS had done since its inception in 1925.⁴²

The BJP-led government's articulation of the India-Bharat divide is different from either its exclusively economic or cultural connotations, although it

37 Ahmed 2020.

38 Nehru 2004.

39 In his autobiographical essay 'Waiting for Visa', Ambedkar reveals the irony that he was able to travel easily in foreign countries, while still waiting for a social visa to enter physical spaces in his own country (Ambedkar 1993).

40 Ananthamurthy 2006.

41 *India Today* 2013.

42 Tiwary 2023.

draws on both because of its explicitly political purpose of domestic and international status enhancement. Both the economic as well as cultural impoverishment of 'Bharat' is attributed to a thousand-year history of colonial misrule, starting with Muslim invasions and ending with the Indian National Congress-imposed Indian Constitution. The new usage of Bharat, galvanised into public discourse by the right-wing polemicist Sai Deepak's book, *India, that is Bharat*, is recast in a decolonial lens.⁴³ In Sai Deepak's conception, from the 8th century onwards, Bharat has been witness to three successive forms of colonialism: 'Middle Eastern/Islamic settler colonialism', European Christian colonialism and the continuing colonialism of the Indian constitution. Bharat is a project for reclaiming 'Indic civilisation' for the country to reemerge as a civilisational state, one that is true to its own decolonial history. Less salubrious aspects of this glorified Bharat, such as caste discrimination, are dismissed as colonial inventions and later perversions. Drawing on the works of decolonial thinkers such as Walter Dignolo (who, in an enthusiastic book blurb, commended Sai Deepak for leading 'decoloniality towards pluriversal futures'), Anibal Quijano, Ramon Grosfoguel, among others, Sai Deepak weaponises a decolonial analytic in service of a civilisation-washing Hindu upper-caste supremacist project. This Bharat is best conceptualised as 'reactionary modernism', an awkward reconciliation of tradition and modernity akin to Nazism's melding of high modernism into an organicist ideology of blood and race, in which division and dissent is seen as pathological and is either to be denied (as with caste) or suppressed (as with Muslims and secularists).⁴⁴

What does Bharat mean in foreign policy terms, however? In his recent book, *Why Bharat Matters*, the Indian foreign minister S. Jaishankar emphasises the importance of reclaiming the lexicon. Distinguishing between Bharat and India, he says:

[Modi government's] outlook is able to meld progressive thinking and embrace of technology with the traditions and authenticity of India. And it sees no contradiction in espousing internationalism abroad while articulating nationalism at home. This is an India determined to play on the big stage, even change the stage itself where necessary ... Whether drawing strength from its heritage and culture or approaching challenges with the optimism of democracy and technology, this is certainly a New India, indeed an India that is able to define its own interests, articulate its own

43 Sai Deepak 2021.

44 Herf 1984; Nanda 2007.

positions, find its own solutions and advance its own models. In short, this is an India that is more Bharat.⁴⁵

In the subtext, ‘traditions and authenticity’ stand for Brahminical Hindu culture; the book draws on parables from *Ramayana* as lessons for Indian diplomacy, and *Ram Rajya* as an ideal statecraft. The ‘optimism of democracy’ is used as a euphemism for elite domination. In fact, not so subtly in the book, domestic critics are disparaged as collaborators with foreign regimes.⁴⁶ The assertiveness of New India, a demonstration of a strong Hindu masculinity, is compared to the meekness of previous governments.

From 2019 onwards, Modi and his ministers have often used the phrase *ghar men ghus ke marenge* (we’ll enter your home and kill you). These are primarily seen as chest-thumping claims against Pakistan and – to some extent – China, which distracts from evidence that India’s airstrikes against Pakistan in 2019 did little damage and that it has lost territory to China during their military confrontation.⁴⁷ New revelations suggesting Indian agencies may even be carrying out assassinations of dissidents in western nations – an extreme form of transnational repression, which is a marker of India’s authoritarianism – put the phrase in a new light.⁴⁸

Nonetheless, Jaishankar and other right-wing writers are keen to differentiate Hindu masculinity with regard to Christian and Muslim masculinities. In their version, Hindu masculinity is progressive because it is not proselytising, whether in domestic or international space. In fact, as Jaishankar argues, India can comfortably straddle internationalism and nationalism, because Hindu masculinity is not domineering or hegemonising. Serving as a tool of authoritarian legitimisation, this aims to portray India as a benign, though assertive, rising power, taking advantage of Western states’ efforts to cultivate India as a bulwark against China. Inspired by the ideals of ‘integral humanism’ and *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, and as the ‘Mother of Democracy’, Hindutva thought seeks pluralist integration. Let us then turn to these ideas and how they contributed to civilisation-washing at the G20.

3.2 *Sabka Sath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Prayas*

The chief problem of the post-Covid world, Prime Minister Modi said in his opening remarks at the Summit, was a crisis of mutual trust, deepened further

45 Jaishankar 2023, xx.

46 Jaishankar 2023, 17–19.

47 Singh 2024.

48 Cohen and Kaushik 2023.

by conflicts. India's leadership of the G20, he stated, was an invitation to 'transform this Global Trust Deficit into global trust and confidence'. 'This is a time for us to walk together', he added, with the mantra of 'sabka sath, sabka vikas, sabka vishwas, and sabka prayas'. This required a 'human-centric approach' that prioritises the 'welfare and happiness of humanity' and 'taking G20 to the last mile, leaving none behind'.⁴⁹

Modi government's human-centric approach has been presented as part of its vision of 'integral humanism',⁵⁰ which refers to a set of ideals elaborated by Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, a key leader of the BJP's forerunner, Bhartiya Jana Sangh.⁵¹ Integral Humanism is presented as the founding philosophy of the BJP, and acknowledged by Modi as a key ideological influence.⁵² In 2017, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs uploaded an e-book on Upadhyaya on its website written by the ministry's officials.⁵³ Titled 'integral humanism', the book equated Hindu thought with *Bhartiya* thought and defined the BJP as the only political alternative in the country.⁵⁴

Upadhyaya's starting point was that the two reigning political philosophies of the 1960s – capitalism and socialism – placed inordinate emphasis on the individual and the state, respectively. The founding political unit of a nation, however, was neither the individual nor the state, but the society. A society is 'self-born'. It is formed not through a collection of individuals or individual wills, but it comes into existence as an organic whole with an autonomous mind. When a society endows itself with a mission and looks upon a specific piece of land as 'motherland', it turns itself into a nation. Each nation, accordingly, has its own soul – its *chiti* – its innate nature that is not a result of historical circumstances, but rather its permanent state of being. Here, Upadhyaya differentiates between *chiti* and culture. *Chiti* refers to the nature of the nation, while culture is the personality it takes on. Culture is a cumulative product of 'the actions, thoughts and impressions' – that is, the historical evolution of a society – but *chiti* is its fundamental nature. *Chiti* determines the direction in which a nation advances culturally. Bhartiya culture may have been shaped by external influences – Muslims and the British – but its *chiti*, or soul, comes from the nation's Hinduness.⁵⁵

49 Modi 2023a; Modi 2023b.

50 Express News Service 2025.

51 Upadhyaya 1965.

52 See <https://www.bjp.org/integralhumanism>, accessed 24 May 2024.

53 Curiously, it has now been taken down.

54 Varadarajan 2017.

55 Upadhyaya 1965.

Having formed an idea of Bhartiya nation, with its Hindu *chiti*, he then discusses the modality of its expression and regulation. He calls it *dharma* (innate law): 'Dharma is the repository of the nation's soul. If Dharma is destroyed, the Nation perishes. Anyone who abandons Dharma, betrays the Nation'. Bharat's *dharma* requires it to be a unitary state that is neither theocratic nor secular (but one that respects – in a hierarchical manner – all religions), and that prioritises national unity at every cost. This means that no part of the country can have any right to seek more federal arrangements or seek secession. He is critical of the Indian constitution for not following Bharat's *chiti*.⁵⁶

Upadhyaya's organicism is hardly original; it forms part of all blood and soil ideologies. But his answers become innovative when applied to the specifics of the Indian situation. 'What constitutes the good of the people?', he asks. The answer: 'Dharma alone can decide'. But who decides what constitutes *dharma*? He does not explain how he arrives at specific precepts of Bharat's *dharma*. This abstractness is in some ways innate to the idea of *dharma* itself. In Hinduism, because there is no law-giver God, it is *dharma* rather than God that mediates between the cosmos and the polis.⁵⁷ This means that precepts of *dharma* vary according to groups – each has its own *swa-dharma*. Natural law applies in the same way to each and every human, but *dharma* means different things; for instance, for a dalit and a brahmin. Likewise, a sovereign's conduct towards its subjects also differs according to their group identity. This particularism of *dharma* as innate rather than revealed, particularist rather than universal, makes it amendable for a social holistic rather than individualist universalist order. *Dharma* is not divinely ordained; hence, it emerges from within a group and its main task is to preserve social order rather than provide universal regulatory principles.⁵⁸

This is what helps Upadhyaya to connect *dharma* to what he calls integral humanism. 'Bhartiya culture', he argues, 'looks upon life as an integrated whole'. A group can only exist through mutual cooperation and according to Bhartiya culture, any conflict within a group was a sign of cultural regression.⁵⁹ Each participant/unit in the group serves an organic purpose of the fulfilment of the group's life, and 'that alone which helps to sustain life can be chosen, the contrary cannot lead to civilized life'. This holism views societal conflict as a pathology, something that is perverse but not pervasive. Conflicts are 'not a sign of culture or nature ... but a symptom of perversion', he says. For instance,

56 Upadhyaya 1965.

57 Nanda 2007, 120–121.

58 Upadhyaya 1965.

59 Upadhyaya 1965.

Upadhyaya does not see the possibility of a conflict arising between castes in a fundamental sense. Drawing on *Purusha Sukta*, he argues that the four castes within the national unity of Bharat are analogous to the different limbs of the *Virat Purusha* (cosmic man): head (brahmin), arms (kshatriya), abdomen (vaishya) and legs (shudra). If conflict was to be fundamental, the body cannot remain and 'One Man' cannot prevail.

Thus, curiously, the historical fact that the caste system has sustained for centuries becomes a conceptual proof of its aptness. Upadhyaya does not see an innate conflict between castes and the system of caste differentiation. On the contrary, in an ideal system, castes operate in organic symphony for the vitalisation of body. To him, the varna system as a whole is a perfect illustration of a well-functioning society. Modern forms of casteism, however, were a distortion: a perversion that may have led to some conflicts. The solution for him was not the dismantling of the caste system but its proper maintenance in an idealised form in which inequality was cosmologically ordained as the performance of duties that are all 'equally dignified'.⁶⁰

Integral humanism is therefore a philosophy of social stasis and hierarchy. It advocates 'a fundamental unity of life' in which all humans are connected to each other, but not as equal individuals, rather as parts of an organic whole in which each serve a different function. As Michel Foucault would argue, peace is war by other means.⁶¹ Social orders perpetuate hierarchies through the violence of law. Drawing further on Carl Schmitt's criticism of positivist law, integral humanism's view of conflict as a regression within a system creates the possibility for a total war.⁶² For instance, a subaltern call for dismantling the caste system would require eradication of those trying to go against social order. The 'unity of all life' is possible only when it is lived in accordance with the precepts of *dharma* – social hierarchies – which it works to perpetuate, violently if needed.

When Modi speaks at the UN General Assembly about integral humanism as 'the co-journey of development and expansion from self to collective', it is crucial to note that the individual is always made subservient to the collective.⁶³ The benevolent, seemingly non-hegemonic, civilisation-washing internationalism of integral humanism that the government advocates is consistent with its repressive policies inside and its use of transnational repression against

60 Bhishikar 2014, 202.

61 Foucault 2003, 15–16.

62 Schmitt 1996.

63 Modi 2021.

dissidents abroad. In that, Jaishankar is correct to suggest that the BJP's nationalism and internationalism are not mutually inconsistent.

3.3 *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*

The epitome of integral humanism is 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam – One Earth, One Family, One Future' which was the official theme of the G20 Summit. In his inaugural remarks, the Prime Minister emphasised that 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' was the fundamental basis of India's global conduct. 'This very notion of considering the world as one family, also connects every Indian with the sense of responsibility of "One Earth"', he added.⁶⁴ The phrase comes from a Sanskrit text, *Maha Upanishad*, and forms part of the broader *Vedanta* philosophy. Modi himself has often invoked Vedanta as his guiding philosophy and commentators have referred to it as 'the spiritual canon' that guides India's foreign and strategic thought.⁶⁵

Vedanta (literally, the end of vedas), argues there is only one undifferentiated reality or the Absolute (that is, *brahman*) and the empirical world is its illusory manifestation (or *maya*). Although there are three different schools, it is the *Advaita* school, which emerged as the dominant interpretation from late 19th century onwards in the form of neo-vedanta, whose chief advocate was the late 19th century ascetic, Vivekananda. Advaita or non-dualism argues that the experiencing self (*jiva*) and the transcendental self (*atman*) are identical. What appears real (the world of our lived experiences) is illusory. The only ultimate reality is *brahman*, a supreme transcendental cosmic spirit. In essence, the whole universe is one existence and this true reality can only be realised through knowledge. Hence, as Vivekananda says, 'Unity is knowledge, diversity is ignorance'. To Vivekananda, therefore, there is no universal brotherhood but only universal oneness.⁶⁶

The ideology of 'oneness' is premised on two key arguments. First, all diversity is ephemeral and thus inconsequential. Second, all material experiences are illusory; true realisation comes from spiritual consciousness of oneness. As scholars working on race, gender and caste have repeatedly argued, this philosophical division between mind and body, consciousness and materiality, realisation and experience, reproduces societal hierarchies by sidelining/suppressing experiential philosophies.⁶⁷ For instance, Indian materialist philosophies, such as *lokayuktas*, emerged from the non-*dvija* (not twice born,

64 Modi 2023a.

65 Chinoy 2021.

66 Vivekananda 2012, 138.

67 Oyewumi 1997.

shudraatrishudras) who were not even allowed to read scriptures and thus engage in knowledge-producing/consuming tasks. Their philosophies, which were rational materialist, emerged from the experientiality of their bodies. This is true even of the *bhakti* tradition, which is not transcendental but rational.⁶⁸ Consequently, transcendental philosophies, by reducing all experience and societal oppression to being just an illusion and by elevating knowledge – a brahminical pursuit – to being the only path to enlightenment, become strategies of brahminical dominance.

The Indian championing of ‘Vasudhaiva Kutumbakum’ needs to be read considering this understanding. The idea of oneness is a call to negate the plurality of experiences, to muzzle diversity and to continue oppression – because the experience of oppression is just *maya* (illusion) – while imagining unity at the level of some superior, other-worldly, consciousness. It is not a call for saving the world, but its disavowal. The Modi government’s domestic and foreign policy agendas have similarly been driven by this notion of oneness – one nation, one leader and one ideology – presenting India as a force for global peace and stability while justifying the suppression of dissent at home and abroad. The melding of domestic and foreign policy agendas was most apparent in the promotion of India at the G20 as the ‘mother of democracy’.

3.4 *Mother of Democracy*

The delegates to the G20 were given a booklet which showed a 5,000-year history of democracy in India, beginning with the Harappan or Indus Valley civilisation, named in the booklet as the ‘Sindu-Saraswati’ civilisation. In Hindutva historiography, the Harappan civilisation, whose script remains undeciphered but is thought to be linked to the Dravidian language family, is absorbed into Indo-Aryan Vedic culture. This is to dispute the well-established theory that Indo-Aryan language speakers who produced Vedic era texts migrated to India from central Asia, and to claim that Hindus are indigenous to India.⁶⁹ The famous ‘dancing girl’ statue found in Harappan excavations is apparently an example of ancient feminism: an ‘independent’, ‘liberated’ woman produced by this civilisation.⁷⁰ The booklet claims that slavery never took root in India and that the Ramayana, Mahabharata and the Arthashastra are the epitome of democratic ideals because the kings portrayed in them sought the approval of

68 Omvedt 2009. Bhakti, meaning devotion, was a spiritual and social reform movement in medieval India that emphasised a personal relationship with god rather than the one mediated by brahmins. It challenged brahminical social norms and hierarchies.

69 Joseph 2018.

70 Government of India, n.d., 5.

councils, consulted with society, upheld the welfare of the people and instilled duties and responsibilities as markers of 'civilised beings'.⁷¹ Describing the Constitution of 1947 as 'retaining aspects of past models from our rich history', the booklet noted that it has been amended many times to reflect changing times.⁷² Accordingly, this long history qualified India as the 'mother of democracy', Modi declared at the Summit.

This phrase was first popularised in 2020 when Modi laid the foundation stone for India's new parliament building. It grounds Indian democracy not in its modern secular constitution but in 'ancient India', and apolitical and antipolitical 'values' and 'culture'. Following Hindu nationalist forebears like Radha Kumud Mookherji, Modi found evidence of the idea of democracy and democratic practices in Vedic texts.⁷³ In his Independence Day speech two years later, he mentioned 81 democracies in ancient India.⁷⁴ He found democratic assemblies in the 12th-century kingdom of Basaveshwara and the Chola empire. He even identified the 'provision of disqualification' for corrupt officials in the Chola empire's famous copper-plate inscriptions, which describe temple affairs.⁷⁵ According to Modi, whereas democracy elsewhere was conflated with elections and governance, 'democracy in India is about life values, it is the way of life and the soul of the nation'. Adding a decolonial gloss, Modi decried that today 'India's democracy is explained to us by the Western countries' and urged the glorification of India's democratic history so 'the world will also say: India is the Mother of Democracy'.⁷⁶

Much of this constituted a thinly veiled attempt to justify his government's authoritarian practices, which has included pursuing opposition leaders with weak allegations of corruption and removing Constitutional provisions for autonomy for the state of Jammu and Kashmir, leading to a prolonged period without elections and severe curbs on freedom of speech, assembly and movement. An apolitical and antipolitical conception of democracy reinforces the entrenched social hierarchies that underpin 'ways of life' in India. The kingdoms and empires in which Modi finds examples of Indian democracy were societies regulated by deeply unequal gender, class and caste norms. Caste and gender-based domestic servitude and slavery were widespread in the Chola empire. Among the classes of unfree labour were lower-ranking women in

71 Government of India, n.d., 10.

72 Government of India, n.d., 45.

73 Jaffrelot 2010, 208; Modi 2020.

74 Modi 2022a.

75 Modi 2020.

76 Modi 2020.

Chola palace households, as well as *paraiyars* and *pallars*, castes of lower-ranking cultivators.⁷⁷ The ‘mother of democracy’ discourse emerged in the backdrop of protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act, which introduced laws that discriminate against Muslims. It intensified after 2021 in the wake of the downgrading of India’s democracy on various democracy indices.⁷⁸ While the ‘mother of democracy’ discourse has been interpreted as directed at a domestic rather than an international audience and as concerned with asserting a superior international social position,⁷⁹ there were also more tangible concerns at stake. Modi was reportedly particularly worried about the Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index because of its potential to damage India’s reputation as a safe place for international investment, which is essential to the Modi regime’s accumulation strategy of growth through a business-state alliance with select conglomerates.⁸⁰ This downgrading also occurred as the government sought to suppress farmers’ protests against its marketising and corporatising agricultural reforms, which attracted international opprobrium including from activists and celebrities like Greta Thunberg and Rhianna.⁸¹ The government sought to contest and deflect growing international criticism of India’s democratic decline by tainting dissenters as elites influenced by foreign ideologies, implying political opponents are corrupt and alleging international conspiracies against India.⁸² Addressing the country on Independence Day in 2022, he proclaimed that the ‘mother of democracy’ ‘walk[ed] with determination and resolve’, which ‘augurs doom for the most powerful sultanates [a reference to Muslims] of the world’.⁸³ Democracy in this conception is reduced to a majority choosing a leader and possessing a ‘spirit’ of unity against enemies.

Similarly, in response to warnings by the UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues of the ‘massive, systematic and dangerous’ situation of minorities in India, Jaishankar retorted that the Indian government had in fact become fairer and more democratic.⁸⁴ He referred to the digitisation of the welfare system as extending benefits – provided mostly in the form of food rations, subsidies for private goods, small loans and small cash transfers – to greater numbers of

77 Ali 2017.

78 Modi 2022c.

79 Sullivan de Estrada 2023, 453.

80 Dutta 2023; Chacko 2023.

81 The Wire 2021.

82 Times of India 2021.

83 Modi 2022a.

84 de Varennes 2023; The Wire 2023.

beneficiaries. Aside from being untrue – studies have shown significant exclusions have arisen due to India's digitised welfare system and that Muslims and Dalits face systematic social and institutional discrimination and marginalisation, which has worsened in recent years – democracy, in this view, amounts to little more than access to compensatory welfare.⁸⁵ The former rights-based approach to democratic inclusion has been jettisoned in favour of the 'cultivation of sacrifice and duty' (in line with Upadhyaya's prescriptions), privileging what in 2010 the Chief Minister of Gujarat, Modi called 'performance accountability' over 'procedural accountability', which promotes institutional disintermediation and the centralisation of power.⁸⁶

4 Conclusion

This article has used a Critical Caste Studies approach to assess India's diplomacy at the G20 Summit. Utilising CDA, we have argued that India's supposedly inclusive and benign foreign policy discourses on 'Bharat', 'Sabka Sath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Prayas', 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' and 'mother of democracy' seek to promote India as an upper-caste-centred social order and delegitimising dissent and criticism, undermining accountability and serving to buttress the Modi government's illiberal authoritarianism.

While Modi waxed eloquent on Bharat's integral humanism, welcomed delegates to the birthplace of democracy and emphasised how the whole world was one home, his government violently evicted nearly 250,000 to 300,000 mostly poor and caste-oppressed people from their houses to beautify Delhi for the G20. Twenty-five slums and various night shelters in Delhi were bulldozed. In previous similar circumstances, such as the Commonwealth Games in 2010, those evicted were at least allowed to return and resettle. This was not the case this time. Schools and offices were closed and traffic advisories put in place alongside severe restrictions reminiscent of Covid bans.⁸⁷ This was the human cost of India's civilisation-washing foreign policy at the G20 Summit. Diplomatically, the reception to India's civilisation-washing was mixed. After the Summit, French president Emmanuel Macron commended India for sending a message of peace and unity to the world. The Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, grappling with imminent revelations of an alleged Indian assassination of a Sikh-Canadian on Canadian soil, was less effusive, noting that in his

85 Baxi 2019; Iyer 2023.

86 Modi 2010; Modi 2022b.

87 Frontline 2023.

talks with Modi he raised ‘foreign interference’ and highlighted the importance of ‘respecting the rule of law’.⁸⁸ In terms of domestic politics, the G20 Summit’s civilisation-washing was less successful. The Summit was meant to herald India’s emergence as a global leader, paving the way to a sweeping electoral victory for Modi in the 2024 election. During the campaign Modi claimed his governance is replacing traditional forms of caste stratification with four castes of ‘welfare beneficiaries’ – women, farmers, youth and the poor – to ‘make Bharat developed’.⁸⁹ However, the BJP lost its majority in the parliament, losing a significant number of seats in which lowered-caste voters dominate to an opposition alliance that highlighted the government’s threats to Constitutional rights and protections.⁹⁰ Ultimately, in this case, caste-obscuring civilisation-washing appeared to be more effective internationally than domestically as a strategy of authoritarian legitimization.

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