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FACULTY ADVISOR'S NOTE

DR SYED AREESH AHMAD

I am immensely pleased to present Volume 3(1) of the Ramjas Political Review. To carry out a publication with such discipline and zeal for the past three years is no small achievement. With the release of the new issue, the Ramjas Political Review continues to consolidate its space as a sustained and meaningful academic publication.

Prof Madhavan Palat's interview is an immensely thought-provoking read. In his reflections on Jawaharlal Nehru, Professor Palat urges us to consider Nehru to be more than just a politician—as a thinker who cared deeply about how politics should be conducted through rational thinking and ethical conduct. A solid grasp of history is indispensable for understanding the legacies of complex figures like Nehru, as they are typically oversimplified in the political contestations of today. The interview is an example of the journal's effort to provide a platform for discussing the intersection of politics and history.

The Ramjas Political Review is a manifestation of a larger pedagogical vision. As students of politics, we are meant to move beyond the immediacies of everyday political commentary and explore the deeper conceptual underpinnings. The new issue, like the previous four, reflects this ambition. It is also worth highlighting how the Ramjas Political Review has expanded its intellectual footprint beyond the journal. Through event reports, book reviews, policy analyses, and other categories regularly published on its website, the RPR has evolved into a continuously engaged academic platform. This diversification reflects an understanding that political inquiry takes multiple forms and that sustained engagement need not be confined to periodic issues alone.

Equally commendable is the professionalism with which the editorial process is conducted. The prompt coordination mechanisms and detailed peer reviews, particularly at advanced stages of evaluation, ensure that submitting to the Ramjas Political Review remains both rigorous and rewarding. Such practices not only enhance the quality of the publication but also familiarise students with the ethics and discipline of academic life. I commend the editorial board for the unparalleled rigour in shortlisting the pieces. Their work strengthens a culture of curiosity, discipline, and thoughtful dialogue.

I wish the editorial board continued success as the Ramjas Political Review moves forward in its academic journey. My sincere thanks go to the Department of Political Science and Ramjas College for their continued support of our journal. I write with the hope that this issue inspires readers to delve deeper into the inquiry of politics and broadens their perspectives.

Best wishes,
Dr Syed Areesh Ahmad
Faculty Advisor
Ramjas Political Review

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF'S NOTE

PREM ANSH SINHA

In the last episode of Rocket Boys, a fictionalised account of India's scientific trajectory, Homi Bhabha says to Vikram Sarabhai, 'I think one of the main aspects of a great man is talking in convoluted sentences'. And one cannot help but smile when Prof Madhavan Palat, in his interview, observes, '...Nehru's form of expression was slightly convoluted; it is not clear-cut. In fact, being a professor myself, I would not have given him an A-grade for the manner in which he wrote.' Prof Palat is a distinguished scholar and the editor of the *Selected Works of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru*, and to have our interview with him featured in this issue is a remarkable honour. What may be interesting to the readers is that Prof Quentin Skinner, featured in the previous issue, taught Prof Palat at Cambridge. It is no less of a distinction for us to have had this opportunity to speak with the luminaries whose works shall continue to be taught till the end of the discipline.

Nonalignment has been one of the quiet themes in this issue. With ancient Ajanta mural of Bodhisattva Padmapani on the cover, we align ourselves with the idea of peace, wisdom, and enlightenment. Padmapani is traditionally paired with Vajrapani, which reminds that peace cannot be sustained without the power of the *vajra*. In a similar spirit, we invoke Gandabherunda, the magnificent emblem of fierceness and immense power on our back cover; for Padmapani to exist, Gandabherunda is a necessity.

We have some remarkable essays in the journal on climate, international agreements, political economy, and political theory, covering every relevant domain. Similar to the previous issues, I am happy to note that we have received a myriad of diverse essays across countries. One underlying aspect of accepting submissions in an undergrad journal is how very few wish to venture into political theory and engage with the foundations of the study of politics. Hopefully, with an emphasis on this, we should be able to invite more essays on such themes.

Academic publications require the freedom to experiment, to err, and to revise. We remain deeply grateful to our Faculty Advisor, Dr Syed Areesh Ahmad, who has protected the institutional autonomy of the journal since its inception, and whose thoughtful guidance, experiential wisdom, and intellectual support have shaped the philosophy of the journal. To sit and discuss the ideas with him for three years has been a great privilege in itself.

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF'S NOTE

As someone leading a journal, there is nothing more satisfying than seeing the editorial board work selflessly and incredibly hard. Their editorial prowess and sharp reviews have been of tremendous help. And of course, the creatives team has dealt with great patience and enthusiasm as well. Alankrita and Piyush have been the best deputies one could have asked for.

Our sincere thanks to our patrons for being very kind with their continuous trust in our vision, too. I also thank the Department of Political Science and the Ramjas College for providing us a space to flourish. This publication is a collective effort of so many people who believe in the long-term impact the Ramjas Political Review can have on intellectual space in India.

Ramjas Political Review is not doing anything revolutionary, but aligning itself with the goals of what an education in political science should mean, which is about separating arguments from opinions and realising the essentiality of spending the formative years studying and thinking for oneself instead of siding with what may seem fancy in easily accessible spaces. Our website is another example of how we are innovating with the changing times—our event reports on panel discussions and conferences are purely academic in nature. We are planning on expanding our idea of publishing research paper reviews in the coming weeks. With interviews of former foreign secretaries, politicians, scholars, and panel discussions with students across the country, the Global Village programme has been an incredible success. We are everywhere.

Frankly, engaging with hundreds of research essays spoils you. You are no longer charmed by fancy writing or heavily generalised, sloppy pieces that do not lead anywhere. You start craving essays that push you beyond the depths of your existing thought horizons. And most importantly, you learn to distinguish an honest intellectual attempt from a sham. Ramjas Political Review stands tall as the university's foremost political science journal. We sincerely hope that one day we find a worthy competition. We must understand that this is an extraordinary feat that shall be remembered very fondly by scholars in the decades to come. I am limited by the resources of my time, but I hope this provides the much-needed momentum and groundwork for the batches to come.

With two volumes behind us, we celebrate Vol 3(1). And so, we stride forward towards a path unknown, with Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker calling for *Marche*.

With best wishes,
Prem Ansh Sinha
Editor-in-Chief
Ramjas Political Review

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A CONVERSATION WITH PROF MADHAVAN K PALAT

Interviewed by Prem Ansh Sinha (Editor-in-Chief)
Edited by Alankrita Singh (Deputy Editor-in-Chief)

Prof Madhavan K Palat is a former professor at the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and has been a visiting professor of imperial history of Russia at the University of Chicago. He is also the editor for 41 volumes of the *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*.

An edited transcript of the interview, as taken on 20 June 2025, is as follows.

According to your arguments in 'India's First Global Thinker: Nehru in Comparative Perspective', Pt Nehru's nationalism was not against the West, rather, it was an attempt to create a universal Indian modernity based on global ideas. This brings to surface an epistemological tension in his vision: balancing cosmopolitanism while maintaining a distinct identity of the Indian civilisation. Do you think this attempt of Pt Nehru was teleological or overly idealistic?

Pt Nehru did attempt to have a nationalism which would not be hostile to any other nationalism. That is, no 'othering', as they call it. He tried to be inclusive all the way. He had no internal enemies, which is an important part of his nationalism. Secular nationalism did not tolerate internal enemies as it sought to unite everybody within the territory of

India. All the other nationalisms within India, had 'another' and 'other'; be it Hindu nationalism, which obviously had Muslims and certain others. Sikh nationalism, as opposed to others, Muslim nationalism the same way, and all the way in all the other regional nationalisms. The whole of India is composed of a series of nations—Bengal, Tamil, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Andhra, you name it. They may not be sovereign independent nations, but they are still nations with all their features. India assembles all these nations into one larger nation. All these different nations have others to them.

Now, secular nationalism claims that there should be no other. It is not going to create an enemy out of anybody within the country, or, for that matter, outside the country. This has faced criticism from the theorists of nationalism who argue that if you have nationalism, it has to be distinct from other nationalisms, and in principle, opposed to other nationalisms. There has to be the other. So, how can you have nationalism without something else? How can you include everybody without ever positing an enemy? This was VD Savarkar's point against secular nationalism. He said it is absurd, and you cannot do it, as you have to posit an enemy. If that argument is valid, the question is: did Pt Nehru have an enemy in mind, against which Indian nationalism was posited? Or was it just wishy-washy nationalism, 'too idealistic', as you put it, which did not have an enemy and therefore, could not be real nationalism? It had to be internally weak, unlike all the other tough nationalisms.

If that is the case, what was the strength of secular nationalism, and how did it turn out to be so potent as to lead the independence movement and also to dominate Indian politics for more than half a century after

independence? What was the substance of it, if it was as hollow as its critics claimed? I would say, it is not as hollow as that, and it did have an opponent in view. We do not talk of it as nationalism, which is British imperialism, and with it, all imperialisms. Now, we think that imperialism is not the same as nationalism, and the British always pretended that they were not nationalists. It is only a pretence. They were the most extreme nationalists, the first industrial nation. British nationalism and British imperialism were melded. Imperialism was an extension or continuation of its nationalism, and there is no way the British nationalists of those days could think of themselves except as imperialists. Without an empire, there is no Britain, and it cannot identify itself. Even today, they have great difficulties seeing themselves without an empire, and therefore they preserve the image and the value systems and so much of the rhetoric of empire. One could even say that the queen was kept for so long, so successfully, in continuation of the monarchy with all its pretensions, as a reminder of their empire. It is maintaining the image of empire, and the Commonwealth is one of the ways of doing so.

If the empire and imperialism are seen as the 'other', then it makes sense. Secular nationalism did have its opponent. When it was uniting, it was uniting all Indians—true; but it was uniting them against imperialism. It was not trying to unite Indians against a domestic opponent, which is what all the other nationalisms were doing and are doing. That was its strength and the reason for its success. It failed with respect to Pakistan, but that was because there was an overriding geopolitical argument for the British to partition the country, and their argument throughout was that the machinations of the British led to the partition, not the fault of the Hindus, Muslims, or Sikhs. All the other Indian nationalisms blame

one of the Indians—curiously, they never blame the British, they always blame one of the communities. Muslims blame Hindus and vice versa; Sikhs blame one or the other or both. Only the secular nationalists clearly point their finger at the British for wanting the partition of the country and for inflaming these nationalist competitions. Secular nationalism was not an empty-headed nationalism or a hollow idealism of that kind, as it was strategically calculated to unite Indians against imperialism, which is what all nationalisms do—they unite the country against somebody, and here the somebody was clearly located outside, and that was British imperialism, equal to British nationalism.

Prof Palat, in your lecture 'The Spiritual in Nehru's Secular Imagination', you emphasise Pt Nehru's deliberate refusal to formalise secularism as a rigid doctrine, noting that he distrusted the word 'secular' for its potential to become a source of dogma, instead opting for an ethically grounded, spiritually balanced form of political reason, based out of his assumptions of human self-sufficiency and the segregation of religious domains. Some scholars suggest that it was secularism that gave rise to the wave of communal politics in the 1980s and 1990s, while others say that had the principles been more rigid, instead of being left vulnerable and under-institutionalised, the course might have been different. These are two extreme views, but with your extensive study of Nehruvian architecture, where do you find yourself here?

I disagree with both positions. Pt Nehru was not rigid and dogmatic in the least, and the other demands that he should have been more dogmatic hardly hold water. Let me explain what makes him secular and

the grounds on which he is secular, and what his principal arguments were. His purpose was, one, to overcome religious conflict, and second, to deal with the problem of religion at another level altogether, that of irrationality in a modern world. They are two different purposes, but they are related. Let me first take the problem of overcoming religious conflict. In a country that has to be united to fight off the British imperialism, overcoming religious conflict was an imperative at that time in the first half of the century, and after independence, it is still important to preserve the unity of the country and ensure its independence so it does not go through further partitions and further internal conflict. So, uniting the country by overcoming religious conflict became immensely important.

Now, it is not due to any disrespect of any religion; as far as Pt Nehru was concerned, the problem of religious conflict was to be solved by asserting and ensuring the fundamental rights to the freedom of conscience, of assembly, and of expression. These are the fundamental freedoms that are already proclaimed in the rights of man during the French Revolution, and have been repeatedly proclaimed throughout the various revolutions in the course of the 19th century in Europe and elsewhere and in the 20th century after our constitution was formulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In a sense, that has become a fundamental premise of all liberal societies that seek to unite—that they must have the freedom of conscience, assembly, and expression. The freedom of conscience means the freedom to believe in anything you wish to believe, which means any religion. In a liberal society, the freedom of religion is guaranteed, and religion is therefore respected. It is not denied. The freedom to express yourself openly in your religion is also allowed, and not merely allowed, but it has enforced

that freedom through association and expression. You are perfectly free to propagate your religion; you can express your religious beliefs, you can assemble to do so, and privately you can exercise the freedom of your conscience. It is a liberal order and has been the premise of all liberal orders from the time of the French Revolution. India is doing nothing new; it is merely reasserting those principles, and so is the United Nations.

All individual and group activity has to be compatible with the constitution that lays down these principles, and in this, the rights of the citizen are superior to those of anything else. The individual citizen is the one whose rights have to take preference over the rights of any group. Groups may, of course, assert and express their rights, but only to the extent that they are compatible with individual rights. The constitution does guarantee individual and group rights, but rights of a citizen are fundamental and superior to all; they are absolute. If the freedoms of religion are guaranteed in this fashion, one religion does not have an advantage over another. Just as citizens, they all have equal rights, and the fundamental principle is that each one is permitted to exercise their rights as long as it does not infringe upon the rights of another. As long as you can exercise your rights without doing so, it is perfectly acceptable. That is all that has happened. But it has been represented as Pt Nehru not respecting religious faith. It has been represented that way because those who think that one religion should have superior rights over another, always complain that they have lost rights. They have not lost their rights—they have the same rights as others, but they want an advantage over another, and it is those who complain that he is a 'hater of God' or that he is irreligious. He is not bothered about all of that. His

point is, you can believe whatever you wish, but do not impose it upon others.

If all religions exist like this, and one is not superior to another, how does a religion exercise its freedom? It functions within an autonomous sphere. All of society consists of a series of autonomous spheres, of which religion is one, and the state regulates those relationships and their functioning exactly the way a state is empowered to, required to, and we expect it to regulate every other sphere. We expect it to regulate the entire field of corporate activity; otherwise, there would be complete chaos. We expect it to regulate a domain like sports; that is, another autonomous sphere. Autonomous means, internally, they have their own rules of functioning that are respected as long as they do not violate any fundamental rights. Academia is another autonomous sphere, and one of our constant demands is that the state should respect the autonomy of the academic world, and it functions best when it is autonomous but regulated by the state. Without regulation, nothing will work. And this, across the board, any profession, any sector, is subject to state regulation and state leadership, but that does not mean state direction of its internal functioning. Religion is just one of those autonomous spheres. In fact, if I can push it to the extreme, crime is another autonomous sphere. It functions on its own and by its own rules, and in a way, the state practically regulates it and also participates in it, in one way or the other—if you look at the story of gangland warfare, the state is not independent of it, but that is pushing it to the limit.

The religions are now made autonomous; they are no longer the regulatory principle of the society. The constitution is the regulatory one, not the religion. Many people think that religion should be,

especially their own religion, in which they find that they are subordinated to the constitution. There, nobody prevents them from observing their religion and propagating it, but the constitution is superior, and that is all that secularism means. This process of secularisation has been going on the world over, and it is not dogmatic; therefore, regulating the relationships and the functions of these institutions is all necessary so that they do not violate the principles of the constitution. But Pt Nehru had another objective in view that he considered essential for the modernisation of the country, which was his intellectual concern that people should not be embedded in any form of irrationality and blind faith—if you can consider religion as an aspect of blind faith. Blind faith, superstition, or any form of acceptance of principles that have not been subjected to scientific investigation, he considered irrational. If you wish to arrive at the truth, use a scientific method. If you can, that is fine, but if you claim anything that cannot be subjected to scientific method, you are being irrational, and it must be open to everybody to investigate and comprehend the procedures by which you arrive at any truth. There are no mysteries to knowledge, and these are all basic 18th-century principles of enlightenment which he was applying and which we all accept. These are the things we were taught in school with the greatest regularity, all the science we are taught is precisely this. Science applies to all forms of knowledge; history has to be scientific, literature has to be scientific, and philosophy has to be scientific. Namely, you have to go through a rational argument and provide evidence for what you are saying, and that evidence has to be subject to the tests of verifiability and falsifiability.

He wanted to promote science as the best means to the approach to knowledge, and with that, religion took a knock. Those who claimed

that this is our faith had to answer the question, If this is your faith, on what basis have you arrived at it? And then they get trapped, because how do you say that it is your faith? How did you get that faith? How is it that you got the faith but not I? Why is it that your faith is not accessible to me? The principles of physics and chemistry are accessible to me or to you if I have studied them, so why is it that the principles of your faith are not accessible? In that case, it is knowledge that is the question, and if you are just indulging in some form of superstition. Now, Pt Nehru was not irreligious. He was respectful of religious feelings, and it is important to note—what he disliked about what we call religion was the priesthood, the dogma that comes with it, and the organisation that enforces it. These were the things he rejected because they create closed systems that you neither have entry to nor any communication with. All closed systems, therefore, are anathema to him. On the other hand, anybody who is fully committed to a cause, in the manner that the truly religious were and are, he admired them immensely. If you are prepared to give your full life and your total concentration to any cause, you have what we call a religious feeling, and he appreciated that very much. He gave many examples of that kind, including people like Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and so on. He admired them, and that is why he admired people like Jesus and Muhammad. He did not so much admire their respective religions; he admired certain people within them, like St Francis of Assisi. Buddha was somebody he admired enormously, and intellectually speaking, he was practically a Buddhist.

He appreciated religious feeling, or what Freud called the 'oceanic feeling', but he despised dogma. And with dogma, the priests, who claimed to be the repositories of that dogmatic knowledge, and the

organisation that promoted it. That is what he objected to; otherwise, he appreciated and admired it in many cases, and he was even called religious by one of the Khilafat leaders, Maulana Mohammad Ali. He said, 'I think you are deeply religious', and he has that in his autobiography, and Pt Nehru said that perhaps he was. He was sceptical about himself in such respects; he was not indifferent to it at all. But he did not create a dogma out of secularism, some others might have. He wanted to be inclusive through it, and the practical politics are that all minorities must feel secure in post-independence India, especially the Muslims, who would suffer the greatest trauma, and he ensured that as best he could, and he said that everybody should respect everybody's religion and that the state would regulate it. The point at which you call the dogma and the excess came after, when the Muslims were used as a captive bank of votes, and they were a trade-off between their conservative religious leaders and the votes. As a result, no further investments were made in their educational progress and so on because the conservative leaders did not want that. But they got the votes because the Congress claimed that they were the only protectors of the Muslims, and that is what led to the enormous campaign against the Congress for what they called 'pandering' to Muslims.

Professor, in the same lecture, you explained how Pt Nehru not only appreciated and admired Buddhism but also incorporated Buddhist symbols due to his firm beliefs in the Buddhist principles of ethical self-regulation and scientific temper. How much did Pt Nehru's beliefs in Buddhism, according to you, influence his initial perception of the Chinese people, the People's Republic of China (PRC), and his engagement with Mao's Chinese Communist Party (CCP)?

I do not think that the two are related. He had a very positive approach to China and expectations from it on multiple grounds. There is a long civilisational association between India and China, and of course, Buddhism was the connection there, but there were many other aspects to that civilisational connection. He saw India and China as very comparable. They had about the same length of history, vast territories, and internal diversities; of course, China has less diversity than India, but what he expected them to come together on was that both were victims of imperial domination in the 19th century and both fought to throw it off in the 20th century, and therefore, they would come together jointly in the campaign against imperialism. That expectation was belied in the form that China became hostile to India, saw it as a competitor, and went to extreme lengths to attack India when India had no such expectations whatsoever. The geopolitical reasons for China doing so are heavily discussed in all the literature, as you know, but I can certainly suggest two aspects of that. One is that when China finds itself isolated, and it finds that India is feeling triumphant or somehow has an advantage over China, then it is a warning that China gives to India not to take advantage of their temporary isolation. Between 1960 and 1962, this happened when the Soviet Union and China split up, and India saw itself in an advantageous position. The United States was friends with India, and the Soviet Union was realigning itself after breaking up with China, therefore, India would have certain advantages. At the same time, India was also host to the Dalai Lama and accepted him, which the Chinese were nervous about, and there was a strong suspicion that India might be the launching pad of a Tibetan insurrection.

Not that India did anything about it, but there were those fears. When you have fears, they become a material fact. So, they gave a warning to India in the form of the 1962 attack, stating that they can assert themselves against India, and we will not have the friends that we expect to have. And that proved to be right; India was in a helpless situation and could not face that invasion, but not that anything happened—the Chinese just came in and went out—a bit of a slap in the face but no more than that. It did it again in 2020 in the Galwan episode when Trump attacked China, and there was a certain feeling in India that China is now isolated. Till now, China was almost an ally of the United States, and China had prospered so enormously with that alignment. Now, if that was breaking with China on its own, as Trump's policy seemed to indicate, then India felt more celebratory, so China once again attacked. It had not done so between 1962 and 2020, and suddenly, the strange attack occurred. In both cases, it is because of geopolitical tensions and has nothing to do with unreal expectations. If it was unreal expectations and that Pt Nehru was up ahead in the air and all that is said about him, then what have all the other prime ministers done, the tough ones? Everyone proclaims themselves very tough against Pt Nehru, but they all faced exactly the same problems, and nothing has changed on the ground. The line-up globally is exactly the same. In fact, things have become slightly worse today than they were then. So, it had nothing to do with Pt Nehru's false expectations, his idealisations of China, his naivety, or his weakness, because everybody who came after him was all tough people, or at least proclaimed themselves to be very tough. Not a single change on the ground, and it is the same with Pakistan.

Sir, I remember watching a conversation of yours with Mr Jairam Ramesh on the release of his book on VK Krishna Menon. You say,

and Mr Ramesh agrees with it, that the 1962 war was more of a military failure than a political failure. So, can we not say that military successes are not political successes; they are military successes? How do we distinguish between the two, and how can we say that the military is not a part of the political will?

Yes, I agree. That is an artificial distinction; to say it is a military failure and not a political one, they are necessarily related. Pt Nehru's political strategy has been laid out very clearly, that is, no conflict with China, and if there are going to be tensions, and you build up the armed forces, the only way of doing so is through a successful industrialisation of the country which will enable you to sustain a large military establishment. A poor country cannot maintain a military establishment of the dimensions people expected; it cannot supply it, and it cannot find the munitions, the arms, and all the modern technological gadgetry. So, he said, we do need a modern army, but the only way of doing so is to go through a successful industrialisation. It is not a matter of just buying equipment; it is the famous case of you not handing over computers to monkeys. There is no use in just acquiring modern hardware; you have to be able to keep it up in a war, and the only way is to produce it yourselves. To produce them you require a huge industrial establishment to do so, and that is why he gave priority to industrial development and the rest to diplomacy, not to more confrontation. When the confrontation occurred, of course, the military failed—it could not succeed, though it could have done better in some senses.

If a conflict occurred, India was always the weaker, because India had chosen a pattern of development which was not the Chinese one. Democracy makes everything slower. We have to cater to so many

different types of demands all the time; Chinese have just wiped them off the state. I must remind you that China went through the largest famine in human history in the 1950s during the Great Leap Forward, more than even the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union's industrialisation famine under Stalin was about five to seven million dead, whereas the Chinese one was at least thirty million. India, on the other hand, has had no famine after independence, all the famines were before that. The priorities were different, and Pt Nehru's consistent argument was that we cannot sacrifice one generation for the benefit of the next one, and so we will have to go along. There is no way the military is going to be effective unless you industrialise effectively, and you cannot industrialise effectively at such a cost he was emphatic about, and he repeatedly brought up the Soviet example by saying that this is not the model we must follow. So, if there was a conflict, we would be the loser; that is the kind of skirmish that China wanted. It is not the kind of conflict where you have a total war. If there was a full-scale invasion of India, then that would be a different matter because then, of course, India has the resources to fight back, but the kind of war that China prefers to have—up in the mountains for small pieces of territory to make a dramatic impact and then to withdraw—is all that we have seen of China so far, and there, India will be at the weak end.

Sir, let me ask you a question about one of your past answers: can it be said that Pt Nehru's ideas about secularism emerged or found their roots in the partition of India? Was there any pre-1947 idea about secularism and post-1947 idea about secularism that got shaped by the horrors of the partition?

No, they were the same. The ideas, the fundamental principles, and the philosophical foundations are all the same, and it is foundational towards the whole of Gandhian philosophy and strategy that Pt Nehru later adopted; that is, Indians must be united against the British power. All of them have to be united, and secularism is one of the means of doing so. You have to unite regionally, you have to prevent caste conflict, and you have to unite the classes in conflict. The class conflict and the desire to unite the classes led to the Left accusing them all of being stooges of the capitalists. The desire to prevent the caste conflict led to them accusing MK Gandhi of not doing enough to overcome it, or even Pt Nehru. Their fundamental principle is that one Indian must not attack another Indian, and the moment you stir up one Indian interest against another Indian interest, the British have an entry point to divide you and sponsor one against the other. In order to prevent that from happening, they kept on compromising—the Poona Pact with Dr Ambedkar, for example, for the Dalits. They are always being accused of compromise, but compromise is what won the day. It united the country; otherwise you would have had full-scale civil wars in India, and the British would have had a wonderful feast. They could pick up anybody they wanted, promote one against the other, and it would have ended up like the Arab world. That is what was prevented, so secularism was within that mould.

After independence, it was important to retain the unity of India. Pt Nehru never took the unity of India for granted; he said that we never know, and there were multiple challenges. He constantly exhorted his countrymen to unite exactly as before 1947, so secularism was required for his secular policy—notably, he seldom used the word—but it was required to maintain the unity of the country. There was a foreign nationalism against whom they had to fight, which was British

imperialism, and it was only when India became more confident of its unity after it faced the Khalistani challenge and after breaking up Pakistan that Indian unity became secure; nobody could challenge it. It is only after that secular nationalism has declined in power and Hindutva nationalism has risen. It was from the 1990s after the Khalistani challenge was seen off. So, the long-term consequences, or the long-term processes, were that once the security of Indian unity was established, or seemed to have been established, secularism was waived, and Hindutva nationalism asserted itself. It has less to do with pandering to Muslim interests or the weakness of particular leaders; those are all short-term ones. The long term, I would say, I put it this way.

Sir, let me bring up another question which was related to the partition of India. I think we do not have a lot of publicly available literature on what was going on during the partition; the focus was usually on the independence of India. In your lecture at the India International Centre (IIC), 'Nehru and Democracy', you pointed out that Pt Nehru was always sceptical and, to an extent, doubtful about what he used to say. It can also be interpreted as he did not think in binaries. Did he ever publicly or privately reflect later in life on whether the partition could have been averted? And when it comes to the letters that might have been written by him, what do you think was his emotional response to the partition of India?

He would have liked to prevent the partition. He thought the partition was an absurdity and the way Muhammad Ali Jinnah presented his demands. He made all the arguments against the partition, and he said that if it is a question of Muslims having their own state and nation, that

is manifestly not possible. Whatever territory you lop off and make Pakistan, there will be millions of Muslims left in India, and so many Hindus in Pakistan. By creating a Muslim state, you are creating a minority problem within Pakistan, and you leave a minority problem within India; nothing is solved. It has clearly nothing to do with solving a minority problem, and the way to solve the minority problem is not by partitioning the country but by mobilising your ideology against minority domination. That is why the partition was carried out in a manifestly irrational fashion. An ignorant lawyer was brought out from London, he put a ruler to the map and drew a straight line, and that became Pakistan. The line went through villages and in certain cases, many houses; it is such irrationality. Everyone thought it was impossible, yet it happened because the British insisted on it. But he also reflected the other side; he said if Jinnah was going to be such a powerful presence, and after the war Jinnah won all the elections in Muslim constituencies—of course, he won the elections because he and the communists were the only ones who were allowed to exist during the war and propagate their views. So, the Communist Party became extraordinarily popular, as did the Muslim League. The Muslim League tried out the communal riots, the Communist Party tried out the revolution in Telangana and so on. Of course, nobody was going to give the communists any chance, and the British were there to support the Muslim League, and therefore, they got Pakistan. They both became popular during the war because they were the only ones allowed to mobilise.

Before the war, Jinnah lost everything in the 1937 elections. So, Pt Nehru thought that we could manage it. But when he saw the degree of apparent popularity and the way it was going, and Jinnah was making it

impossible to govern India through a series of communal riots—and the British were assisting those, like the 1946 Calcutta Killings—it was then when he was convinced, and his own party was convinced. MK Gandhi had said that if everyone wanted the partition, then he was not going to stand in the way, and he was, in fact, asked why he did not carry out a fast unto death, and he said: If everyone wants the partition and if I fast unto death, all that will happen is that I will die and you will still have the partition. Pt Nehru's further point was that suppose we make a compromise after compromise and get a united India, which he was very doubtful about because he saw the way the British were going, finally, you will get it at such a heavy cost that you cannot do anything in India. He wanted to develop a modern India. He wanted to carry out huge land reforms and social reforms—what he called the social revolution—and with Jinnah at the helm of the Muslim League and them being run by landlord interests and so on, there was not a ghost of a chance. He would be hamstrung. He said, let them have another country, and we will get on with our own development as we want. What nobody expected was that having another country would lead to massacres of one million people and twenty million homes, and nobody expected that throughout their lives, there would be a permanent war between India and Pakistan.

That aspect of the Cold War they had not seen; that was maintained by the Cold War and continues to this day. Pakistan is a client of the United States, and as a client, the United States maintains an army there. It is a backward state which is exactly the same as when the British left—run by the landlords, army, and bureaucracy. But they needed a crime state; the army was there, and it continued the same way. So, Pt Nehru's point was that it is best that we do not have such a state with us because we would not be able to do anything in this country. He had to carry out the

zamindari reform, he had to industrialise, he had to democratise, and would all that be possible with the kind of politics you have in Pakistan? He said perhaps just as well, but nobody foresaw that it would be at this cost. I think all of them thought, including Jinnah, that you would have a partition and the two states would just live peacefully, like India within India. We have had a series of partitions with the state reorganisation; Andhra has been carved out, Maharashtra and Gujarat have been separated, Punjab has been divided, the Northeastern states have come, and that process is still going. It has never led to a war between them. You create a new state, and you just continue; in principle, that should have been possible. What is wrong with having a Pakistan if you want it? It does not mean you have to be at war with each other; you can just be there, like Czechoslovakia split up into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In all probability, Britain will split up, and Spain might split up for the same reason, but that is all possible because there is an overarching union, which is the European Union above. But the geopolitical situation was such that the United States required a client here, and Pakistan was the one, and that structured completely different politics.

Prof Palat, in your lecture 'Nehru's Democratic Dilemmas', you highlight Pt Nehru's deep dismay with electoral politics, with his description of elections as 'madness' and his concerns regarding the submergence of real issues. Beyond a moral fatigue, would you interpret this as a more fundamental critique of electoral democracy itself—particularly in its capacity to sustain reasoned public discourse within a postcolonial society like India?

He had his doubts regarding democracy in this sense, and that was part of a basic critique of democracy that was going on worldwide from the

middle of the 19th century, and he found it applicable to India also. It is not a postcolonial problem particularly. It is very much evident in France or in Italy; in fact, Indian democratic politics are far more stable and regular than anything that France had to show until then—only after 1958 did France become stable politically. The Third Republic and the Fourth Republic were shocking; they never had a government for more than nine months, and Italy was even worse. It is not a peculiar problem of India and has nothing to do with postcolonial—I do not like that word, 'postcolonial', let us say independent India—unless you want to call Europe postfascist or something, which might be more valid, perhaps it is not postfascist; it is still fascist. So, it is a fundamental problem in democracy that what we assume to be all the democratic values of public discourse on fundamental issues by an informed, rational public meeting in the public sphere, or Habermas's argument, for example. Ever since mass democracy took over in various parts of Europe in the 19th century and in India during the Gandhian phase, it does not occur that way. Mass democracy does not allow for that rational, informed public discourse. It is very doubtful if it had occurred before; a certain range of it might have occurred, and a certain range of it continues even now, but the raucous mass mobilisation is so powerful that it overwhelms all the rational discourse that we are so keen on.

People like Schumpeter have said that it is not as rational as you imagine it to be, that many people who claim to be rational are, in fact, extraordinarily irrational. They are very well-informed, intelligent, educated, and experienced, and they have occupied senior positions; but they are as irrational, or populist, or irresponsible as any mobster. It is all in Schumpeter's argument, and many others have said so; there is no reason to assume that an educated man is more rational than an

uneducated man. An educated man may give more rational reasons, he may argue it better, but he is also driven by fundamental emotional requirements and self-interest as anybody else. Pt Nehru had all his doubts, but he said that we can consciously work against those problems, and that is the only way we can work. If you try to restrict democratic expression, you are going to end up in a fascist mobilisation—which is also democratic because it mobilises masses—but to be chauvinist, authoritarian, and violent, we can work against all of that. Democracy has its problems, but it has its solutions too, and it is for you to work out the solutions. If you face problems in democracy, the solution is more democracy, not to attack democracy or to impose military rule or dictatorship, which has never solved any problem. But if you can mobilise a democratically committed political party and create popular support with parties in competition with each other, and they place their arguments before the republic, you can do it. The point is to try to do it, and he kept urging people to do so. And he was not wrong; it is possible, and that is why we are democratic.

One final question to you, Prof Palat: you have been working very extensively on Pt Nehru for the past few decades. There must have been some biasses when you started working on the *Selected Works*. How do you think your understanding of Pt Nehru and the ideas of India has evolved over time? Do you think there has been any significant shift in your ideas, or did you have any preconceived notions that changed after spending years on the work?

Yes. The bias I had was, like many people have, that Pt Nehru was rather wishy-washy and at times not decisive enough. When I read his work,

and now I have been editing his work since 2011, as if I were sitting next to him and talking to him practically. I have read everything that he was writing, reading, thinking, and talking about. I have watched him draft his speeches, his letters, and everything there is. I have been more and more impressed by him; he was not at all wishy-washy. The thing is, his form of expression was slightly convoluted; it was not clear-cut. In fact, being a professor myself, I would not have given him an A-grade for the manner in which he wrote. Very literary—but the quality of sharp argument is not the best for a man to pass an exam well. Subhas Chandra Bose, on the other hand, was perfect; very clear-cut and very well-stated, and I can understand why he succeeded well in the Indian Civil Service (ICS) exams. Pt Nehru would not have, I think. The point is, Pt Nehru was a deeper thinker, and he always saw multiple sides of any problem, and because of that, he expressed himself in a way that always led to qualifications. It is not emphatic and straight. He did not say that this is right and this is wrong, of course; he did, but at a different level. For example, communalism was wrong, imperialism was wrong, and anybody who attacked the unity of India was wrong. But in everything else, he saw the complexity of an argument. In a country as complex as India, the reality is complex and full of contradictions. He saw the problems on all those levels, and therefore he expressed those complexities, which is what we call being wishy-washy. He sought compromise and consensus, which is why we call him as being weak and indecisive.

His daughter, too, was that typical tough one who drew the line and said: Not any further. She was that type. She was not a consensus builder—Pt Nehru was a consensus builder, and he considered that absolutely imperative after the partition. As I said earlier, he did not take

the unity of India for granted. So, I have been more and more impressed when I see the complexity he was dealing with. On the same day, he would have to deal with a fellow like EMS Namboodiripad on one side and K Kamaraj on the other. BC Roy was there, the good old Kairon, who was the antithesis of all these people, and Sheikh Abdullah, and all those politicians in Uttar Pradesh, one after the other. He redeemed the whole lot, and the way he responded to each, arguing with each ever so consistently and carefully, indicates a high level of statesmanship. He was able to deal with Master Tara Singh and Sant Fateh Singh with the greatest rationality and the coolness of head. Anybody else would have got fed up with them, with the way they kept on at him, but he continued replying to their letters, arguing again and again, explaining why he was opposing the Punjabi Suba perfectly reasonably and rationally all the way. He always tried to persuade people to his side, and therefore, he did not create enemies the way his daughter did. And that, I was very impressed by. To rule a country like India, you have to bring people together; you cannot afford a Leninist revolutionary situation—you are going to have civil wars, and they will be extreme in India. And he succeeded; he held the country together, brought the people together, and he developed an undying consensus for democracy in India. We do not realise that we take it for granted that we are all democratic, but what do we owe it to?

The British claimed that they created democracy in India; absolutely not. What the British had was fascism in India. What was created was by Indians, against the British, but who consolidated it? That was Pt Nehru. And we have taken that for granted to such an extent that we can afford to be so critical of him. There is no danger of army rule in India, everybody else has had it. There is no danger of direct dictatorship in

quite the way that most other places have—we have had authoritarian regimes—but it is not the same as overthrowing the constitution and creating a dictatorship. Why is it that no army leader has dared to take power in India? It is because democracy is firmly entrenched. Every political leader in India—you can say everything about them, but the whole political leadership is elected. We might despise them as much as we want for all their inadequacies, but the one thing is that they are all elected, and nobody sees any other leadership as a legitimate one; nobody sees the army as a legitimate leader. He created a firm foundation of law in India, as firm as we can imagine it to be. I know how lawless the country is, but the constitution is grounded, the rule of law is grounded, and that is not due to the British. The British did not have a constitution or a rule of law; they had just a dictatorship, and what they called law was just arbitrary rule by them. It is not the British at all, and it is not an inheritance from the British. It was all created after that and against very heavy odds. And one of the greatest achievements is the reorganisation of the states, which has deepened Indian democracy. He was afraid that it might lead to further partitions, but the fact is that every part of the country can now feel democratically assertive through its own linguistic state by creating a nation within that linguistic area. Of course, India is blessed by having clear-cut linguistic areas so each one of them can become a nation of its own, which is attached to the Indian nation. Everyone feels comfortable having both. You have the benefit of having your own nation as well as the superior Indian nation. You have a larger space in which you operate, but you have the security of having your own space. Partly it is good fortune, and partly it is the creation of those early founding years.

Ends.

ACADEMIC ESSAYS

NEGOTIATING SHARIA, SECULARISM, AND THE BODY: GENDER AND LEGAL REFORMS IN POST-OTTOMAN STATES

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Abstract

With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, its successor governments faced difficulties in reconciling Islamic legal traditions with secular rule. The issue of gender emerged as a key element in legal discourse, particularly the regulation of the female body. This essay discusses Turkey, Egypt, and Tunisia's policy approaches to family law reforms, sharia implications, and the layered application of secularism. It examines the symbolic and functional roles of gender in codifying citizenship through a legal lens, aiming to demonstrate how these dynamics legitimised state authority while forging new notions of identification and belonging.

Keywords: Sharia, Islamic legal traditions, Secularism, Gender, Belonging

Introduction

The breakdown of Ottoman authority in the early 20th century indicated a period of great legal and ideological transformation across the Middle East and North Africa. As new post-Ottoman states were striving for modernisation, legal systems became platforms for contests between Islamic law (sharia), secular ethical norms, and nationalist ideologies. The debates were centred around the key issue of gender, and most particularly women's status, as part of family legislation, marriage, divorce, inheritance, and public conduct.

This paper explores three influential states that emerged from the post-Ottoman period—Turkey, Egypt, and Tunisia, aiming to analyse the complex connections between legal development and gender politics within specific narratives of state formation. They reflect unique lines of development with a shared thematic focus. Together, they reflect a broader regional trend: an attempt to synthesise Islamic legal traditions with secular modernist projects. In this struggle, the female body becomes a contested site that illustrates tension between control and resistance.

Sharia and Legal Inheritance in Post-Ottoman States

During later times of Ottoman legal practice, there existed a unique type of syncretism that incorporated Hanafi Islamic jurisprudence *(fiqh)*, *qanun* (imperial decrees), and customary laws influenced by regional tribal and societal traditions (Hallaq, 2009). This pluralistic structure provided a level of freedom of interpretation within legal traditions; yet, at the same time, it simultaneously reinforced inequalities, especially

about issues of gender as well as kinship relations. The Mecelle (Ottoman civil code) of 1876, though based upon Hanafi principles, attempted to codify Islamic legal doctrines into an integral codex, thus mirroring the trends within modernising Islamic jurisprudence while sustaining its earliest traditions (Hallaq, 2009).

Following the breakdown of the empire in the early 20th century, this elaborate legal code was taken up by new nation-states created at that time. The decentralisation of Ottoman central authority, however, fractured the cohesion of its legal institutions. During the process of state formation, many states opted to secularise various sectors like criminal, civil, and commercial law to make them compatible with European patterns. Nonetheless, laws governing personal status, including marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance, remained within the purview of sharia courts or sharia-based legal systems. The persistence here was a consequence of a convergence between political pragmatism, cultural identity preservation, and religious legitimacy retention.

This development created a dualistic legal code wherein modern civil codes were accompanied by religious laws. The dualistic form fostered significant tension, especially as gender reform became a central focus within modernising discourse regarding the state. Reform proponents, as well as lawmakers, presented adherence to sharia within personal status legislation as a unifying strategy. This approach maintained cultural cohesion while at the same time paving the way for significant legal progress in other areas. However, because of its significant direct impact upon women's private sphere, particularly regarding marriage, divorce,

and inheritance, personal status legislation emerged as fundamentally the most ideology-sensitive area of reform.

By framing the realm of family law as a 'private' sphere, state institutions successfully posited their specific understanding of secularism as an administrative task rather than an expression of ideological bias. Nonetheless, this dichotomous definition was not without political implications. Charrad (2001) argues that family law reforms functioned as ubiquitous tools of the central authority of the state. They were aiming to make kinship relations compatible with the purposes of central governance—either by lessening tribal authority, by eroding clerical influence, or by creating a modern national identity.

Within this construct, sharia played dual roles: as an embodiment of religious persistence and as a unifying force within debates concerning reform. The discussion of legal evolution often used binary oppositions between 'obsolete' religious practices and 'progressing' secular modernity, framing the alteration or wholesale reform of Muslim family law as a required civilisational imperative. However, many Muslim conservatives and renewal advocates took such changes to be constraints imposed by foreign pressures upon genuine Muslim identity and holy authority.

Additionally, codifying sharia, wholly aimed at codifying and modernising Islamic jurisprudence, often made it inflexible. Since then, legal rules have been codified in rigid codes, and jurists have been denied the interpretive liberty they previously enjoyed through *ijtihad* (independent reasoning). This process was used to immobilise the law at

a certain point in history by limiting its ability to adapt to shifting social and cultural conditions (Hallaq, 2009, pp. 419–425).

While traditional Muslim legal reasoning did not allow for free rein, it still provided for adaptability through the concept of *ijtihad*. And various post-Ottoman legal systems cast such interpretations as unchangeable statutes, thus inhibiting the natural evolution of Islamic legal discourse. Such inherent inconsistency of embedding sharia within legal statutes created lasting inconsistencies within postcolonial Muslim legal systems.

The gender reforms in this constitution did more than simply equalise women and men under the law; power, religious authority, and cultural identity were also part of it. Throughout various periods, female heads of household governed under personal status legislation corresponding to sharia were a stand-in for deeper ideological debates that involved modernity, Islam, and the creation of national identities.

Republic of Türkiye: Secular Nationalism and the Recasting of Gender

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey launched a comprehensive and ideologically driven secularisation process, led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Atatürk aimed to create a new nation-state founded on Western models, thus relinquishing the Ottoman-Islamic identity in exchange for a national identity rooted in reason. Legal reforms, especially those encoded in the 1926 Swiss Civil Code, were at the centre of this revolutionary process and comprehensively displaced Islamic personal status law. These legal reforms banned polygamy,

introduced civil marriage and divorce, and granted Turkish women rights equal to those of men in property, guardianship, and contractual obligations (Kandiyoti, 1988).

The changes to codified legislation entailed not just administrative corrections but important symbolic moves calculated to redefine national identity, where secularism became a part of the very essence of Turkish identity. The changes done in the family law were a significant step away from Ottoman customs, allowing Turkey to identify with the European civilisational benchmark and present proof of its own march towards modernity. In this context, women were key symbols of modernity. Their emancipation was seen as a critical benchmark to be achieved by Turkey to be counted among equal nations.

It is essential to understand that the gender reform policy undertaken by the state had a structured and hierarchical character. As much as the formal legal rights granted to women were increasing, at the same time, the female body became a prominent symbol within the emerging secular structure. The ban on veiling in public institutions, the promotion of women's education, and the increased participation of women in the labour force were not separate measures but rather parts of a state-imposed strategy designed to steer social change (Kandiyoti, 1988; Hallaq, 2009). Symbolically, unveiling women was a performative act that represented state-endorsed modernity. The female bodies were 'unveiled' in a literal sense as well as from an ideological perspective, as they were reconfigured as spaces of visibility, regulation, and political engagement.

This specific form of feminism, which Tugal (2009) characterises as emancipation-from-above, carried important traits of exclusion. It provided little backing to grassroots feminist actions or alternative Islamic views toward emancipation. In Tugal's (2009) account, secular legal reforms implemented during the Kemalist period created a public space essentially incompatible with Islamic identity, hence entrenching the state as the final authority to speak to emancipation questions concerning women. Those who wore religious garbs and were seen publicly with a commitment to their Islamic veil or by manifesting religious piety were excluded; even with legislation having been passed with a view to supporting them, they were included among the 'unemancipated'.

The long-lasting effect created a divided political culture, where secularism became an identity with progressive and feminist values, and religion became consigned to a private arena or defined as obscurantist. This binary vision did more than divide the richness of Muslim women's daily life into fragmented parts; it also hindered the growth of a feminist discourse edified by internal Islamic values. The secular state undermined the Islamic frameworks for women's rights by portraying the religion as obscurantist. It left little space for Muslim women to define feminism on their own cultural and spiritual terms. This led to discord, particularly among Muslim women who were committed to their faith. They stated that Kemalist feminism was group-centred and was designed for the rich.

In this way, an environment was promoted that fostered counter-movements, especially among Muslim women who were committed to their religion, who argued that Kemalist feminism was sectarian and elitist.

In addition, the Turkish experience demonstrates that legal secularism acts as a tool used by a secular, centrally controlled state to exercise control over society, rather than as a device to liberate society and create independence. While women gained access to judicial mechanisms of civil law and reached legal equality in certain spheres, their identities continued to be deeply intertwined with a state-centred ideology. The state created the model of the 'modern woman' and viewed any deviations, especially those based on religious morals, with suspicion or hostility. For that reason, legal changes in Turkey replaced religious patriarchy with a paternalistic system based on centralised, secular power and thus changed but did not replace the site of control.

Egypt: A Synthesis of Hybrid Legalism and Limits to Reform

Whereas Turkey has experienced a marked secularisation of its legislative system, Egypt has pursued a gradual and combined approach, where civil developments in the legal system exist alongside the continued influence of Islamic law in personal status matters. This unique blending of legal systems in Egypt can be explained by its singular colonial and post-colonial history. The British ruling period from 1882 to 1956 probably had a key role to play in Egypt's judicial modernisation, as civil, commercial, and penal codes of European provenance were absorbed; nevertheless, personal status matters like marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance continued to be decided by sharia courts, which were overwhelmingly defined by compliance with the Maliki and Hanafi schools of Islamic law (Bernard-Maugiron & Dupret, 2002).

The coexistence of several legal codes within a single system operated both as a political compromise and a useful tool of policy implementation. The maintenance of sharia within personal law satisfied religious authorities, especially Al-Azhar, whilst, at the same time, operating as a guarantee to maintain progressive developments within secular reforms of other areas within the legal system. However, the outcome was a fragmented legal code in which citizens faced different principles across domains, disproportionately disadvantaging women.

Women's rights activists, spearheaded by Huda Sha'arawi, who founded the Egyptian Feminist Union in 1923, protested against the patriarchal structures that permeated personal status laws. These activists worked towards several measures aimed at gender equality, including an all-embracing programme with educational initiatives, suffrage efforts, and legal challenges to the prevailing legal norms, which were shaped by their domestic roles. This activism yielded gradual changes during the 1920s and 1930s, such as legislation requiring judicial review of polygamous contracts and the recognition of women's right to request divorce on grounds of harm *(khul)* (Sonbol, 1996). However, such reforms were tactically framed to avoid confrontations with sharia law. Rather than direct rejection of Islamic legal concepts, reformists and legislators proffered reinterpretation or selective appeals to Quranic passages expounding gender equality and women's rights. Thereby, they posed reforms as reaffirmations of a true interpretation of Islam and not as foreign influences.

The state skilfully developed a subtle balance by employing sharia as a basis for cultural authority, all the while accommodating shifting gender norms. This highly complex legal system mirrored wider political

developments taking place across Egypt by illuminating the intersectionality between nationalism, colonial modernity, and Islamic authenticity. In the 20th century, changes to family law became one of the few areas where rival ideological points of view were studied with extreme seriousness.

In recent decades, especially since the rise to prominence of Islamist groups, most prominently among them being the Muslim Brotherhood, there has been a buildup of tension. Political Islam, having gained ground since the 1940s, became a powerful movement where secular legal reforms were seen as signs of moral degeneration and external imposition. To those who subscribe to an ideology of political Islam, personal status law went beyond legal matters and gained an almost sacral character, being a representation of divine will. In view of that, any endeavour to modify this area, primarily regarding rights or freedoms involving polygamy, was seen as a direct challenge to Islamic identity and social solidarity.

Within political discussion, the female body became a powerful political signifier. The choice to wear or remove the veil, along with the display of women's bodies, was continually open to scrutiny within the political debates around Egypt's moral direction. Saba Mahmood, within her ethnographic study of a women's mosque movement, explained that Muslim women understood Islamic modesty not as a sign of repression or subordination, but as a practice in moral training in the name of religion and self-cultivation (Mahmood, 2005). These practices challenged the liberal binary of liberation versus oppression as well as unsettled secular feminist narratives that equate emancipation with unveiling and modernity.

By the end of the 20th century, the different regimes in Egypt—namely Nasser's, Sadat's, and Mubarak's, recognised that personal status law lay within a symbolic order that could not be fully secularised without the risk of alienating meaningful portions of the population. The amendments listed in the agenda had a persistent trend, just like the 1979 Personal Status Law amendments (commonly called Jihan's Law) and the 2000 Personal Status Law, that were intended to promote women's rights in terms of divorce. The initiatives were controversially opposed by the religious authorities. As a matter of fact, the modest amendments received an enormous negative reaction, revealing the manner in which legal concerns regarding gender were tied to larger ideological struggles such as secular nationalism, Islamic revivalism, and global liberalism.

Planned legal reforms within Egypt are a prime example of inherent structural limitations of hybrid legalism operating within a conflict-fertile society (Bernard-Maugiron & Dupret, 2002). Instead of providing an even-handed mediator, the dual legal structure fuelled divisions. It was especially among women, whose legal rights depended on their marital status, religious affiliation, and capability to cope with legal institutions. While some reforms were partially successful, they were still invariably marred by the pervasive ideological dominance of sharia within the broader national conscience.

Tunisia: The State of Feminism and Legal Innovation

Among a number of subsequent states established in the post-Ottoman period, Tunisia illustrates a phenomenal first shift in legal policies toward addressing gender disparity, and in particular, in relation to personal status laws. At the time of independence from French colonial power in 1956, President Habib Bourguiba initiated a wave of constitutional and legal reforms, essentially reconfiguring the relationship among Islam, legal policies, and gender relations. The central theme behind such a reform movement was the adoption of a Code of Personal Status (CPS), a novel legal code that prohibited polygamy and allowed civil divorce. It made mutual consent between husband and wife obligatory for marriage and augmented custodial rights and inheritance privileges for women (Charrad, 2001).

In contrast to the Turkish example, which substituted sharia with a legal system based on European customary law, Tunisia followed a newer, more indigenous path. Bourguiba did not completely repudiate Islam but instead invoked *ijtihad*, in Islamic jurisprudence, to argue that Islamic sharia's fundamental principles are compatible with modern ideas of sexual equality (Charrad, 2001). This rhetorical strategy enabled Tunisia to implement legal reforms without an official break with Islam and protected the nation from being viewed as heretical or culturally treasonous.

The aforementioned legal innovation is a variation of what can be called a form of 'state feminism', which is a hierarchical nationalist endeavour wherein the state assumes a leading role to induce further emancipation among women (Charrad, 2001). Bourguiba viewed emancipation from

patrimonial control as an ethical necessity and a crucial instrument to attain national development. The government wished to secularise Tunisian society and decrease reliance on outmoded kinship alliances, especially those linked with religious or pre-state power, by expanding access to education, employment, and family planning.

Nevertheless, the proposed constitution was advanced within authoritarian parameters. Tunisia's own dedication to legal secularism was part of a larger venture of positioning religious practice within a regulatory framework. The Ministry of Religious Affairs controlled the mosques, sermons, and religious education, with religious organisations in general subjected to ongoing marginalisation. Accordingly, the dominant account of religion effectively undercut the possibility of a pluralistic or community-based rethinking of Islam that included consideration of Islamic feminist views. Analysts noted that although the reforms undertaken by Bourguiba were fairly liberalising, they took place within a context marked by restrictions on civil rights and the exclusion of alternative religious and secular thinking.

Tunisia's law has, for a long time, been an important point of reference in the Arab world, frequently used to demonstrate possibilities for harmonisation between Islamic heritage and gender equality values. This exceptionalism has nevertheless come into question following events since the 2011 Arab uprisings overthrew the Ben Ali dictatorship and initiated a novel democratic polity with a diverse range of components (Charrad, 2011). The subsequent electoral win by the Ennahda party, perceived as a middle path between secular liberalism and Islamic traditionalism, reset political Islam at the centre stage in national debate,

thereby putting into question Tunisia's continuity of progress relative to reforms previously achieved in gender.

Significantly, the post-revolution period did not reverse legal gains made in Tunisia. Rather, it was subjected to a new type of negotiation between secular and Islamic actors, resulting in agreement by contesting stakeholders to preserve the CPS as a national gain. Ennahda leaders repeatedly proclaimed their code consistent with Islamic values, prefiguring a change from resistance to reconciliation (Charrad, 2001). The transition from resistance to reconciliation also reflects a distinct manner in which Tunisia's transition history has created a new normative reference point, where equality among men and women has been integrated into national discourse, even between previously antagonistic parties.

Yet, controversies persist. Controversies over equality in inheritance issues, reproduction, and religious roles in education and the judiciary are prominent issues of public contention. The controversies are no sign of a retreat from change, but they are a sign of an ongoing struggle over Islamic legitimacy's limits and legal scope. Tunisia is a unique case in which Islamic legal theory, feminist movements sponsored by the state, and democratic opposition converge and yield a critical case study shedding light on gender change in a post-Ottoman, post-authoritarian state.

The Female Body as a Legal and Ideological Site

In those new states from within the old Ottoman Empire, attempts at legal reform, and in particular concerning gender, have persistently

centred on the female body as a symbolic marker and a regulatory nexus. Rather than being considered a cultural or biological construct, the female body was a site of ideological contestation where those issues touching on modernity, national identity, and religious authority intersected. Issues of veiling, sexuality, reproductive rights, body movement, and dress went beyond concerns on personal freedom to encompass highly politicised arenas characterised by legislating paradigms, religious authority, and communal sensibilities.

Legislative interventions against women were frequently articulated through discourses on civilisation, morality, and national honour. In this context, the female body was not merely subject to surveillance, but quite literally governed by law. The state became accountable for determining which bodily practices might be deemed acceptable, honourable, or deviant. In Republican Turkey, the unveiled woman emerged as a figure to represent the modern, rational citizenry of the secular nation. The unveiling no longer represented a rejection of Ottoman-Islamic heritage, but was a performative means to sanction membership in Western ideals within a broader civilisational project. Legislative efforts and policies veered away from a practice of veiling, resulting in systematic exclusion from public sector jobs, higher education, and civil service, and thereby consolidating a binary between religiosity and modernity (Göle, 1996).

The hijab assumed gigantic political significance in the context of Islamic revivalist discourse in Egypt. At the close of the 20th century, marked by the ascent to power of the Muslim Brotherhood and subsequently by state crackdown, the practice of veiling was once again reclaimed as a counter-hegemonic resistance. For many, the act of wearing the veil

became one that resisted conformity to patriarchal norms but, more significantly, became a conscious articulation of religious identity, a rejection of Western cultural hegemony, and a protest against authoritarian secularism. Mahmood (2005) elucidates that liberal autonomy can no longer be deployed to measure the veiled female body in Egypt; rather, it must be understood within some moral and religious discursive paradigms, which drastically alter the perception of agency.

Tunisia's legal reforms after its independence represent a key case study demonstrating the deployment of women's bodies in a state-sponsored project of secular modernisation. In Bourguiba's regime, styles of dressing and comportment by women were strictly controlled in a national development project. Public veiling was stigmatised, with an ensuing ban from some public institutions. Furthermore, a nationalist feminist discourse propagated a normative ideal of the secular, liberated woman characterised by unveiled hair, control over reproduction, and active economic engagement. Gendered ideals were concretised by the law, media propagation, and pedagogical programs, with a uniform policy agenda whereby, together with guaranteeing rights, a nation delineated its subjects' identities.

A woman's body came, in a variety of contexts, to be a first boundary, delineating between inclusion and exclusion in the sphere of multiple constructions of national identity. It was a symbol of religious purity or an icon of secular advancement, a site within literary works in which ideological conflicts were articulated. The implications of such a symbolic role were more than merely legal repercussions, extending to real-life repercussions: a woman's decisions in terms of dressing,

marrying, sexual orientation, and body ownership were controlled by legal parameters but also by overall societal mechanisms of restriction.

Furthermore, the symbolic meanings tended to make the female body hyper-obvious and explicitly defined, boiling down political action by women to being and behaving. Meanwhile, women were not often afforded an opportunity to contribute to coding those laws that they were subject to (Charrad, 2001; Sonbol, 1996). This contradictory status of being visible but voiceless remains a recurring characteristic among legal codes of post-Ottoman territories, where women occupied a pivotal role within national identity yet were simultaneously barred from legal authority. We must recall here that these processes are still relevant to contemporary society. Ongoing controversies regarding abortion rights, legislating sexual harassment, and regulating fashion provoke passionate political debate, attesting to the degree to which women's bodies continue to be a central site of conflict between legal regulation and moral imperative. In concert with feminist theory, gender alterations necessitate transformations of legal institutions, no less than a rethinking of terms like citizenship, subjectivity, and value granted to the body in legal discourse.

Conclusion

The complicated dynamic between sharia, secularism, and gender reform within territories once under Ottoman authority demonstrates that legal institutions operate not just as focal points of authority but as ideologically infused constructions. Those constructions are informed by and shape variant readings associated with religious rule, national identity, and conceptions of citizenship. Within the unique contexts of

Turkey, Egypt, and Tunisia, programmes focussed on legal change after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire attempted to re-establish both moral and symbolic foundations to the nation-state, all during reconfigurations to alter conceptions of judicial power. The combined understanding of women, especially with reference to physical autonomy, became a central feature within those reconfigurations, operating as a key juncture where variant readings associated with modernity, authenticity, and sovereignty converged.

It cannot be doubted that reforms have improved access to civil rights, education, and constitutional protection for women. Nevertheless, those reforms simultaneously provided space for new kinds of repression, replacing religious patriarchy with authoritarian kinds of patriarchal rule. In every case, political authority's legitimacy has been tested by allusion to the female body: regardless of whether unveiled or covered, located within public or private spheres, or displaying discipline or autonomy. This paper identifies a problematic double standard—if legal discourse purportedly frees up women, it simultaneously sets to work to use them, as their bodies are called upon to serve to establish ideological purity.

Additionally, the binary framing of secularism and sharia, oft-cited within reforms, reflects a problematic tendency to simplify sophisticated concepts and fan political polarisation. Examining case materials from Tunisia and Egypt, across historical and present-day scenarios, demonstrates that Islamic and secular models contain internal variety and are susceptible to diverse readings. Sharia and secularism are not inherently emblems of liberation or sheer subjugation, but rather both bodies of law have the potential to further or constrain gender justice

depending on the prevailing political environments and interpretative approaches.

Reforms should enable greater legal advancement within the domestic legal systems of regions formerly under the Ottoman Empire during the thirteenth century, while at the same time promoting an atmosphere that will support legal pluralism, democratic accountability, and robust interpretative debate. Sharia, therefore, should be newly interpreted not as a fixed or monolithic entity but rather as a dynamic moral-legal system that can revisit its foundational principles with reference to new developments. At the same time, the principles of secularism need to be examined in terms of their professed commitments to equality and autonomy.

Women should no longer be seen as peripheral or subservient actors within discursive processes that shape legal change. Personal stories, personal narratives, and conceptual perspectives should be central to efforts towards change. In taking such a view, the campaign departs from dominant secular paradigms of feminism, thus foregrounding religious women who have been excluded from religious and feminist agendas. The path towards gender change should neither ignore religious identity nor apply critical Western models of legal change uncritically; instead, it should promote original, critical, and dialogical strategies, foregrounding a commitment to global rights but being sensitive to culture-specific moral norms.

Post-Ottoman societies move beyond the legacies of fragmentation and forge a path toward a gender-sensitive legal system of justice that is pluralist, participatory, and transformative. Such an end may be achieved

by putting in place concrete mechanisms that enfold these principles in practice. Legislatively, it may involve reviewing personal status laws to ensure gender equality, creating independent institutions for implementation monitoring, and encouraging public discourse featuring a diversity of views. Especially those of religiously observant women, who are so commonly excluded from dominant feminist narratives.

Educational programs, training of the judiciary, and policymaking should work toward enabling citizens as actors in the legislative sphere, rather than seeing them as passive recipients of the law. Post-Ottoman regimes can create legitimate and responsive legal systems that are sensitive to the complexities of late-modern society by encouraging inter-paradigmatic dialogue between secular and religious frameworks and promoting an interpretively adaptive sharia alongside constitutional guarantees. Such reforms would go beyond symbolic gestures to result in a fundamental restructuring of the law as a space for inclusion, accountability, and genuine gender justice.

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CURRENCY AND SOVEREIGNTY: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF A BRICS COMMON CURRENCY AND THE CONTESTATION OF DOLLAR HEGEMONY

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Abstract

The BRICS proposal for a common currency functions primarily as a geopolitical signal rather than a purely macroeconomic ambition. Drawing on theoretical concepts of international political economy and international relations, this academic essay assesses the initiative through the lenses of monetary sovereignty, structural power, and global governance contestation. It argues that the proposal simultaneously challenges dollar hegemony and exposes intra-BRICS asymmetries, particularly China's strategic dominance. Framed as a contested political process rather than a technical exercise in monetary integration, the BRICS currency project reflects broader struggles over sovereignty, South-South cooperation, and the reconfiguration of power in an evolving multipolar order.

Keywords: BRICS, Dollar hegemony, Monetary sovereignty, Currency politics, De-dollarisation

Introduction

The dominance of the US (United States) dollar as the global reserve currency has long been a cornerstone of the international monetary system, conferring disproportionate structural power to the United States (Cohen, 2005; Kirshner, 2008). This exorbitant privilege enables the US to run persistent deficits, shape global liquidity, and exert political influence through extraterritorial sanctions (Eichengreen, 2011). In response, the BRICS bloc comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa has increasingly called for a transformation of the global financial order, viewing dollar hegemony as a source of asymmetry, dependency, and vulnerability. The proposal for a BRICS common currency reflects both a desire for monetary sovereignty and a broader strategic effort to reconfigure global monetary governance in favour of a more multipolar and equitable system (Ocampo, 2017; Ban & Blyth, 2013). For many BRICS countries, especially Russia and China, dollar dependence is not only economically costly but also politically restrictive, exacerbated by sanctions and financial exclusion.

From a political economy perspective, the BRICS currency initiative is not merely a technical monetary reform but a geopolitical act of contestation. Drawing from structuralist and critical international political economy frameworks, the global dollar system is viewed as a hierarchical regime that entrenches core-periphery relations and undermines the policy autonomy of emerging economies (Li, 2023; Gallagher, 2015). However, despite the rhetoric of South-South solidarity, intra-BRICS divergences ranging from macroeconomic heterogeneity to strategic mistrust pose serious obstacles to monetary integration (Armijo & Katada, 2015; Johnston, 2019). The feasibility of

a common currency thus remains uncertain, potentially serving more as a symbolic assertion of multipolarity than a short-term institutional reality. Unlike the Eurozone, the BRICS lack the institutional infrastructure, fiscal integration, and historical convergence that underpinned the euro project. Moreover, the heterogeneity of their economies, differing levels of capital account openness, and national priorities complicate the design of a credible, stable, and widely accepted joint currency. These constraints suggest that the proposal is as much a geopolitical signal as a concrete economic plan—an exercise in strategic positioning within the shifting tectonics of global finance.

This paper critically examines the implications of the BRICS common currency initiative by situating it within three intersecting frameworks: (1) geopolitical contestation and the decline of dollar hegemony; (2) dynamics of currency sovereignty and regional monetary cooperation; and (3) the developmental implications for member states and the broader Global South. It further explores whether the BRICS currency idea is a viable counter-hegemonic strategy or a symbolic manoeuvre within the broader struggle for reforming global financial governance. Through a synthesis of theoretical insights, institutional analysis, and case studies, this study contributes to ongoing debates about the future of the international monetary order in an increasingly multipolar world.

Sovereignty, Structural Power, and the Global Monetary Order

Monetary power lies at the heart of global order, shaping how sovereignty is exercised and contested (Cohen, 2008). This section explores how the BRICS currency initiative reflects broader tensions in the global system—between dependence and autonomy, hegemony and

resistance, and the institutional structures that mediate them. We intend to analyse the monetary sovereignty and the postcolonial condition, the dollar's structural power and sanctions regime, hegemony, multipolarity, and monetary consideration.

a) Monetary Sovereignty and the Postcolonial Condition

Monetary sovereignty refers to the authority of a state to issue its currency and manage monetary policy independently. This is often considered a fundamental attribute of national sovereignty. However, for many postcolonial states, this ideal has remained elusive due to historical, structural, and geopolitical constraints. Upon gaining independence, many former colonies inherited financial systems deeply embedded in colonial infrastructures, including currency boards and fixed exchange rate regimes tied to the currencies of their former colonisers, effectively limiting their control over domestic economic policy (Bonizzi et al., 2020; Özekin & Sune, 2023).

Even after formal independence, many countries, such as countries of Latin America and South Asia, found themselves trapped in a global financial architecture dominated by institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. These institutions, while ostensibly aimed at fostering development and macroeconomic stability, often imposed structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) in the 1980s and 1990s that significantly curtailed domestic policy autonomy. In South Asia, for instance, India's 1991 balance of payments crisis led to IMF intervention that mandated liberalisation, deregulation, and privatisation, reshaping the country's economic trajectory along neoliberal lines (Hopewell, 2016). Similarly, in Latin America, countries

like Argentina and Bolivia undertook IMF-backed reforms that prioritised debt servicing and fiscal discipline over social spending, exacerbating inequality and weakening state capacity. These policies reflected and reinforced asymmetries in global financial governance, where the voice and vote of debtor nations remain marginal compared to that of major shareholders in these institutions, especially the United States (Helleiner, 2008). Such conditionalities often restricted domestic monetary flexibility in favour of austerity, inflation targeting, and capital account liberalisation. This created a persistent form of 'monetary dependency' or 'monetary neocolonialism' wherein states in the Global South remained structurally subordinated to the interests and disciplines of the Global North (Ndikumana & Boyce, 2011; Li, 2023). The centrality of the US dollar in trade, reserves, and global payments has compounded this dependency, forcing postcolonial economies to accumulate dollar reserves to stabilise exchange rates, service external debt, and maintain investor confidence—often at the expense of domestic development objectives (Ashman et al., 2011). Within this context, the BRICS initiatives toward de-dollarisation and proposals for a common currency represent not only a pragmatic attempt at economic diversification but also a symbolic act of postcolonial resistance, aimed at reclaiming monetary space and reducing reliance on a global system that has long marginalised their policy autonomy (Armijo & Roberts, 2009). These efforts reflect a broader struggle to reassert sovereign control in a system historically structured to maintain dependency and discipline in the periphery.

b) The Dollar's Structural Power and Sanctions Regime

The global dominance of the US dollar represents a powerful form of structural power, enabling the United States to shape the rules of international finance to its advantage (Strange, 1988). This monetary hegemony allows the dollar to function not only as the primary medium for international trade, debt issuance, and reserve holdings but also as a geopolitical tool wielded through what Eric Helleiner (2008) terms 'monetary statecraft'. The US leverages this power most visibly through its expansive sanctions regime, operated via the Treasury Department and the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), which exploits the dollar's centrality in global payment systems to enforce economic exclusion. With most global transactions relying on dollar-clearing systems and Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) infrastructure, countries such as Iran, Venezuela, North Korea, and more recently, Russia have faced crippling financial isolation, exacerbated by the freezing of Russia's $300 billion in foreign exchange reserves in 2022 (Sokołek et al., 2023; Drezner, 2015). These sanctions often produce wide-ranging spillovers, affecting trade, investment, and macroeconomic stability far beyond their immediate targets (Fredona, 2022). For BRICS nations, the coercive capacity embedded in dollar primacy highlights a deep asymmetry that undermines economic sovereignty and exposes their economies to extraterritorial US control (Chin & Gallagher, 2019). Consequently, these states have intensified de-dollarisation efforts through bilateral trade in local currencies, development of parallel payment systems like Russia's System for Transfer of Financial Messages and China's Cross-Border Interbank Payment System, and the ambitious call for a BRICS common currency. These strategies reflect more than

transactional recalibration. They constitute a deliberate challenge to a dollar-centred order that institutionalises hierarchy, enforces compliance, and limits the strategic autonomy of emerging powers.

c) Hegemony, Multipolarity, and Monetary Contestation

The global monetary system has long reflected the broader distribution of geopolitical power, with the US dollar at the centre of a hegemonic order established in the aftermath of World War II and institutionalised through the Bretton Woods system. Dollar hegemony, while initially stabilising, has increasingly been criticised for reinforcing unipolarity and enabling the United States to exercise disproportionate influence over global trade, finance, and security (Kirshner, 2008; Eichengreen, 2011). The ability to run persistent deficits, impose extraterritorial sanctions, and shape international liquidity flows are hallmarks of what Cohen (2005) terms the structural power of currency. In this context, the rise of BRICS represents a critical moment of monetary contestation—an attempt to pluralise monetary authority in a way that reflects the broader shift toward geopolitical multipolarity (Ban & Blyth, 2013). These emerging powers challenge the legitimacy of a system wherein a single national currency serves as the *de facto* global reserve, calling instead for a more diversified and representative order. Efforts to develop alternative financial infrastructures such as the BRICS Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), the New Development Bank (NDB), and discussions around a BRICS common currency must thus be understood not only in economic terms but as part of a larger project to reconfigure global governance in line with post-Western multipolar realities (Cooper, 2017; Armijo & Roberts, 2009). Monetary contestation, in this light, is not merely about financial architecture but

also about reclaiming agency, rebalancing structural hierarchies, and challenging the ideological foundations of dollar-based globalisation.

Internal Contradictions: Political Asymmetry within BRICS

Despite shared aspirations to challenge Western dominance, the BRICS coalition is marked by deep internal differences, particularly in terms of political asymmetry, strategic priorities, and economic scale. China's dominance, competing nations, institutional weakness, and governance vacuum undermine cohesive monetary cooperation. These asymmetries raise critical questions about the feasibility of institutional convergence, collective leadership, and the equitable governance of any proposed common currency or financial infrastructure, thereby complicating the bloc's vision of a unified, multipolar monetary alternative.

a) China's Dominance and Strategic Ambiguity

China's dominance within the BRICS grouping presents both an opportunity and a challenge for any effort toward monetary coordination or a common currency. As the world's second-largest economy and largest trading partner for most BRICS members, China possesses disproportionate financial and geopolitical influence within the bloc. This asymmetry has led to concerns that BRICS initiatives may be subsumed under China's broader geoeconomic strategy, particularly the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the internationalisation of the renminbi (RMB), which have often advanced unilaterally rather than through multilateral BRICS platforms (Subacchi, 2017). By favouring bilateral agreements and advancing institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Cross-border Interbank

Payment System (CIPS) outside of BRICS structures, China tends to follow a form of selective multilateralism. This approach allows it to further its geoeconomic goals, but often leaves limited room for genuinely shared decision-making among its BRICS partners (Armijo & Roberts, 2009).

While China rhetorically supports multipolarity and South-South solidarity, its policy approach reveals a strategic pragmatism. China retains control over critical monetary instruments such as exchange rate management, capital controls, and the regulation of cross-border financial flows, particularly through the selective liberalisation of its capital account. This allows China to balance rhetorical commitments with national economic imperatives. This complicates trust and consensus-building within BRICS (Helleiner & Kirshner, 2014). Furthermore, China's centralised political structure, lack of institutional transparency, and preference for bilateralism over formalised multilateralism reflect a broader strategy of controlled multilateralism. The PRC engages selectively with multilateral forums while advancing core interests through unilateral and state-led initiatives like the BRI (Hopewell, 2015). In this context, China's use of bilateralism acts as a deliberate tactic within a broader unilateral approach, enabling it to assert influence on its terms while evading the obligations of collective decision-making. This dual strategy tends to exacerbate imbalances within BRICS, raising doubts about the fairness and unity of South–South financial cooperation. India's strategic mistrust of China, intensified by military confrontations, trade asymmetries, and regional competition, further undermines prospects for cohesive monetary cooperation (Pant & Passi, 2017; Stuenkel, 2015). These power imbalances raise fears that a BRICS currency or payment framework may

evolve into a China-centric financial order, rather than the egalitarian, multipolar alternative envisioned by other members, thus risking the reproduction of hierarchies under the guise of de-dollarisation.

b) Conflicting National Interests and the Limits of Convergence

Conflicting national interests among BRICS members pose significant obstacles to deeper monetary and institutional convergence, despite their shared interest in challenging Western-dominated financial structures. Each member of the bloc pursues distinct national development strategies, geopolitical objectives, and regional ambitions, often shaped by deeply rooted historical identities and domestic political imperatives. India's 'strategic autonomy' doctrine and suspicion of Chinese expansionism, Brazil's oscillation between regional leadership and domestic populist politics, and South Africa's domestic developmental constraints and regional commitments contribute to divergent priorities that undermine collective policy coherence (Kornegay & Bohler-Muller, 2013; Pant, 2013). In the Asian context, the post-pandemic resurgence of nationalist and protectionist rhetoric has intensified calls for economic self-reliance and monetary sovereignty, particularly among major emerging powers like India and China. Consequently, enduring concerns over currency autonomy, uneven development, and geopolitical rivalries have limited the scope for institutional convergence (Hopewell, 2014; Helleiner & Kirshner, 2014). As a result, initiatives such as the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralisation (CMIM) or the BRICS Contingent Reserve Arrangement reflect more decentralised and sovereignty-preserving models of monetary cooperation, rather than supranational institutionalisation. These tensions are especially pronounced between India and China, whose rivalry extends from

contested borders to overlapping institutional spheres of influence, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the International Solar Alliance (ISA), making mutual trust and cooperative institutional engagement difficult to achieve (Stuenkel, 2015). Even within economic coordination forums like the BRICS NDB or CRA, national interests frequently take precedence over collective strategy, revealing the limits of convergence in a bloc without a shared normative foundation or integrative political identity (Stephen & Parízek, 2018). Thus, nationalism, while a driving force of postcolonial agency, simultaneously acts as a centrifugal force that restricts the bloc's capacity to function as a coherent counter-hegemonic coalition.

c) Institutional Weakness and Governance Vacuum

Despite ambitious rhetoric, BRICS continues to suffer from institutional weaknesses, such as the absence of a formal charter, lack of a permanent secretariat, limited enforcement mechanisms, and asymmetrical influence among member states, which collectively contribute to a 'governance vacuum'—a situation where there is a lack of effective institutional architecture or agreed-upon rules to facilitate collective decision-making, policy implementation, and accountability. This institutional fragility undermines its ability to establish a credible and cohesive alternative to the Western-led global financial order. BRICS remains an informal, consensus-driven coalition lacking enforceable commitments, bureaucratic depth, or policy harmonisation (Arnold, 2025). The NDB and the CRA, while symbolically important, operate with limited capitalisation, constrained lending capacity, and minimal coordination with broader BRICS macroeconomic policy, revealing a gap between ambition and institutional delivery (Brutsch & Papa, 2013;

Humphrey, 2020). Moreover, there is no permanent BRICS secretariat or centralised governance structure capable of setting agendas, resolving disputes, or implementing long-term monetary strategy, leaving coordination *ad hoc* and often reactive. These structural deficits are compounded by divergent national regulatory regimes, incompatible monetary frameworks, and differing levels of financial openness among members, particularly China's capital controls and India's floating exchange rate system. As a result, collective action is often hindered by path dependencies and domestic constraints, limiting BRICS' capacity to operationalise its vision of a multipolar monetary system (Roberts et al., 2017). Without deeper institutionalisation, creation of enforceable rules, transparent decision-making structures, and mechanisms for equitable burden-sharing, BRICS risks becoming a symbolic alliance rather than a functional counterweight to existing global financial institutions.

The Symbolic and Strategic Dimensions of Currency Creation

For emerging powers like BRICS, proposing a common currency represents a deliberate assertion of autonomy, identity, and geopolitical ambition. It challenges the ideological foundations of dollar hegemony while signalling a collective intent to reshape the norms of global financial governance.

a) Currency as Diplomacy and South-South Solidarity

Currency initiatives within BRICS are increasingly framed not just as economic instruments, but as tools of diplomacy and expressions of South-South solidarity. For emerging powers that have historically been

marginalised in Western-dominated financial systems, cooperation in monetary affairs offers a platform for asserting postcolonial agency and deepening political ties independent of the US-led institutions (Cooper et al., 2013; Cooper & Farooq, 2013). Initiatives such as local currency trade agreements, cross-border digital payment systems, and the potential creation of a BRICS common currency are emblematic of a shared desire to promote mutual development, reduce vulnerability to dollar volatility, and enhance transactional sovereignty. These efforts aim to foster an alternative form of globalism rooted in multipolarity, regional autonomy, and equitable economic relations—an ideological departure from the structural conditionalities and asymmetries historically embedded in IMF and World Bank operations (Mielniczuk, 2013; Hopewell, 2016). By institutionalising financial cooperation, BRICS nations attempt to recast monetary governance as a space of inclusive negotiation rather than hierarchical enforcement, reinforcing diplomatic ties among emerging economies. While significant obstacles remain, such as internal political divergence and structural asymmetries, currency cooperation represents a potent form of 'soft balancing', enabling BRICS to contest US monetary dominance through peaceful and constructive institution-building (Engel, 2019). Thus, currency acts as both a diplomatic medium and a symbolic node in the broader project of reimagining global governance from the perspective of the Global South.

b) De-Dollarisation as Political Performance

De-dollarisation within the BRICS framework operates not only as a macroeconomic adjustment but also as a form of political performance—an intentional assertion of sovereignty and resistance to the entrenched asymmetries of the global financial order. The act of

conducting trade, particularly in strategic commodities like oil and agricultural goods, in local currencies or a proposed BRICS unit, even on a limited scale, serves a performative function by visibly challenging the ideological and institutional dominance of the US dollar (Kirshner, 2008; Cohen, 2005). For energy exporters such as Russia and Brazil, pricing commodities in non-dollar terms, such as the Rupee-Ruble trade mechanism or Russia's shift to the yuan and ruble in oil and gas trade. This signals both practical diversification and symbolic defiance of Western-centric monetary norms. These acts of monetary autonomy, while often constrained by market realities, resonate strongly in the Global South, where many states associate dollar dependence with a legacy of conditionality, surveillance, and policy subordination imposed through institutions like the IMF and the US Treasury (Helleiner, 2014; Siddiqui, 2024). Moreover, the strategic staging of de-dollarisation initiatives through high-profile bilateral agreements, currency swap arrangements, and public declarations at BRICS summits allows its members to construct a shared counter-hegemonic identity, even in the absence of deep institutional integration.

As Kirshner (2003) notes, monetary policy can serve expressive as well as instrumental purposes, and BRICS' push for alternatives to dollar invoicing, however incremental, functions as a diplomatic signal of emerging multipolarity and a collective challenge to the legitimacy of unilateral monetary power. Thus, de-dollarisation is not merely a technocratic adjustment, but a symbolic and strategic articulation of autonomy, solidarity, and dissent.

c) Strategic Signalling to the West

BRICS monetary cooperation, particularly the discourse around a common currency and de-dollarisation, serves as a calculated act of strategic signalling to the West, conveying discontent with the prevailing global financial order and asserting the bloc's geopolitical agency. These actions are not merely technocratic policy proposals, but also communicative gestures designed to challenge the structural and symbolic dominance of the US dollar in international trade, finance, and sanctions enforcement (Cohen, 2006; Stuenkel, 2015). In the wake of Western-led sanctions regimes, most notably the exclusion of Russia from Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) and the freezing of its foreign exchange reserves, BRICS states have grown increasingly wary of the vulnerabilities associated with dollar dependence. The creation of institutions such as the NDB and the CRA, along with recent moves to settle bilateral trade in local currencies, is meant to signal to the US and its allies that monetary hegemony is neither stable nor uncontested (Roberts et al., 2017). These initiatives also serve a domestic and regional audience, demonstrating to Global South partners that BRICS can articulate a sovereign financial vision free from Western coercion or conditionality (Helleiner, 2014). Moreover, by floating the idea of a new reserve currency, BRICS states aim to challenge the dominant norms underpinning the dollar-centric global monetary system. In doing so, BRICS states leverage monetary discourse as a diplomatic tool to negotiate greater influence within existing institutions such as the IMF and the G20 (Ban & Blyth, 2013). These BRICS states strategically deploy monetary discourse not merely as an economic proposition, but as a diplomatic instrument to question the legitimacy of existing hierarchies in global financial governance. Ultimately, this

signalling encapsulates a broader contest over the legitimacy and equity of global financial governance, where monetary innovation becomes a stage for geopolitical expression and multipolar ambition.

Theoretical Futures: Pathways without Union

Despite aspirations for a unified BRICS currency, the bloc may instead pursue alternative futures that emphasise monetary cooperation without full currency union. These theoretical pathways, ranging from digital settlement platforms and bilateral swap networks to enhanced use of local currencies, reflect pragmatic adaptations to political, institutional, and economic asymmetries. Such models allow BRICS to challenge dollar hegemony incrementally, preserving national sovereignty while fostering systemic pluralism. This section explores the strategic viability of non-union monetary architectures in a fragmented, multipolar world.

a) Institutional Multipolarity without a Currency Union

Institutional multipolarity without a formal currency union offers BRICS a flexible route to reshape global monetary governance as it enables member states to coordinate monetary settlements, such as local currency trade settlements and reserve pooling. Such initiatives confront the steep political costs of sovereignty loss or the technical challenges of macroeconomic convergence, unified fiscal policy, and shared monetary institutions. By knocking down the rigidities of a currency union model, BRICS preserves national policy autonomy while advancing a pluralist monetary order that incrementally undermines the dominance of the dollar-based system. Rather than emulating the Eurozone's supranational model, BRICS members can strengthen regional payment

systems such as India's proposed integration of the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) for cross-border settlements. These states further emulate local currency trade settlements like the BRICS NDB and CRA, and multilateral financial platforms to incrementally reduce dollar dependence (Ocampo, 2017; Fritz & Mühlich, 2019). As seen in earlier examples such as the European Currency Unit (ECU) and the IMF's Special Drawing Rights (SDR), currency cooperation can take the form of a non-circulating unit of account used for trade settlement, reserve diversification, and financial coordination (Schaberg, 2001; Boughton, 2001). BRICS could emulate this model by creating a digital currency basket to facilitate intra-group trade and reduce reliance on the US dollar, thereby fostering institutional multipolarity without requiring full monetary unification. Coordinated governance mechanisms, such as the BRICS Contingent Reserve Arrangement and the New Development Bank, already provide platforms for structured cooperation (Fritz & Mühlich, 2019).

b) Digital Platforms and the Fragmentation of Monetary Sovereignty

The future of monetary contestation may increasingly lie in digital infrastructure rather than formal treaties. With all BRICS countries currently piloting Central Bank Digital Currencies (CBDCs), the bloc is well-positioned to develop an interoperable, blockchain-based clearing system that could bypass SWIFT and reduce exposure to Western-led secondary sanctions (Auer et al., 2021). Such a system would offer not only technical efficiency but also a strategic assertion of digital financial sovereignty, enabling BRICS states to insulate cross-border transactions from geopolitical risk, such as the risk of monitoring, interception, or

disruption by Western-dominated financial infrastructures such as SWIFT and the US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). This form of monetary surveillance involves not just the detection of digital financial trails, but the capacity of Western powers to freeze assets, block transactions, and exert extraterritorial control over payment flows. This compromises the strategic autonomy of non-Western states such as Russia and China. This shift signals a fragmentation of traditional monetary sovereignty, wherein digital platforms become instruments of both autonomy and contestation. By embedding resistance in code and decentralised architecture, BRICS could redefine how financial alignment is institutionalised in the Global South (Fahad & Bulut, 2024; Chatterjee & Naka, 2022). In this emerging landscape, sovereignty is no longer merely legislated—it is encrypted, programmable, and increasingly infrastructural in form.

c) Global Governance in a Fragmented Monetary Order

The rise of a BRICS-centred financial bloc, however embryonic or symbolic, signals a gradual fragmentation of global monetary governance and a shift away from the unipolar dominance of the dollar. As BRICS countries experiment with alternative reserve units, local currency trade settlements, and regional clearing systems, the architecture of monetary authority begins to evolve into a more 'polycentric' system marked by overlapping regimes and contested norms (Ocampo, 2017). This trend challenges the hierarchical role historically played by institutions such as the IMF, Bank for International Settlements (BIS), and SWIFT, which may increasingly be pressured to accommodate non-Western initiatives—not necessarily because BRICS alternatives offer immediate economic substitutes, but because maintaining legitimacy and relevance

in an evolving multipolar system depends on retaining the participation and trust of the Global South (Chatterjee & Naka, 2022).

As emerging powers grow in systemic importance and assert demands for more inclusive governance, Western-dominated institutions risk reputational erosion and geopolitical fragmentation if they fail to adapt (Helleiner, 2014; Shaw, 2014). The incentive centres around accommodating less about direct economic competition and more about preserving institutional authority in a contested global order. In this emerging global monetary order, we see not a wholesale replacement of dollar-centric rule-setting, but a gradual shift toward negotiation, selective accommodation, and institutional pluralism—driven in part by the assertiveness of emerging powers and in part by the defensive recalibrations of established actors (Gallagher & Kozul-Wright, 2022). Rather than replacing the current system wholesale, BRICS-led monetary initiatives reconfigure it from within, reflecting broader transitions in global power and a normative contestation over what constitutes legitimacy and authority in international finance. At the same time, established powers such as the United States and the European Union have responded to geopolitical and economic pressures by recalibrating their strategies, as seen in the US turn toward protectionism under the Trump administration and the EU's push for strategic autonomy in trade and finance. These developments collectively signal a more fragmented and contested international financial order, where authority is negotiated rather than imposed, and legitimacy is subject to increasing debate across multiple centres of power.

Conclusion

The idea of a BRICS common currency is not merely a financial proposal but a deeply political expression of sovereignty, resistance, and institutional ambition in a world where monetary power has long been asymmetrically distributed. While the formation of a full-fledged currency union remains structurally and politically unlikely in the near term, the very articulation of such a project reflects growing dissatisfaction with the unipolar dollar order and signals the emergence of new centres of monetary agency. Through mechanisms such as local currency settlements, digital financial platforms, and multilateral reserve arrangements, BRICS states are forging pathways toward institutional multipolarity, recasting monetary cooperation not as a replication of Western models but as a pluralistic and adaptive response to structural exclusion.

This evolving monetary strategy also reflects broader shifts in the global order, where contestation increasingly takes place through infrastructure, code, and institutional layering rather than formal treaty-making. The de-dollarisation efforts and the construction of parallel financial systems by BRICS are emblematic of a geopolitical recalibration wherein currency becomes a tool of diplomacy, a symbol of autonomy, and an instrument of developmental assertion. However, internal contradictions ranging from competing nationalisms and strategic ambiguity to institutional fragility continue to constrain the bloc's coherence and collective capacity.

Ultimately, the political economy of a BRICS common currency lies not in replacing the dollar outright, but in decentralising the sources of

monetary power and expanding the normative and operational space for alternative arrangements. As monetary sovereignty is increasingly redefined in the context of global digitalisation, fragmentation, and polycentric governance, the BRICS bloc, despite its limitations, represents one of the most consequential attempts to reshape the future of global finance from the perspective of the Global South.

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GREEN CITIZENSHIP AND THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION: ENVIRONMENTAL DISSENT IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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Abstract

This essay analyses the paradoxical shift in India where environmental movements, once vital to participatory democracy, are now reframed as impediments to national development and security. This trajectory signals a crisis of green citizenship, characterised by the systemic exclusion of dissenting ecological voices. The paper argues that democratic space is actively being reconstructed as the state imposes a technocratic, state-controlled modality of climate action through discursive reframing and repressive legal measures. Conversely, the analysis emphasises the resilience and creative strategies of ecological counterpublics in constructing alternative democratic practices. Ultimately, achieving genuine climate justice demands a strong, inclusive democratic space that actively legitimises dissent and grants citizens meaningful participation in India's environmental future.

Keywords: Green citizenship, Environmental dissent, Counterpublics, State repression, Environmental justice

Introduction

India has been going through some very deep and multidimensional challenges posed by the climate crisis, which now calls for conscious, comprehensive action among all sectors. Considering how much India has been putting forward bold climate commitments to various international forums (MoEFCC, 2022), this, inside the country, is accompanied by a visible contraction of democratic space for environmental movements and dissenter voices (Dubash, 2013). India thus appears at a crossroads in its democratic journey, where the paramount rights of citizens meet ecological sustainability.

Here lies the argument for 'green citizenship': by definition, it is more than just the citizens' right to a healthy environment. It suggests that citizens also have the inalienable right to participate meaningfully alongside shaping the environmental futures that affect them beyond policies that govern those futures (Schlosberg, 2007).

These have historically been framed as exemplary instances of participatory democracy in India. Community-led forest protection by the Chipko Movement or the vehement opposition to large-scale industrial projects is an example of participatory democracy (Baviskar, 2005). These movements often act as important counterpublics contesting the development paradigm and advocating the rights of marginalised communities. However, in the last decade or so, there has been a visible change in the politics surrounding the legitimacy of environmental dissent, with its portrayal coming more and more in terms of its perceived hindrance to national development and security

(Thakurta, 2019). It is argued in this paper that the ideological shift and subsequent policy developments point to a more profound political transformation, where the beginning stages of a crisis of green citizenship are marked, in which dissenting ecological voices are systemically extirpated from the public sphere. By interrogating this transformation in terms of political theory and various salient examples, this paper tracks the active restructuring of democratic space to delegitimise ecological counterpublics in favour of a technocratic state-led model of climate action. The subsequent sections will present a theoretical charnel house of citizenship, public space, and dissent. They will also proceed to examine the reframing of environmental activism, the instruments of repressive governance, and finally, the resilience of ecological counterpublics against the backdrop of ever-encroaching democratic space.

Theoretical Framework: Citizenship, Public Space, and the Politics of Dissent

To comprehend the evolving dynamics of environmental dissent in India, it is essential to ground our analysis in key political theories concerning citizenship, the public sphere, and the inherent role of contestation in democracy. Hannah Arendt (1998), in her seminal work *The Human Condition*, posits that true political action, the very essence of citizenship, occurs within the public sphere—a space where individuals can appear, speak, and act in concert to shape their common world. For Arendt, this public realm is distinct from the private sphere of the household and the social sphere of economic activity; it is where freedom is realised through collective deliberation and action. Environmental movements, by bringing ecological concerns into public

debate and demanding collective responses, inherently embody this Arendtian ideal of political action, transforming private anxieties about environmental degradation into public, shared concerns.

However, the notion of a singular, open public sphere is challenged by scholars like Chantal Mouffe, who advocates for an 'agonistic' model of democracy. Mouffe argues that healthy democracies do not suppress conflict but rather provide legitimate channels for its expression. Political life, she contends, is characterised by an unavoidable tension between adversaries—those who share a common symbolic space but disagree on its organisation (Mouffe, 2000). From this perspective, environmental dissent is not a pathology to be cured but a vital sign of democratic vitality. When such contestation is systematically suppressed or delegitimised, it indicates a departure from agonistic principles, potentially pushing legitimate disagreements into antagonistic forms that threaten democratic stability.

In the Indian context, the distinction between 'civil society' and 'political society', as articulated by Partha Chatterjee, offers a crucial lens through which to view environmental activism (Chatterjee, 2004). Chatterjee suggests that while civil society operates within the formal institutions and norms of liberal democracy, political society comprises populations and their struggles that fall outside these established channels, often engaging with the state through informal, extra-legal, or direct action. Many environmental activists, particularly those from tribal or rural areas directly impacted by resource extraction, find themselves operating within this 'political society'. Their claims, often rooted in subsistence rights and traditional practices, are frequently seen by the state as outside

the legitimate 'civil' discourse of policy-making, making them vulnerable to being framed as disruptive or illegal.

Furthermore, Nancy Fraser's concept of 'subaltern counterpublics' offers a powerful framework for understanding how environmental movements create alternative discursive spaces (Fraser, 1990). These counterpublics emerge when marginalised groups, excluded from mainstream public spheres, create their own arenas for deliberation and the formation of collective opinion. Environmental movements, especially those representing indigenous communities or farmers, often develop their narratives, knowledge systems, and forms of communication to challenge the dominant logics of economic growth and state-led development. They offer alternative visions of environmental futures and societal organisation, thereby acting as critical sites of resistance against hegemonic power. Understanding these theoretical underpinnings is crucial for analysing how environmental movements in India occupy a liminal space, simultaneously attempting to engage with formal democratic processes whilst often being relegated to the margins or subjected to state suspicion (Talukdar, 2018).

From Citizen to Threat: The Reframing of Environmental Dissent

The historical narrative of environmental activism in India, once largely celebrated as an integral component of democratic participation, has undergone a significant ideological reframing in recent years. This shift has seen environmental dissent increasingly portrayed not as legitimate civic engagement but as a direct impediment to national development and, at times, even a threat to national security. This transformation is

not accidental; it is a deliberate discursive strategy employed by the state, amplified by certain media outlets and digital propaganda ecosystems—which include state-aligned social media accounts, information technology (IT) cells, networks of partisan news websites, and the selective use of internet regulations and control laws (Human Rights Watch, 2016)—to delegitimise ecological counterpublics and consolidate a particular vision of progress (Thakurta, 2019; Sainath, 2017).

This reframing did not emerge in a vacuum; its origins lie in the post-1991 era of economic liberalisation. While environmental movements of the preceding decades, such as the Chipko and Narmada Bachao Andolan, were, whilst contentious, largely understood within the framework of social justice and democratic rights, even garnering significant public and international sympathy (Baviskar, 2005; Roy & Martinez-Alier, 2019). With the state's subsequent prioritisation of rapid industrialisation and foreign investment, however, environmental regulations were increasingly framed as bureaucratic hurdles to economic growth. This ideological shift set the stage for the more aggressive 'anti-national' framing that characterises contemporary dissent. Recent instances, such as the targeting of young climate activist Disha Ravi in connection with the farmers' protests (Klein, 2021), or the framing of movements like Save Mollem in Goa as 'anti-national' (Human Rights Watch, 2016), exemplify this profound ideological shift. Crucially, the police action was immediately triggered by her alleged connection to the farmers' protests toolkit, but the state's choice to employ stringent national security provisions against a figure known for climate advocacy served to deliberately merge dissent, effectively sending a clear warning to the broader environmental space. These actions suggest a deliberate

attempt to criminalise environmental advocacy and associate it with broader narratives of sedition or foreign interference.

The language employed in this reframing is particularly potent. Terms such as 'urban naxals', 'anti-development', and 'foreign-funded' are frequently deployed to discredit environmental activists and their concerns (Fernandes, 2006). The 'urban naxal' label, originally used to describe alleged Maoist sympathisers, has been broadened to encompass a range of urban intellectuals and activists, including those involved in environmental causes, thereby associating legitimate dissent with extremism and internal security threats. Similarly, the 'anti-development' accusation is a powerful rhetorical tool, positioning environmental concerns as inherently opposed to economic growth and national aspirations. This narrative often simplifies complex ecological issues into a binary choice between progress and stagnation, effectively marginalising voices that advocate for alternative, sustainable development pathways.

A critical dimension of this reframing is the strategic deployment of the 'foreign-funded' accusation, a powerful discursive weapon used to cancel the legitimacy of an organisation or individual. The state consistently frames this as a matter of national security, arguing that foreign support for NGOs is used to subvert the country's economic productivity and derail industrial projects (TNN, 2014). However, this narrative is demonstrably a tool of political control, as seen in the government's targeted crackdowns that often fail to hold up to legal scrutiny. The most powerful example of this is the case against renowned environmental lawyer Ritwick Dutta. In 2023, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) initiated a high-profile case alleging he used foreign funds to stall

development. The allegations in the FIR have drawn notable criticism from legal commentators and journalists, who have publicly questioned the factual basis of the charges and the concrete evidence supporting the claims (Pardikar, 2023).

Instead of focusing on securing a conviction, the objective is to deliberately create a 'chilling effect' that forces activists and organisations into a state of legal and financial paralysis, thereby stifling their work. By associating organisations and individuals with labels like 'foreign-funded' or 'anti-national', the state effectively erodes their credibility in the public eye, isolating them from potential supporters and donors. Thus, the issue of foreign funding is not a simple binary; rather, it is a complex tool of governance used to strategically control and delegitimise dissent that falls outside the state's approved vision.

This reframing is not confined to official state discourse; it is actively propagated through various channels, including segments of mainstream media and sophisticated digital propaganda networks. The fundamental ethical mandate of journalism requires a clear commitment to objectivity and the distinction between 'public interest' and the commercial or political interests of the news organisation (Thakurta, 2019). However, platforms often amplify state narratives, selectively reporting on environmental protests in a manner that highlights disruption or alleged anti-national elements, whilst downplaying the substantive environmental and social justice concerns being raised (Thakurta, 2019). The mobilisation of public opinion against environmentalism is also a critical dimension of this strategy. Through the propagation of simplified narratives and the creation of polarised publics, a segment of the ruling party's base and broader society is systematically mobilised to view

environmental activists with suspicion or hostility. This is achieved through coordinated social media campaigns, often led by political IT cells, that employ pejorative labels to frame dissent as a direct challenge to the nation's economic aspirations and social order. This concerted effort to control the narrative actively restructures the public sphere, making it increasingly difficult for ecological counterpublics to articulate their claims and gain widespread support without facing significant delegitimisation.

Repressive Governance: Law, Surveillance, and the Criminalisation of Climate Activism

Beyond the discursive reframing of environmental dissent, the Indian state has increasingly deployed concrete legal and administrative tools to suppress climate activism, effectively criminalising forms of participation that challenge its developmental agenda. This repression is not an incidental outcome but a structured governance strategy designed to silence counter-narratives and consolidate state control over environmental policy. The incentive mechanisms guiding this strategy are deeply rooted in the state's pursuit of rapid economic growth, which is often intertwined with crony capitalism and the strategic prioritisation of projects for corporate interests (Palshikar, 2018). Large-scale infrastructure and industrial projects, in particular, are prioritised because they serve as tangible symbols of modernity and progress, crucial for gaining political support and electoral advantage. Environmental safeguards are systematically loosened to ensure the unimpeded progression of these projects, regardless of their ecological or social costs. For instance, the controversial Draft Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification of 2020 aimed to institutionalise post-facto

environmental clearances, effectively allowing projects to proceed without prior regulatory approval. If found in violation, companies could then get retrospective approval by only paying a penalty, which critics argue amounts to a 'pollute and pay' model that removes any real deterrent (Chhabra, 2025).

A primary instrument of this repressive governance has been the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA). Ostensibly designed to regulate foreign funding to non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the FCRA has been widely criticised for its arbitrary application. This arbitrariness stems from a lack of transparent and consistent criteria for suspending licenses, with organisations often facing severe restrictions based on vague terms like 'public interest' or 'national interest'. Prominent environmental NGOs, such as the Centre for Policy Research (CPR) and Greenpeace India, have faced suspension or cancellation of their FCRA licences, leading to a significant curtailment of their operations and research capabilities (Amnesty International, 2020). These actions effectively choke the financial lifelines of organisations that provide independent analysis and support grassroots movements, thereby limiting their ability to engage in the public sphere and hold the government accountable.

Furthermore, the state has increasingly resorted to stringent national security laws and digital surveillance to target environmental activists. The targeting of youth activists, in particular, appears to be a calculated strategy to deter future mobilisation. A prominent example is the arrests during the Aarey Forest protests in Mumbai, where young protesters were booked for peacefully demonstrating against the felling of trees for a metro shed (Singh, 2019). Beyond direct arrests, provisions within the

Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), originally intended for terrorism, have been invoked against individuals and youth organisations for their involvement in protests or online advocacy, demonstrating the broad and often vague interpretation of such laws to criminalise dissent (Amnesty International, 2020). Beyond direct legal action, revelations concerning the use of sophisticated surveillance tools, such as the Pegasus spyware—a military-grade tool that can infiltrate a mobile device without the user's knowledge—have raised serious concerns about the privacy and security of activists, journalists, and civil society leaders (Forbidden Stories & Amnesty International, 2021). Such surveillance acts as a powerful deterrent, undermining the freedom of association and expression that are fundamental to democratic participation.

The crackdown on specific protest movements further illustrates this pattern of repressive governance. Large-scale environmental agitations, particularly those against extractive projects, have faced swift and often forceful state responses. The protests against the proposed mining in Hasdeo Aranya in Chhattisgarh (Gupta, 2022) and the ongoing resistance to the expansion of coal mines exemplify how communities defending their land and livelihoods are met with police action, arrests, and legal battles. The tragic events at Tuticorin, where police firing during protests against the Vedanta copper smelter plant resulted in fatalities, serve as a stark reminder of the extreme measures employed to quell environmental dissent (UN Human Rights, 2018). These responses suggest that repression is not an incidental consequence of protests, but rather a structured governance strategy aimed at suppressing counter-narratives and ensuring the unimpeded progression of state-backed development projects, regardless of their ecological or social costs.

Ecological Counterpublics: Surviving and Resisting the Shrinking Space

Despite the formidable pressures of discursive delegitimisation and repressive governance, environmental movements in India demonstrate remarkable resilience, persisting and innovating in their efforts to challenge dominant paradigms and advocating for ecological justice. These movements, often operating as 'ecological counterpublics' in the sense articulated by Nancy Fraser, continue to create and sustain alternative democratic practices, even when formal public spheres are constrained. They represent a vital force for democratic participation, driven by localised grievances, and a commitment to alternative environmental futures.

The concept of counterpublics is particularly pertinent here, as it describes how marginalised groups, excluded from mainstream political discourse, forge their own arenas for deliberation and collective action (Fraser, 1990). In India, movements like Save Mollem in Goa, which mobilised against the double-tracking of railway lines and other infrastructure projects through ecologically sensitive areas, and the ongoing resistance in Hasdeo Aranya against coal mining, serve as powerful examples of such alternative democratic practices. These movements, often led by indigenous communities, articulate claims rooted in their traditional ecological knowledge, their dependence on natural resources, and their fundamental right to self-determination (Misra, 2021). Their resistance directly challenges the state's technocratic, top-down approach to development and climate action, offering a ground-up perspective that prioritises ecological integrity and community well-being.

In the face of shrinking formal spaces, environmental movements have increasingly adapted their strategies, leveraging informal networks and digital platforms to keep resistance alive. Social media, despite its vulnerabilities to surveillance and propaganda, has become an essential tool for disseminating information, mobilising support, and connecting disparate local struggles (Treré, 2019). The use of vernacular languages in online and offline communication allows these movements to resonate deeply with local populations, bypassing mainstream media filters and cultivating a sense of shared identity and purpose. For instance, the Narmada Bachao Andolan famously used folk songs in local dialects like Bhilali and Pawari to mobilise communities, a strategy mirrored in the ongoing Hasdeo Aranya movement, where protest songs and poetry are used to communicate grievances and strengthen resolve (Gaon Connection, 2022). This decentralised mobilisation, often driven by a core of dedicated activists and community leaders, enables rapid response to new threats and sustains long-term campaigns, even when faced with significant state pressure (Misra, 2021).

Furthermore, these ecological counterpublics are actively engaged in reclaiming public legitimacy through diverse forms of expression, including culture, art, and the articulation of localised ecological narratives. Folk songs, street plays, and visual art become powerful mediums for conveying environmental concerns, strengthening the collective memory of past struggles, and envisioning alternative futures. The Chipko Movement's iconic slogan was spoken in the Garhwali dialect of Hindi as a rallying cry that highlighted the invaluable ecological functions of forests beyond commercial timber (Guha, 2000). Another powerful example is the Appiko Movement in Karnataka, which,

inspired by Chipko, used street plays and songs in the Kannada language to protest commercial logging and promote afforestation (Hegde, 1983). These cultural forms not only build solidarity within affected communities but also communicate their messages to a broader public, often in ways that bypass the filters of conventional political discourse. By emphasising the intrinsic value of nature, the interconnectedness of human and ecological well-being, and the injustices inherent in destructive development models, these movements redefine ecological legitimacy from the ground up. Their persistence, despite the formidable challenges, underscores the enduring human desire for agency in shaping their environment and highlights the continuous, albeit often difficult, negotiation of democratic space in India.

Conclusion: Rethinking Climate Democracy

The analysis presented herein underscores a critical paradox within India's climate action narrative: whilst the nation positions itself as a leader in addressing the climate crisis on the global stage, the domestic democratic space essential for robust environmental governance is increasingly under pressure. Environmental movements in India, deeply rooted in historical struggles for resource justice and community rights, have consistently played a significant role in shaping public discourse and advocating for sustainable development. However, as demonstrated, this vital sphere for citizen engagement and dissent faces considerable constriction through a combination of policy dilution, direct state repression, and restrictive measures targeting civil society organisations.

The evolving regulatory landscape, often driven by the imperative of the 'ease of doing business', has systematically narrowed avenues for public

participation and transparency in environmental decision-making. Concurrently, the assertive response to grassroots protests and the tightening grip on non-governmental organisations have inhibited critical oversight and silenced diverse voices that are essential for a truly democratic and effective climate response. These pressures are not merely procedural; they carry profound implications for both the efficacy and the equity of India's climate action. When democratic space contracts, the ability to formulate adaptive and equitable policies diminishes, and the disproportionate burdens of environmental degradation continue to fall upon the most vulnerable communities, thereby undermining the very tenets of environmental justice.

Ultimately, genuine and effective climate action in a democratic framework demands not only ambitious targets but also, and crucially, a vibrant and protected space for civil society, dissent, and participatory governance. For India to navigate the complex challenges of climate change whilst upholding its democratic values, it is imperative to recognise and safeguard the indispensable role of environmental movements. Their sustained capacity to advocate, monitor, and mobilise is indispensable for promoting a climate-resilient and environmentally just future for all its citizens. Can there be climate justice without democratic inclusion? This essay posits that the answer is unequivocally negative; true climate justice, which addresses both ecological and social inequities, cannot be realised without a robust and inclusive democratic space where all citizens, especially the most vulnerable, can genuinely participate in shaping their collective environmental destiny.

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RELIGION, CONTENTION, AND SUBALTERN AGENCY: A GRAMSCIAN REAPPRAISAL

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Abstract

This paper questions the argument that religion, hitherto discarded as a tool of hegemonic domination, can strangely function as a modality of subaltern agency. Relying especially on Antonio Gramsci's Notebook 25, the paper contends that religion is neither altogether an 'opiate' nor a mere 'echo of ruling-class ideology', but rather a space of intense contention where domination and dissent coexist. Whereas most of the secondary literature simplifies Gramsci's subaltern to an economic identity 'coded as proletariat', the paper is interested in how the subaltern negotiates its contradictions around the double role of religion, which Dorothee Sölle has outlined as both 'apologia' and 'protest'.

Keywords: Subaltern agency, Gramsci, Religion, Hegemony, Common sense

Introduction

The present inquiry engages critically with the proposition that religion, far from being merely an instrument of repression but may also be a possible space of resistance and agency for subaltern (subordinate) collectivities. The term 'subaltern,' drawn from Antonio Gramsci's prison writings, refers to those social classes systematically excluded from institutional power [...] peasants, workers, and others whose collective experiences and struggles are often obscured in dominant historiography. Gramsci's conceptualisation of the subaltern, while emerging from a Marxist lexicon, does not collapse entirely into the category of the proletariat; rather, it presents a more nuanced terrain where power, ideology, and marginalisation intersect in complex ways (Zene, 2013). It is quite important to acknowledge that Gramsci's fragmented and coded reflections on subalternity, especially in *Notebook 25*, have led to multiple, often contradictory interpretations. While some scholars read 'subaltern' as a cypher for class in a strictly economic sense, others rightly point out that Gramsci's engagement with culture, race, and even religion complicates such reductionism. Indeed, his theoretical lexicon suggests a broader concern with how socio-political subjugation is reproduced and resisted across various sites of life, including through institutions such as religion (Zene, 2013, pp. 116–117). This poses a fundamental question: can religion simultaneously be an apparatus of domination, ideology, and a vehicle of emancipatory awareness for the historically marginalised from hegemonic power?

Gramsci's examination highlights the importance of cultural hegemony, namely the manner in which dominant ideas become 'common sense' and legitimise unequal social relations. Religion in this account cannot

be described simply in terms of doctrinal content or institutional forms; religion has to be analysed for its embeddedness in the material and symbolic life of the subordinated classes. His texts challenge us to question how religion can reproduce obedience, but at the same time supply idioms of dissent, solidarity, and meaning to subaltern groups. '[Religion],' Gramsci observes, 'needs to be viewed as a field of struggle,' in which the ideological strength of the dominant class is confronted by popular beliefs forged from historical experiences of marginalisation (Gramsci, 1971, as cited in Zene, 2013).

It positions itself within this conflict. It asks: how does religion contribute to maintaining marginalised groups in a state of oppression, and when does it become a vehicle for resistance? Most sociological literature today admits that belief in religion tends to afford existential comfort in times of unfavourable material conditions. Yet political neutrality may prove beyond the reach of such comfort. On a number of historical occasions, institutional religion has cooperated with dominant powers in its attempt to legitimate social hierarchies. Here, there is no attempt at blanket glorification of religion or absolute dismissal as reactionary. Instead, this paper attempts an investigation into this ambivalent ground upon which religion operates for subaltern groups: as a vehicle for incorporation and as an available source of critique.

Religion, Power, and Cultural Struggle in Gramscian Thought

The traditional sociology of religion, especially as developed by Émile Durkheim, has understood religion to be a type of 'social cement'—a force that maintains collective consciousness and solidifies social solidarity. Durkheim's understanding prioritises the integrating work of

religion, aligning it with social cohesion and stability. This monolithic view has been critically revised. Dorothee Sölle (1984), in her article 'The Christian-Marxist Debate of the 1960s,' argues that the role of religion has to be understood dialectically. Religion, as understood by Sölle, functions in society within a dual mechanism: as 'an apology and legitimating of the status quo and its culture of social injustice on the one hand, [and] as a means of protest, change and liberation on the other' (Sölle, 1984, pp. 20–26). This doubleness does not, nonetheless, operate with a guarantee. Religious opposition to domination, exploitation, and institutional subordination is neither inevitable nor spontaneous. Religion, instead, frequently operates as an apparatus of mediation, sometimes complicit with systems of oppression, sometimes a space of rupture and transfiguration (Billings, 1990, pp. 1–31). This ambivalence is essential to any sociological analysis of religion and power.

It is not possible to fully appreciate the sociology of religion without confronting the workings of power, particularly insofar as it is exercised by the ruling and the dominant classes. The way religious communities and institutions formulate and promote their interests is anything but clear-cut; it is situated on contested landscapes of ideological bargaining. Antonio Gramsci's contribution to this discourse lies in his insistence on a historically conscious understanding of religion: one that interrogates the socio-political mechanisms through which dominant classes shape the religious practices and preferences of subaltern groups. Conversely, Gramsci is equally attentive to the counter-hegemonic potential of subaltern agency, which resists dominant ideologies in the pursuit of cultural and political autonomy. Whereas Marx and Engels tried to deal with religion mainly in the light of material conditions as a mirror of economic relations, Gramsci diverged from determinism by placing the

emphasis on culture as a semi-autonomous sphere of the social totality (Billings, 1990, pp. 3–4). For Gramsci, cultural practices, religious practices included, are not just ideological reflections of the base but active sites of struggle and mediation.

His reflections in the *Prison Notebooks* are particularly challenging to decipher, not least because of the conditions of their composition. Written in fragmented, often coded language due to carceral censorship, and never systematically revised, the *Notebooks* resist a linear or doctrinaire reading. As Geoffrey Nowell Smith (as cited in Billings, 1990) observes:

> 'Gramsci's writings in the *Notebooks* are like a network, or a web. While there is a logic to them, a logic that is not linear but achieved through repeated branching out, with arguments doubling back and reuniting laterally instead of sequentially, the kind of univocal reading we are used to being able to make of texts in the Marxist tradition is hard to accomplish in the *Notebooks*. They need a new kind of suspended attention, a receptiveness of reading to correspond to their receptiveness of writings.'

Gramsci's religious critique should also be placed within his wider intellectual struggles. He was most critical of Benedetto Croce's idealism as well as Karl Kautsky's mechanistic Marxism. Kautsky, by reducing history's change to laws of determinism, essentially eviscerated Marxism of its dialectic vitality (Billings, 1990). Gramsci, on the other hand, sided with a generation of Marxist intellectuals such as Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, who saw the complicated interaction of political, cultural,

and ideological conflict. Gramsci, however, went further in specifying that civil society was a necessary battleground upon which cultural conflict precedes and shapes political revolution. In this regard, Gramsci's theory of 'cultural hegemony' is central. He suggested that in capitalist Western societies, class struggle is less a matter of explicit confrontation and more one of ideological negotiation within the sphere of civil society. Religion, being a component of this ground, is a site that is both disputed and capable of consolidating hegemonic norms as well as articulating emancipatory possibilities.

Consent, Coercion, and Cultural Power

As Gramsci argues, the hegemony of the ruling class in capitalist states is preserved not by coercion but by a more subtle relation between force and consent. A distinction is made by him between direct repression and what he calls 'hegemony,' a mode of socio-cultural and political power by which the ruling class obtains the consent of the governed, naturalising existing hierarchies as it were (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 257–264). Hegemony, in this sense, is 'armoured by coercion' when consent breaks down or gets weakened, and force is requisite (Billings, 1990, p. 5). This is a very different understanding of hegemony from the Marxist 'false consciousness'. It is not a crude distortion of class consciousness or a bald expression of economic models. Gramsci demands that we emancipate Marxism from determinism or reductionism. He says that hegemony is a contingent political success, achieved without any historical necessities (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 425–430). Where subordinate groups do not permit consent, coercion and even violence usually re-emerge as means to achieve dominance (Billings, 1990, p. 5).

The process of hegemony starts with the ruling class identifying its own interests with those of the subordinate groups as it perceives them. In this identification, the ruling class acquires a sort of moral and intellectual leadership. Through a lengthy duration, the leadership enables the ruling group to render its own worldview consisting of moral and religious doctrines, widely accepted, as if all sections of society embraced them. Organic intellectuals, who are born out of these class divisions, operate in the centre of articulating the dominant ideology in a form comprehensible to the broader public. These intellectuals traverse various ideological and institutional spaces, such as religious, moral, and educational spaces, to reproduce the hegemonic order (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 229–238).

The success of such hegemony lies in its subtle character: the prevailing worldview is adopted unselfconsciously by the subaltern class as 'common sense'. Through ideological reinforcement in civil society, namely in schools, religious institutions, and media, the ruling class is able to maintain its moral and intellectual leadership. According to Gramsci, 'every relationship of hegemony is necessarily an educational relationship' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 350).

Education, therefore, plays two opposing roles. Firstly, it can build new forms of hegemony that disrupt the existing order. Secondly, it plays a repressive role by legitimising the existing worldview through civil society institutions. The ruling culture is transformed into an experiential framework of meanings and values, which has been termed a 'culture of domination and subordination,' as being unavoidable (Grelle, 2017, pp. 16–17).

Raymond Williams (2010) depicts this idea by saying:

> 'Hegemony, therefore, cannot be conceived of as merely the articulated highest stratum of "ideology"; nor can its modes of control be described by what are more commonly referred to as "manipulation" or "indoctrination". Rather, it is a very broad range of practices and expectations which embrace the totality of everyday life: our expenditure of energy, our ideas of self, and our meanings of the world. It is a lived order of meanings and values—constitutive and constituting—where, in experience as practices, they present themselves as reciprocally reinforcing. In this sense, therefore, hegemony creates a reality for the majority, an experienced and seemingly fixed reality from which it is very difficult to escape in many spheres of life. In the most traditional sense, therefore, it is a "culture"; but one which must also be understood as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes' (p. 110).

Orthodox Marxism holds that the dominant class seeks to impose its hegemonic ideology on society at large; however, this imposition is not necessarily accepted smoothly and is sometimes met by subaltern groups with resistance. In his rich analysis of popular culture, Gramsci calls to our attention the implicit antagonistic forces of the lived experience of the oppressed. Popular culture—similarly to religious practices—is the lived consciousness and experiential context of the masses for Gramsci. It possesses, in Gramsci's words, the latent capacity to 'debase' (id est, disorient, even erode) the cultural foundations on which ruling-class hegemony is based. As he says:

> '...every religion, even Catholicism (indeed Catholicism more than any, precisely because of its efforts to retain a surface unity and avoid splintering into national churches and social stratification), is in reality a multiplicity of distinct and often contradictory religions: there is one Catholicism for the peasants, one for the petite bourgeoisie and proletariat, one for women, and one for intellectuals, which is itself variegated and disconnected' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 420).

Thus, popular culture can become the terrain for a reactionary mobilisation when mixed with progressive overtones. Yet its progressive thrust within it is often dampened, diluted by its own contradictions and internal incoherence. In the Italian case, for example, the dogmatic hegemony of the Catholic Church was tactically utilised to diffuse and neutralise religious religiosity at the vernacular level. What was left behind was not a unified counter-force but a form of passive resistance, weakened and confined within the dominant order (Maduro, 1982, p. 140).

Gramsci assumes that only when religious awareness of the subaltern classes is redirected to a politically consolidated vision can the counter-hegemonic potential in the society be suitably mobilised. This is confirmed by Maduro (1982), who observes that 'subordinate classes whose worldview is predominantly religious will have difficulty taking any initiatives, unless their religious worldview undergoes appropriate transformations' (p. 140).

For Gramsci, this evolution requires the historicisation of organic intellectuals in the subaltern classes, those who are in a position to

re-interpret the daily experiences into a consolidated political consciousness (Billings, 1990, pp. 1–31). These thinkers need to challenge unthinking acceptance of prevailing ideological orthodoxy. Their role is the transformation of cultural bases, beyond the mere dismissal of elitist thought, to the positive reformulation of the 'common sense' of the masses. As Gramsci observes: 'Self-consciousness of one's own worldview is the process of combining it into an integral whole and raising it to the level set by the most highly developed ideas of the world. The basis of critical analysis is self-awareness of one's actual self, including 'self-knowledge' as a consequence of historical development' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 324). The aim, therefore, is not merely opposition but the development of an alternative hegemony, one based on the subaltern's lived realities and hopes. Religion, reworked in this way, can stop reproducing domination and instead become a source of speech from below, as an instrument of historical agency.

Common Sense, Religion, and Subalternity

Gramsci employs the term common sense to describe an uncritical, sedimented form of understanding the world. It is, in his view, the 'philosophy of non-philosophers,' a diffused and non-systematic corpus of belief which individuals acquire from their social and cultural environments (Gramsci, 1971, p. 419). It is this kind of understanding that he describes as a 'philosophy of folklore,' a world view which, though diffused and incoherent, does contain flashes of truth and moral wisdom. Above all, Gramsci argues that common sense is dynamic. It is in constant change, absorbing scientific knowledge and philosophical fragments, thereby evolving alongside social evolution (Gramsci, 1971, p. 324). Although each society creates its own type of common sense, they

are typically defined by hegemonic institutions, most prominently by religion and cultural institutions.

For Gramsci, common sense is not monolithic but a patchwork of myths, beliefs and practices; it reproduces domination and contains shards of critique. These shards arise because everyday life tends to contradict hegemonic explanations (Martin, 2025). When people say, for instance, 'we should be grateful for charity' while grumbling about chronic scarcity, they reproduce consent and simultaneously lodge a grievance. Such fissures create what Gramsci calls the oppositional potential of common sense. Significantly, potential is latent without organisation. Organic intellectuals and left-wing organisations must accomplish two tasks. First, they must harvest dispersed fragments of 'good sense' (spontaneous, sensible responses grounded in experience) and make their coherence manifest in relation to structural grievances. Second, they must weld these fragments into an organised moral-philosophical system—a 'new common sense'—by concerted cultural effort in schools, trade unions, churches, and the press. Gramsci's politics thus makes scattered, empirical contradictions into a historic bloc of critique, pedagogy, and organisational practice. Without this, oppositional elements are anecdotal and cannot overthrow hegemony (Billings, 1990; Gramsci, 1971).

This paradoxical role of common sense is the same reason why the subaltern cannot construct a rational world vision. For Gramsci, the subaltern remains locked on a splintered terrain. Subaltern movements cannot articulate their own political and cultural visions without collective leadership and organic intellectuals. They are thus left to be at

the mercy of hegemonic ideologies, which reinforce their passivity (Zene, 2013, pp. 124–125).

In contrast, following Vatican II, the Latin American Church in most locations became a crucible for counter-hegemony. Medellín (1968) and subsequent gatherings openly advocated the preferential option for the poor (Valiente, 2012), reframing Christian faith as an advocacy of justice, not passive suffering. This theological evolution (based on Gutiérrez's Liberation Theology) complemented institutional change to catalyse the creation of *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base* (CEBs). These tiny lay organisations–frequently rural or poor city parishes connected biblical reflection to critical social analysis. In CEBs, semi-literate and illiterate priests and catechists served as 'organic intellectuals,' interpreting the signs of the times into homilies and Bible study so that suffering was accounted in terms of structural injustice and not the will of God (Valiente, 2012; Acero Ferrer, 2023). As Acero Ferrer (2023) highlights, CEBs turned into 'spaces in which to be reborn' politically. With communal worship and literacy work, they produced a lived liberation theology and collective identity that openly aimed at systemic oppression. In practice, religion was reflected upon as a resource for empowerment (a type of 'faith qua emancipatory pedagogy'), providing a moral justification for resistance in situations of dictatorship and repression (Wingeier-Rayo, 2019).

Gramsci counterattacks this religious stance directly: 'Class differences and the uneven distribution of wealth are ordained by God, and it would be impious to attempt to eliminate them' (Gramsci, 1992, p. 100). Not only does this dogmatic perspective close off the dominated classes' political imagination, but it also naturalises current times by making

inequality natural and inescapable. Religion, according to Gramsci, is on two planes: the religion of the people and that of the intellectuals. The former is the lived religion, practices, and moral codes of the subaltern, usually entangled with popular customs. The latter is codified, systematic knowledge produced by theologians and ecclesiastical authorities (Grelle, 2017, pp. 31–33). The institutional church skillfully interweaves these two strands, thereby ensuring relevance and hegemony. Fulton (1987) states that

> '[a religion] could not have become elaborated intellectually, morally and organisationally unless it had been [...] a hegemonic form in society, a means of social control at the level of the mind and the heart' (p. 205).

This dual purpose, however, comes at a price. While symbolic synthesis exists between intellectual religion and popular religion in the Church, intellectual elites remain socially separated from subalterns. The result is a persistent inability to satisfy the political needs of the masses or to spread an emancipatory religious consciousness. For that purpose, therefore, Gramsci does not merely dismiss religion but challenges its role as an instrument of domination or transformation.

A vivid historical example is the post-fascist peasant revolts in Southern Italy (1943–45). In several Sicilian towns (like, Piana degli Albanes and Caulonia), peasants briefly established 'people's republics' that explicitly fused Catholic imagery with socialist ideas. Communist leaders like Giacomo Petrotta openly framed their cause in Christian terms. In his final will (before founding the Piana degli Albanesi Republic), Petrotta wrote that he fought 'against the capitalist landowners in Sicily, for the

common cause of the triumph of the proletariat,' and that he would 'with God in [his] thoughts always keep [his] commitment' (Saresella, 2015). In his diary, he explicitly hoped to establish 'only one sheepfold and only one shepherd' in Piana—a messianic metaphor of unity under Christ. In practice, the insurgents even invited a local Catholic bishop to serve on their 'Revolutionary Commission' as a kind of official witness, declaring that everything they did was 'with the blessing of the Church'. The insurgent republic's slogans—'brotherhood', 'unity', and even 'stabs to the insubordinates'—were infused with quasi-religious language, showing how Christian symbolism was repurposed as revolutionary rhetoric. In short, Petrotta and his colleagues took the familiar language of suffering and redemption from Catholicism and rearticulated it as a call for social justice and class revolt. This counter-hegemonic use of religion helped mobilise peasants who felt abandoned by the liberal state and clerical landowners. A similar dynamic occurred in Caulonia in 1945 under Pasquale Cavallaro, a former seminarian, who openly appealed to Jesus's 'mission of liberation' against fascism. In this sense, Partha Chatterjee (1989) provides a helpful model, suggesting that religion provides a double function: it legitimates hierarchy to the rulers, and yet provides the subaltern with access to a wider cultural code. As he suggests, 'religion then coexists and intermingles in an apparently eclectic fashion with the original elements of common sense' (Guha, 1989, p. 172). This balanced understanding sets out the way in which religion enables and constrains [...] how it can naturalise stratification, and yet at the same time provides the symbolic tools for critique.

Religion as Hegemony, Resistance, and Subaltern Emancipation

Throughout history, religion has had two faces: as a force that legitimises ruling classes, and as an instrument of resistance from the subalterns. Gramsci uses the term 'agency' to conceptualise how subaltern subjects use religion not as a passive phenomenon, but as a tactic of countering domination and creating new identities, worldviews, and sociopolitical structures (Patrick, 2017). In order to question religion's transformative potential, it is quite important first to understand its bifurcated role.

On one hand, initially, as the status quo, religion provides transcendental legitimation for the current sociopolitical structures. It makes class stratification and unequal distribution of wealth as natural or God-ordained. Bruce Lincoln (2003) observes that this hegemonic religiosity strives for complete ideological saturation [...] attempting to infiltrate all societal strata. However, religion's ideological apparatus never convinces all segments; there is always exclusion and alienation (Grelle, 2017). Secondly, religion as resistance emerges in these enclaves of alienation. It creates counter cultures, ethics, and cosmologies from the inside of the dominant order. Its identifying characteristic is the critique of existing status religion. Grelle differentiates between two types: passive and active resistance. Passive resistance does not prevent systemic change but rather creates subcultures bound(ed) to local spaces. Active resistance, by contrast, seeks total sociopolitical redesign [...] through reform or revolution (Grelle, 2017).

Reformation addresses particular points, eschewing systemic revolution. Revolution requires a complete break in sociocultural, economic, and ideological realms. Both utilise different discursive techniques:

reformation refigures symbols, revolution substitutes them with others. Gramsci argues that effective revolution also needs to build a new moral, juridical, and artistic order (Gramsci, 1977). Both strategies are politically ambivalent. Reformation can be conservative (restorationist nostalgia) or progressive (projective transformation). Revolution can also dichotomise: traditionalist revolutions yearn for reintegration of sacred and profane under doctrine (example, Iran, 1979), while anti-traditionalist revolutions destroy entrenched injustice (example, France, 1789; Russia, 1917) (Lincoln, 1985; Grelle, 2017).

Though secular in ethos, revolutions such as the French Revolution retained strong Christian overtones. Lincoln (2003) makes this continuity clear: Robespierre used religious imagery, for example, and established the 'cult of the Supreme Being' in an effort to make new political ideals sacred. Grelle (2017) proposes the third model: transformation. Gramsci favours this model. Amidst debates in the Bolshevik period between legal reformists and violent revolutionaries, Gramsci placed emphasis on the need for intellectual and moral rebirth. He insisted that lasting change must originate within subaltern cultures, rather than through coercion. In such a schema, cultural formation and education become key. Gramsci's socialism relies on the masses of people and hegemonic counter-culture construction. He finds inspiration in Christianity's revolutionary genealogy. For Gramsci, change is individual and collective, ethical, and intellectual. It cuts across epochs: Renaissance, Reformation, Protestantism, German Idealism, and French Revolution (Gramsci, 1971).

Religion remains bound to power, inherent in politics. Socialism, however, as understood by Gramsci, contains religion's cultural and

emotive aspects but raises them to critical consciousness. It becomes an 'integral vision of life,' possessing spirituality and morality of its own (Fulton, 1987).

Socialist transformation is not imposition but organic coming-into-being. It brings revolutionary ideals together with subaltern culture. Theory and praxis merge here to engender counter-hegemony (Grelle, 2017). The subaltern may, and should, produce its own culture [...] one that overthrows master myths and creates new universal values. Gramsci's special contribution is to situate religion's moral and ideological possibilities in the struggles over power. The socialist counter-hegemony, in his view, is based on mass involvement. People's communication is critical. Dominant hegemony maintains authority through a mix of force and persuasion, but subaltern groups can develop counter-narratives that challenge dominant religious worldviews. The international context, full of ideological diversity, makes it possible for subaltern critiques to undermine prevailing epistemologies. But who triggers this change? Gramsci first identified with Marxist orthodoxy in attributing a central role to the working class. Subsequently, he turned his attention to the political party as the organ of revolutionary pedagogy. But Grelle (2017) questions the possibility of such a party being realised in reality. Revolution, for Gramsci, transcends seizure of state; it is ideological contestation, waged over time—a 'war of position'. He rejects Leninist abruptness in favour of civil society transformation. Gramsci believed dominant ideology must first be demystified at the level of belief before revolutionary momentum can build. Gramsci criticised reformism because it brought the working class into the bourgeois order. Reformist parties, according to him, tended to obstruct socialism rather than accelerate it. They were either used to strengthen bourgeois

hegemony (example, Western Europe) or they got suppressed (example, Chile 1973).

Conclusion

Antonio Gramsci's discourse on religion is inseparable from concepts like hegemony, popular culture, common sense, and the role of intellectuals. He insists that religion is not a neutral domain of belief, but a cultural form tied directly to political force and socialist revolution. Unlike classical Marxists who viewed religion reductively, Gramsci reorients the analysis to foreground religion's cultural function and its ability to shape worldviews. For Gramsci, religion is a 'unity of faith between a conception of the world and its corresponding norm of life' (Grelle, 2017, p. 66). Far from dissolving religion to the level of belief in the supernatural, he labels it an 'active conception of the world'. This notion has sociological significance. As Fulton (1987) maintains, religion at the same time expresses an 'active mode of experiencing nature and human relationships' and differs with power relations. Therefore, Gramsci makes a differentiation between the intellectuals' religion and that of the people.

Gramsci's broader philosophical project aligns Marxism with a kind of secular religion. According to Grelle (2017), he envisioned Marxism as a system that aims to 'integrate its worldview and practical ethic into a distinctive culture' (p. 20). He called this effort a 'modern intellectual and moral reformation,' whereby subaltern groups might build new political, cultural, and religious relationships grounded in their material conditions. Religion is not necessarily in league with domination, however. Religious and moral discourses are frequently means of protest

for the oppressed, Gramsci observes. These provide the ability to express counter-worldviews, critical ethics and social visions (Fulton, 1987). Failed reform movements in popular religion frequently failed not through any insincerity, but because they lacked strategic purpose in opposition to dominant hegemony (Grelle, 2017). Gramsci contends that for a revolutionary struggle to succeed, the subalterns must create organic intellectuals who can create counter-hegemonic culture. Religious leaders, mystics, and socio-religious movements can, through them, challenge the dominant ideologies. Religion becomes, in this context, a terrain of struggle (not surrender).

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INTERROGATING PANCHSHEEL: AND THE 1962 INDO-CHINA WAR

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Abstract

The Agreement between the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet Region of China and India, in particular the espousing of the 'Panchsheel Doctrine' [Five Principles for Peaceful Coexistence], is often cited as a watershed moment in the history of Sino-Indian relations. Crucially, however, the ramifications of the same for the forthcoming Sino-Indian War of 1962 are grossly underexplored. To explore this linkage, the author employs a historical methodology to construct a composite archive for examination, with the agreement as its fulcrum. The subsequent examination of the assembled archive builds upon the historical research conducted by K Gupta (1978) and J Bandyopadhyaya (1962), while being guided by the ideas of EH Carr (1964) and MR Trouillot (1995).

Keywords: Silences in history, Hierarchy of causes, Expansion, Legitimation, Asymmetry

Introduction

The Agreement between the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet Region of China and India [*The 1954 Agreement*] was signed on April 29, 1954. It had two crucial immediate impacts. Firstly, it outlined the terms for trade and (limited) cultural exchange between the two geographies; one can consciously choose not to use the term 'nations', for while it impacted a relatively broad expanse of India (including its northern and eastern territories), its bearing with respect to China was limited to (as the name itself suggests) Tibet. Secondly, it served as India's formal acknowledgement of Tibet as a region administered under China, thus relinquishing the historical buffer which existed between the two Asian behemoths (Sikri, 2011).

The 1954 Agreement itself was composed of a preamble and six articles: the former famously established the Panchsheel Doctrine [Five Principles for Peaceful Coexistence], namely 'mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty', 'mutual non-aggression', 'mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs', 'equality and mutual benefit', and 'peaceful coexistence'. It was eventually adopted by the Bandung Conference (as part of the *Ten Principles of International Peace and Cooperation* in 1955) and the United Nations General Assembly (in 1957), being hailed as emblematic of the Non-Aligned Movement's success—a great ideological victory for Jawaharlal Nehru.

But it is perhaps this very celebration and selective memory which relegated the remainder of this historical document to the darker depths of history; consequently, to bring some semblance of balance to the scales

of historiography, this paper shall primarily occupy itself with the six articles. Moreover, the dominant historiographical perspective plaguing both contemporary and future accounts considers the 1954 Agreement solely in terms of its politico-economic dimensions and as a failure in retrospect; that is, even those accounts which acknowledge it as a diplomatic failure (Arpi, 2015) do so in light of the Sino-Indian War of 1962. [Or at the very least, the border tensions which commenced in 1958.]

Challenging this dominant perspective, the author presents an alternate view which situates the 1954 Agreement as part of a grander Chinese design for territorial expansion whose logical conclusion was attained in the Sino-Indian War of 1962.

The author does so by briefly introducing the 1954 Agreement and the diplomatic 'Notes exchanged' between the two parties regarding the same. These together form the historical archive for examination.

The author subsequently establishes the historical context and (resultant) necessity of the Agreement, before proceeding to examine the archive. This examination is accomplished both independently (that is, via an interrogation of its clauses and language) and contextually (that is, by reading against the grain and identifying key contextual silences), in the process providing proof of the author's thesis statement combining relevant literature review with independent argumentation. In doing so, the author is guided primarily by historical methodology and political theory.

(Establishing) The Archive

The archive for examination comprises two sections, namely, the six articles of the 1954 Agreement (Republic of India & People's Republic of China, 1954) and the 'Notes exchanged' (Raghavan & Han-Fu, 1954).

The former establishes provisions for the establishment of trade agencies and trade markets, outlines the pilgrimage sites open to cross-border movement, specifies the routes and conditions of cross-border travel, and clarifies the time frame of the agreement. It was signed in Peking (currently, Beijing) in Hindi, Chinese, and English. The plenipotentiaries who signed the agreement were HE Nedyam Raghavan and HE Chang Han-Fu. The latter are critical in clarifying and elaborating certain aspects of the primary agreement, primarily the terms for the handover of administrative and infrastructural control in the region (from India to China).

While these sections let us know much independently, it is only once we place them in their spatio-temporal context that we can gauge the ramifications they have for the forthcoming Sino-Indian War of 1962. Furthermore, while uncovering the literature on the subject and interrogating the archive in the subsequent section, we shall also be analysing each relevant section of the 1954 Agreement (Republic of India & People's Republic of China, 1954) and the 'Notes exchanged' (Raghavan & Han-Fu, 1954) in greater detail.

Contextualising and Interpreting the Archive

Prologue

The first critical piece of contextualisation required with respect to the 1954 Agreement is the historic event which necessitated its creation—the annexation of Tibet in 1950. It was fuelled by the communist government's determination to integrate Tibet under the larger Chinese mainland; unlike earlier Republican claims [the Chinese nationalist government had already protested the McMahon Line and the 1908 Trade Regulations (Gupta, 1978)], however, they possessed the power to enforce their objectives, causing panic in Lhasa. Tibet's last-minute diplomatic and military efforts failed. China offered self-government in exchange for voluntary union, but before negotiations advanced, the People's Liberation Army invaded in October 1950 (Mehra, 1956).

Internationally, India protested China's use of force but maintained a diplomatic stance, advocating Tibetan autonomy under Chinese suzerainty. Tibet's own appeal to the United Nations (UN) failed due to a lack of international support. After Tibet's military collapse, China pursued a political settlement, leading to the 17-Point Agreement in 1951, formalising Tibet's integration into China. India later accepted China's control over Tibet, redesignating its mission in Lhasa as a consulate-general in 1952, marking a shift in Indo-Tibetan relations. However, according to Mehra (1956), the culmination of these adjustments came only with the 1954 Agreement—to illustrate, the third article, which outlined the pilgrimage sites open for cross-border travel [Kang Rinpoche (Kailas) and Mavam Tso (Manasaorovar) in Tibet for Indian pilgrims, and Benaras, Sarnath, Gaya, and Sanchi in India for

pilgrims from the Tibet Region of China], featured Lhasa in a separate sub-clause. Although unassuming at first glance, this isolated mention of Lhasa (and diplomatic legitimation of the same by India under the ambit of the agreement) is significant for being the strongest formal claim of control over the region made by China (given that Lhasa was the erstwhile capital of independent Tibet).

Necessity

According to Gupta (1978), who offers a comprehensive account of the agreement, the 1954 Agreement was a natural and necessary step for India. It stemmed from India's recognition of the People's Republic of China on December 30, 1949, invalidating previous arrangements based on agreements with the British. This was because British privileges in Tibet were undue, in that they were based on the Anglo-Tibetan Trade Regulations of 1914, which had been concluded without the knowledge of the Chinese (Pokharna, 2009). These regulations stemmed from the 1914 Simla Convention (between British India, Tibet, and the Republic of China), which had also birthed the McMahon Line—the boundary between erstwhile British India and Tibet. While independent India initially accepted the McMahon Line and the Anglo-Tibetan Trade Regulations of 1914 as legacies from the British Raj, its leaders soon recognised that these privileges, including extraterritorial rights, were unlikely to be accepted by the newly established and powerful communist China (Gupta, 1978).

Communist China's ideological considerations, particularly Mao Zedong's Marxist Theory of War, added much credibility to India's fears at the time. Mao Zedong viewed war as essential for class struggle and

international conflicts, believing all contradictions could be resolved through force. His doctrine shaped China's perception of India, viewing its peaceful independence as incomplete and its government as a bourgeois puppet of Western imperialism (Bandyopadhyaya, 1962). The latter consideration arose as a consequence of China's rigid 'two-camp' ideology that saw the world as either revolutionary or imperialist, thus dismissing India's non-alignment as a facade.

Moreover, China knew Tibet's strategic importance. It was not only spread over a vast geographical space but also contained a limited population; this would allow additional land for both the settlement of migrants from the eastern Chinese heartland and the development of strategic infrastructure in the region. Furthermore, Tibet was and continues to be rich in natural resources like copper, iron, zinc, lead and lithium, alongside perhaps the most crucial element of all—water; let us not forget that the Brahmaputra, a critical lifeline for eastern India, originates in Tibet (Tibet's natural resources, 2010). Naturally, it should come as no surprise that China viewed Tibet as a 'springboard for expansion', its aggression seeking both regional dominance (economically and territorially) and ideological supremacy.

India consequently faced a stark choice—either to relinquish these privileges voluntarily or to risk forcible expulsion from Tibet. This demonstrated a pragmatic understanding on Nehru's part of the new geopolitical reality India had to operate in, wherein the maintenance of these inherited rights against the will of the new Chinese government was not a viable long-term option.

Therefore, it is only justified to acknowledge that the Sino-Indian Agreement of 1954 was a natural and necessary step for India (Gupta, 1978). However, what the author does take issue with is how it was facilitated; there are five major issues which he wishes to flag here and consequently prove the paper's thesis statement in the process.

Interrogating the Archive

A note on the method: The author has hierarchised (Carr, 1964) his contentions in ascending order in terms of their causative value with respect to the Sino-Indian War of 1962. In doing so, he hopes to uphold the historical processual integrity of the timeline he proposes, providing a more nuanced and multifaceted defence of the thesis statement.

Furthermore, a critical component of this historical interrogation is via engagement with the document's 'silences' (Trouillot, 1995). In the case of the primary archive assembled, there are various 'contextual silences'. [Omissions regarding the spatio-temporal location of the archive and the larger context to which it pertains; in this situation, indicating the motivations and power dynamics present.] Engaging with the same enables one to paint a more complete picture of the processes or phenomena at work.

Firstly, Article 6 assigned a validity of eight years to the 1954 Agreement, commencing with its ratification, which took place on June 3, 1954. This meant that it was scheduled to expire on June 3, 1962. The Sino-Indian War only began on October 20, 1962, when China launched offensives in both Ladakh and the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), now Arunachal Pradesh, four months after the expiration of the

Agreement. Due to the breakdown in diplomatic relations between India and China by this point, the Agreement, of course, had not been renewed. That is to say, it no longer bound either nation to continue even a superficial commitment to the uneasy peace reached eight years prior; a full-scale offensive, in the manner that eventually transpired, would not violate any arrangement.

While this demonstrates the tact of the Chinese in navigating a binding international arrangement, highlighting their careful consideration of the same, it does not necessarily prove that the 1954 Agreement itself was an instrument of China's expansionist designs. In fact, the agreement could easily be presented as an unfortunate casualty of a worsening Sino-Indian relationship rooted in factors external to it. However, such a reading would ignore the ideological grounding of the Chinese Communist Party (as explored above) and China's actions following the treaty. The most notable in this regard are the construction of a strategic road for China's military-industrial complex in Aksai-Chin as early as 1957 (the same eventually being occupied by them post the war) (Aarten, n.d.) and the publication of Chinese maps depicting Ladakh and NEFA as Chinese territories in 1958 (which Nehru condemned). Furthermore, there was also the Chinese incursion across the Shipki La Pass (listed in the 1954 Agreement as a pass or route for travel of pilgrims and trades) and the claiming of territory a few kilometres south of the same (Arpi, 2015).

These stark violations of the provisions and principles of the 1954 Agreement cannot be located as external to it; the border had always been a point of contention for China, however, instead of immediately seeking all-out war against India, China took its time to establish a

certain perceptual claim over the border regions and build up the necessary infrastructure to strengthen its claims and position over the same. The instrument which afforded them the time for the same was none other than the 1954 Agreement, which effectively lulled India into a false state of security. As Dasgupta (2016) posits, the 1954 Agreement for India delayed the resolution of the border issue with China, if not outright ensuring its peaceful resolution in the future, due to the diplomatic precedent established. It offered the nascent nation-state much-needed respite from tense border struggles in the aftermath of the 1947–48 war with Pakistan, thus compelling it to ignore the evident 'self-destruct date' which accompanied the document and all of China's actions that followed.

This is only further evidenced by the second factor we must consider, that is, the lack of concrete negotiation with respect to the border issue between the two nations. There was an evident duality in India's attitude towards the Simla Convention. Gupta (1978) highlights that while Nehru was willing to renounce the extraterritorial rights in Tibet inherited from the Simla Convention of 1914, he was initially firm in maintaining the McMahon Line as India's northeastern border. Despite some officials advocating for it, Nehru eventually consciously chose not to raise the Indo-Tibetan border issue (particularly the McMahon Line) during the 1953-1954 negotiations. He believed that raising the border claim might lead to counter-demands from China, especially given the historical rejection of the McMahon Line by previous Chinese governments.

However, as various officials had suggested (Gupta, 1978), it was naive of India not to raise the border issue (particularly Aksai-Chin and the

McMahon Line) during the negotiations, as the silence and ambiguity surrounding the same eventually snowballed into the 1958 crisis, and eventually, the Sino-Indian War of 1962.

Third, Article 4 of the 1954 Agreement (Republic of India & People's Republic of China, 1954), which specified the passes and routes for travel by traders and pilgrims of both countries, listed the Shipki La Pass, Mana Pass, Niti Pass, Kungri Bingri Pass, Dharma Pass, and Lipu Lekh Pass. The peculiar thing to note here is that all of these are present on either the Himachal side or the Uttarakhand side of the Indian border. The Ladakh side and the Arunachal side of the Indian border (both of which featured prominent borders and passes with Tibet, most notably, the Demchok Pass in the former and the Bum La Pass in the latter) were crucially absent. These would be the exact regions—Aksai-Chin and NEFA—where the Chinese would eventually launch their military campaign during the Sino-Indian War of 1962.

These three factors together provide evidence of what may be considered to be one of the earliest instances of 'Chinese Legal Warfare': a form of unconventional warfare, wherein a concrete basis for launching an offensive is formed by taking advantage of loopholes and provisions in the concerned legalities of international doctrines and conventions, mutual agreements, et cetera (Knoll et al., 2021). The primary objective in this scenario was twofold—establishing a certain superficial security, accompanied by stark ambiguity surrounding the object of security (that is, the border issue).

Fourthly, as has been commented upon by Mehra (1956) and Gupta (1978), if one brings their attention to the 'Notes exchanged' (Raghavan

& Han-Fu, 1954), one notices a clear asymmetry in the exchange being facilitated and provisions being provided for. India agreed to return to China all lands used or occupied by India in the region, other than the lands within its trade agency compound walls at Yatung; this marked a significant formalised acquisition of territory by the Chinese. Accompanying the same was the transfer of administrative and infrastructural control in these areas from India to China. This included India agreeing to completely withdraw its military escorts stationed at Yatung and Gyantse within six months, hand over to China the postal, telegraph, and public telephone services operated by India in the region, and transfer twelve rest houses in the region to China (which China agreed would continue to function as rest houses).

Thus, while India relinquished long-held rights, privileges, territory, and even resources, the Chinese only seemed to offer promises of friendship and some remuneration at a 'reasonable price' (Raghavan & Han-Fu, 1954). In return, however, they amassed a great deal of built infrastructure in the region, which could now be utilised as the proverbial 'springboard for expansion' (Bandyopadhyaya, 1962).

While it has been analysed that components of the giveaway (such as the military escort and communication services) had already been far diminished in their practical utility and India's right to maintain them had become questionable under the new circumstances, given that these privileges were established in accordance with the Anglo-Tibetan Trade Regulations of 1914, which the Chinese government did not recognise, as discussed above, it is unclear why such a crucial bargaining chip was discarded in such a manner.

Lastly, Articles 1, 2, 4, and 5 seem to provide an emphasis on trade, which the Indian government hoped to safeguard in the region. The first article established provisions for the setting up of trade agencies by both governments in the other's territories (these included Chinese agencies in New Delhi, Calcutta, and Kalimpong, and Indian agencies in Yatung, Gyantse, and Gartok); the second article specified trade markets (China designated Yatung, Gyantse, and Phari, and India designated Kalimpong, Siliguri, and Calcutta, for this purpose); the fourth article specified passes and routes (as discussed above); and the fifth article specified documentational requirements for cross-border travel.

However, there are three issues which highlight the superficiality of such an emphasis. Firstly, there is the absence of any specification whatsoever regarding the amounts (in monetary terms or weightage) or lists (of items) of trade; even if that is excused, the absence of even a goal amount is appalling. Secondly, there is no evidence to prove that said trade was substantive in nature; while authors like Sikri (2011) have pointed to the prevalence of customary trade [it being the object India hoped to secure, perhaps in the interest of its border citizenry], it is unclear as to whether this was extensive enough to merit such an agreement wherein India was forced to concede the various privileges it held. At the very least, if Chinese interest in trade was genuine, the Agreement would have presented the scope to expand economic trade relations between the two countries (even if only utilising Tibet as a point of initiation for the same). However, as Bandyopadhyaya (1962) highlights, this being the third issue for consideration, there existed a stark ideological incompatibility in a communist state allowing private foreign trade.

This clearly indicates that the agreement was primarily an instrument for China's formalised territorial expansion, with trade simply serving as a superficial item of exchange.

Epilogue

Tensions only escalated following the Dalai Lama's 1959 asylum in India, further straining relations. Nehru accused China of border incursions, while Zhou Enlai's territorial compromise was rejected. Diplomatic talks failed, and India's 'Forward Policy', which involved the establishment of a series of forward posts and patrols to prevent Chinese advances and to assert Indian territorial claims, only worsened hostilities.

China, eventually viewing Nehru as unreliable, launched the Sino-Indian War of 1962, swiftly defeating Indian forces before declaring a unilateral ceasefire. The war secured Chinese control over 40,000 square kilometres and exposed India's military vulnerabilities (van Kemenade, 2008).

Conclusion

Given the evidence collected from the author's examination of the composite archive which was constructed, we may conclude that the 1954 Agreement, in terms of its spatio-temporal dimensions, curated ambiguity, and uncertain and asymmetric exchanges, was in fact part of a grander Chinese design for territorial expansion whose logical conclusion was attained in the Sino-Indian War of 1962.

The utilisation of key concepts in political theory and the hierarchisation of causes were key to the investigation; however, even more crucial was

the engagement with the contextual silences presented by the archive alongside its clearly intelligible narrative. These, as have now been uncovered, pose huge ramifications in the form of invisibilised change that occurs through them.

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BOOK REVIEWS

THE INSIDE STORY OF INDIA'S MOST CRITICAL AGREEMENTS: LESSONS FROM THE NEGOTIATION TABLE

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Book: Negotiating India's Landmark Agreements
Author: Avtar Singh Bhasin
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> India is regarded warily in the West because she is against the concept of imperialism and because she invented the 'Third World'. India is looked on with suspicion in the 'Third World' because of her [subversive] sentiments for democracy, human rights, et cetera. The Muslim world is wrathful because of our secularism. The communist countries regard India as insolent and particularly dangerous—because we have rejected communism as the prime condition for progress [...] We are, of course, on the side of God...is God on our side?
>
> —AS Bhasin, *Negotiating India's Landmark Agreements*, p. 73

AS Bhasin quotes the note (above) slid by India's Ambassador in Paris, Dwarka Nath Chatterjee, in a letter (which was addressed to the Joint Secretary of the United Nations) forwarded to Haksar, the Prime Minister's Principal Secretary, during a time when India was particularly worried about the uncertainty of China's spontaneous hostility, which it might unleash towards India subsequent to the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation in August 1971.

Negotiating India's Landmark Agreements is an in-depth account of five major treaties, agreements, and accords signed by the country with China, Russia, Sri Lanka, the United States of America (USA), and Pakistan. The events preceding the agreements as well as the aftermath, are narrated in the form of stories which take their turns, akin to the bends of a river. The commentary made while explaining every dialogue plays an essential role in not only educating the reader but also providing them with a critical perspective, directing them to form informed opinions about these negotiations. We see how India lagged behind in its rational approach while engaging with China soon after its Independence on the Tibetan issue. Prime Minister Nehru was attached way more sentimentally to our Chinese neighbour than they were to us. This can be seen in contrast with the decision made by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh when he joined hands with the US for the nuclear agreement in 2008. Such events shed light on how political leaders and their ideologies can affect the foreign relations of the country, leading to distinct shockwaves in the international sphere.

Not only has the timeline of events been described perfectly, but also the dilemmas and conundrums faced by all bureaucrats and politicians during such important talks with other countries. This leads to

observing the negotiating lessons one can imbibe after reading these accounts, especially in diplomatic or legal settings.

(Correct) Communication is Key

The book brings forth some rather humorous ways in which international leaders communicated to advance their national interests while putting their reputation at stake. For instance, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto set out to normalise India-Pakistan relations soon after coming to power by seeking assistance from Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, who had helped Pakistan with air support during the war in 1971 (Bhasin, 2024, p. 101). Bhutto's strategy was to pass the message that the Indian Prime Minister and Mujibur Rahman were in similar situations needing speedy resolution. The first line of the message read 'Both she and Mujibur Rahman are faced with situations which need to be resolved expeditiously' (Bhasin, 2024, p. 101). Here, the communication was intended to insinuate India's disadvantage without normalised relations, hoping to shift the onus for the lack of diplomatic progress to India.

This is where India decided not to let him get away with this chicanery, and in its response, quietly probed Colombo whether Bhutto's message was misinterpreted and its meaning was sought. In response to this query, Pakistan sent a revised message stating that 'she and I are faced with a situation which needs to be resolved expeditiously' (Bhasin, 2024, p. 101). This revision reflected Bhutto's dawning realisation that depicting India as the party that needed to change would not prove effective and that he needed to present a more balanced approach to initiate dialogue. Ultimately, this correspondence represents the

connotations and complexities of diplomatic messages directed in the shadow of Indo-Pak relations during a sensitive period shortly after the war in 1971.

This leads us to infer that getting the message wrong can create misunderstandings and stall talks, highlighting that viable negotiations are usually built on transparency, mutual respect, and a sound understanding of the involved complicated historical and emotional contexts. Thus, the efficiency of communication can spell the life or death of a diplomatic effort. As such, it remains one of the most paramount skills that any person engaged in negotiations should aspire to perfect.

Creating Strategic Alliances

On reading about the role of the Soviet Union in extending its support to India during a time when it was tussling between Pakistan (and its support from the West as well as China), one understands how this backing by the Soviet Union was not merely altruistic. At the beginning of June 1971, Moscow wanted a formal treaty with India instead of a simple statement because it understood the geopolitical situation. On the other hand, Indian Foreign Minister Swaran Singh preferred a less binding statement because India had avoided joining military alliances since gaining independence in 1947 (Bhasin, 2024, p. 96). The USSR knew well that India had avoided such commitments since the beginning. The most recent instance was in 1962 during the Sino-Indian War, when Western assistance was provided and well received, without any formal treaty. The Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation was signed in August 1971 and implied a significant shift in

this policy, though it was done in the form of a non-military agreement. Moscow was not blind to this because there existed a fear: If India were to go out of its non-aligned way, it could develop dangerous alliances with other powers, especially seeing the increasing ties between Pakistan and China.

Furthermore, the treaty simultaneously served a variety of strategic purposes for the two countries as tensions in South Asia were on the rise. For India, it was an essential security assurance against possible US and Chinese intervention during the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War, allowing New Delhi to throw its full weight behind the Bangladesh Liberation movement without feeling constrained by any external military repercussions. As for the Soviets, partnering with India was a means to counter US influence in the region and to consolidate its position as a prime player in the subcontinental geopolitics. The provision for mutual consultation in case of threats reflected this convergence of interests while at the same time allowing India to put up a semblance of non-alignment.

Here, we learn how alliances also often lend credibility to the parties engaged in the negotiating process, rendering them much stronger. When treaties cemented the relationship between India and the USSR, these nations sent a message to others in the community of nations that they were in collaboration, respecting defence and cooperation, enabling them to increase their prestige globally.

Third-Party Intervention through Mediation

If open and honest communication can set the tone for dialogue, and formal alliances can enhance a nation's negotiating advantage, then third-party mediation is often employed as a tool when bilateral avenues are strained or distrust is evident. India's history with Pakistan was definitely not untouched. Bhasin elaborates greatly upon the conflicts between East and West Pakistan, the role played by India in what was said to be an 'internal affair', and the subsequent intervention by Prime Minister Gandhi, which led to the formation of Bangladesh (Bhasin, 2024, pp. 97–136). He also provides dimensions to this landmark development in India-Pakistan history by elucidating upon the role played by the West and the Soviet Union in being a catalyst to the demands of Pakistan and India, respectively. Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet Union's General Secretary, was central to influencing the dialogue between India and Pakistan during a very critical juncture of South Asian geopolitics, specifically the Kashmir conflict.

After the catalysis of Bangladesh in the aftermath of the 1971 war, Bhutto's mission was one of defining the India-Pakistan relationship on a new footing. Thereafter began his diplomatic overtures in a stepwise process toward normalcy, from a 'Ceasefire Line' to a 'Line of Control' (LoC) and a more permanent *status quo*. Brezhnev's contribution was wholly helpful in getting Bhutto's proposals across to the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi while assuring Bhutto that his viewpoint would be presented cautiously enough to avoid perceptual pitfalls. This important handling of the situation was necessary, as it was clear to both leaders that their positions faced a backdrop of a very complex historical baggage and national pride.

The conduct of Brezhnev in this matter also draws out the larger pulsing dynamics. He assured Bhutto of his support but also informed Gandhi of their conversation to instil deeper reconciliation, firstly to the India-Pakistan conflict, and secondly to Pakistan-Bangladesh. Despite this effort, Gandhi was sceptical of Bhutto's sincerity and expressed that unless the treaty or agreement was addressed with reliability, it would be of no purpose to address the concerns that have the potential for conflict between the two countries. She said:

> (E)ven if he were now prepared to reaffirm his desire for peace in a new solemn treaty or pact, it would fail to provide us with an adequate guarantee of peace in the sub-continent, unless it was supported and supplemented by other agreements designed to eliminate the issues which have hither to served as pretext for Pakistan to keep alive tension and resort to armed conflict with India every few years. (Bhasin, 2024, p. 112)

This whole situation indicates how third-party involvement can greatly affect third-party facilitation of the negotiation through invoking mediation, support, and the introduction of objective perspectives into processes that may allow one or both parties to dispute various issues. The third party can facilitate communications by clarifying messages and ensuring that messages are articulated and understood by both sides. Brezhnev's assurance to both leaders about the sensitivity of their discussions helped the parties overcome possible misunderstandings, which allowed them to converse in a more productive manner (Bhasin, 2024, pp. 106–117). The third party can also act as a means of ensuring that the parties comply with the terms negotiated upon during

settlement. Other roles for the third party include serving as a guarantor or an observer on negotiations as a means to promote compliance with negotiated agreements and endeavours to avert potential noncompliance, thus contributing to the durability of the outcome from negotiated positions.

Ensuring Stakeholder Engagement

Mr Bhasin calls the India-Sri Lanka Accord a fable of the blind men and the elephant—something which meant different things to different people (Bhasin, 2024, p. 187). It was entered into by the President against the advice of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet on Rajiv Gandhi's promise that he would take responsibility to end the ethnic conflict. The 1987 Accord proved disastrous for Rajiv Gandhi, as it lacked crucial support from key players, id est, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sinhalese leadership. Although Gandhi was trying to restore peace, the accord was viewed with considerable suspicion. The LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran felt betrayed (Bhasin, 2024, p. 181), since the accord had rejected his call for an independent Tamil Eelam. In addition, many Sinhalese saw Indian involvement as an affront to sovereignty, suggesting that the accord had done little to address long-standing nuances of the ethnic divide.

The mere presence of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) also complicated matters. Instead of keeping the peace, the IPKF got into a fight with the LTTE, which led to casualties and growing anti-Indian sentiment among the Sri Lankans. Ultimately, Gandhi's decision to dispatch troops without consulting the local parties reflected badly on him both domestically and internationally. The situation finally spiralled

out of control, leading to Gandhi's assassination at the hands of the LTTE, emphasising the catastrophic impacts of a poorly executed diplomatic initiative.

The lesson learnt here is indispensable to note: the success of agreements is more likely to be achieved when stakeholders are consulted from the outset. Engagement ensures that everyone involved understands their roles and responsibilities. This, in turn, facilitates smoother actualisation. The failure to obtain buy-in from key Sri Lankan factions created resistance to the accord and undercut its own objective. Engaging stakeholders allows early identification of risks and challenges that may pose problems during negotiations. Knowledge of differing perspectives allows negotiators to anticipate objections and ensure they are dealt with before they escalate into larger issues. Lack of engagement from the stakeholders in the signing of the India-Sri Lanka Accord created unintended consequences, including violence and political fallout.

Negotiating India's Landmark Agreements offers an enthralling examination of the complex web of diplomacy in the international relations of India since independence. AS Bhasin expertly navigates the convolutions of the keystone treaties, not only exposing the leaders' strategic calculations but fully presenting the human sentiments and historical contexts that dictated their choices.

In conclusion, the lessons learnt from monumental treaties in Indian history lay down concrete principles in the arena of negotiations relevant to any diplomatic activity. The efficacy of communication remains the core, highlighting the need for lucidity and fairness to avoid misunderstandings that lead to the unravelling of talks. Strategic alliances

exemplified by the Indo-Soviet Treaty highlight how partners can accumulate strength or security against their negotiating counterparts. The role of mediation by a third party is also vital in bringing both sides together to ensure messages are conveyed correctly with less potential for conflict. Lastly, if the stakeholders are not engaged, the entire negotiating process is compromised; for trust to be gained, everything relevant to an issue requiring settlement must be referred to or included from the start.

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PLOUGHING A LONELY FURROW: PANDIT NEHRU'S POSTCOLONIAL DILEMMAS

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Book: The Nehru Years: An International History of Indian Non-Alignment
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The Midnight Hour

Hours before the clock would strike twelve and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru delivered his iconic speech, emissaries of Sri Ambalavana Desigar from Tanjore passed down a golden sceptre symbolising the continuity of the ancient Hindu kingship (TIME, 1947). The crimson-red authoritarian rule of Britannia lacked popular support, and this symbolic act accounted divine legitimacy to Nehru. In these moments of multitudinous magnificence, one question was about India's position in a world getting categorised and polarised by an iron curtain.

After hundreds of years of colonial impoverishment, state sovereignty and strategic autonomy seemed indivisible; however, it was a humongous task to think consciously and independently as a nation-state. Nehru, the protagonist of the book and the chief architect of nonalignment, treads very carefully on the path to develop a sustainable foreign policy. Dr Nayudu (2025) writes (p. 3), 'Nonaligned thought also allows us to escape empire, not just in its colonialist, European or Eurocentric forms, but by opening up a space to move beyond critiques of Eurocentrism.'

With several books and research papers already written on nonalignment, one may wonder about the relevance of Dr Nayudu's work. She draws her study from extensive sources, underscoring that the existing literature on the idea is often riddled with ahistoricism and numerous inaccuracies. She sharply criticises the sympathisers and disparagers of Nehru, and writes (p. 6), 'his foremost biographers, in an effort to rescue him from the charge of realpolitik, let it be believed that he was simply bewildered at the excesses of the post-war world. Proponents of this school of thought rely too heavily on Nehru's rhetorical practice to the extent that much meaning has been drained from his writings by selective reading intended to emphasise his liberalism.' Dr Nayudu frees Nehru from the shackles of political categorisations, and in the classical Skinnerian fashion, insists that he be read not as a thinker of today, but of the previous century, as a leader chained to his circumstances. With a country falling apart, border crises erupting, institutions calling to be built, and subjects in abject poverty unable to distinguish between the colonial and independent periods, it was Nehru's dilemma.

Dr Swapana Kona Nayudu lays down the purpose of her work masterfully in the introduction. The title, *The Nehru Years: An International History of Indian Non-Alignment*, has been carefully chosen, informing readers specifically about the thematic scope of the book. She further narrows down the structure of the book into two parts: first, to inform readers of the thought, and second, to broaden the lens to find the thought in play.

Shaping of the Ideas

At the midnight hour, one ought to believe that Nehru may have found solace in Gandhi, to 'run to him, to seek advice' (Mukherjee, 2018). And so he did. Despite Gandhi observing his fast and prayers on the day of independence in Beliaghata, the closest disciple would assert that the 'world can no longer be split into isolated fragments' and shall call India, 'the star of the freedom of the East' (Nehru, 1947).

Nehru saw contradictions as they were and 'sought consensus and compromise' (Sinha, 2025). These contradictions often led to significant indecisiveness but allowed him the patience to see through the pragmatism of his principles. Perhaps, this was what Gandhi meant when he said that when he would be gone, Jawaharlal would be the successor and 'speak his language' (Mukherjee, 2018). Gandhi, in the words of Subhas Chandra Bose, was a 'bad bargainer' (Kakati, 2005), wherein he often gave more than he took. Perhaps, at the onset, one can argue for similarly assessing Nehru's nonalignment. Nehru's ideas, Dr Nayudu writes, were rooted in the fragmented sovereignty of Gandhi and the internationalism of Rabindranath Tagore (anglicisation of Thakur). Gandhi believed that in an ideal state, no political institution

shall exist (p. 23). Gandhi also advocated for a modernity crafted exclusively for and in India, in order not to be swayed away by the frameworks of the Raj and the West. What comes across as interesting is Dr Nayudu framing Gandhi and Tagore as radical thinkers instead of liberal, as academics often like to categorise them.

However, this aspect seems underdeveloped and rushed. While there is no doubt that Gandhi and Tagore had a significant influence on shaping the postcolonial Indian consciousness, what may occur to the readers is why only they have been plucked out from the vast, vibrant garden of thinkers and leaders. After all, KM Panikkar, Aurobindo, and Subhas Chandra Bose, amongst so many other anti-colonialists, had views of the international that aligned with the ideas of strategic autonomy as well. *Second*, although Dr Nayudu rightfully mentions that there has been no monolithic Indian tradition and that all such ideas were often incompatible with each other, with merely around ten pages devoted to it, she does not quite build the relationship effectively. *Third*, it also becomes worthwhile to note that Tagore was a poet, and poets often live a parallel reality. As former foreign secretary Maharajakrishna Rasgotra remarked in 2013 in a conference hosted by the Indian Council of World Affairs (Bhattacharya, 2013) to commemorate the 152nd birth anniversary of Tagore, his ideas led to misjudgement of India's relations with China. Moreover, some other discussants in the same event believed that Tagore was not well informed of international politics, either. Despite this, Dr Nayudu's lens of using Tagore as an influence marks an interesting aspect in the book.

The Mysterious and Unknown

The second part of Dr Nayudu's work encapsulates how Nehru's vision of nonalignment was received across the world, and the way it responded to various events occurring at the peak of the Cold War. She builds on the Korean War (1950–53), analyses the dilemma during the Suez Canal Crisis and the Hungarian Revolution (1956), and very notably, illustrates the sharp conviction of Nehru in the lesser-known Congo Crisis (1960–64). In the history of nonalignment and Nehru's years, the 1962 debacle is essential for a comprehensive understanding. However, the Indo-China War of 1962 quite unexpectedly falls outside the scope of the study.

Nehru describes Asia as a mysterious and unknown place. Much to the dismay of Nehru, Pan-Asianism, despite all its allure of oneness, did not rest on a strong foundation. Dr Nayudu writes (p. 40), 'Most Asian states experienced the radicality of the twentieth century while still not being full-fledged states [...] the inter-Asian relations often took place within that framework.' The war had ended with Japan as a fragmented and defeated state, but it still was a former imperial power which showed colonialist tendencies. Nehru was aware that without bringing the People's Republic of China (PRC) into the United Nations, the Korean problem might become unmanageable and that India had a limited defined role to play. At the same time, with KM Panikkar in China, he felt that India could placate the Chinese. However, the turn of events was too quick for him to act. North Korea crossed the 38th Parallel on 25 June 1950, which led to the beginning of one of the bloodiest wars of the Cold War.

Despite being riddled with the remnants of the partition, India volunteered to send the Army's Medical 60 Parachute Field Ambulance (60 PFA) in a humanitarian spirit. And around the question of the repatriation of the prisoners of war (POWs) during the armistice agreement, India chaired the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC). This was a major event in Indian diplomatic history because it is always the practicality that forces one to question and polish the principles. Nehru remained clear about his stance, which was not to enter any Asian country militarily when India was not wanted.

Dr Nayudu's articulation of the events is eloquent. More so, she knows how to find patterns and connect them to reach her analysis, while sticking to the core theme of the book. It can be seen clearly in chapter four, when she speaks of the Suez Canal Crisis and the Hungarian Revolution (1956) in a comparative relation without losing the flow of prose. While India renounced the British and French aggression in the Suez Crisis, she remained ambiguous in the Hungarian Revolution. She goes on to call the Hungarian Revolution crisis the first failure of Nehru's nonalignment. Dr Nayudu writes (p. 133) that Nehru, at the end of the crises believed that the Soviet Union, England, and France had been desperately trying to find a way out without the loss of dignity. He went on to invoke Gandhi and elaborated on why one door must always be left open without sacrificing principles for this reason.

The conceptual idea of nonalignment, as could be inferred, was built on the lines of Pan-Asianism; there seemed to be a blind spot that Nehru and his recruits tried to find with the progression of conflicts. But the blind spot was further accentuated during the Congo Crisis of 1960–64, which showed a lack of understanding of Africa in the Indian diplomatic

thought leadership. Nehru placed an unwavering faith in the United Nations. And so, despite his reluctance and even the ambiguity of the UN on the use of violence in the crisis, he allowed the Indian peacekeeping forces and personnel to serve in Congo. And so, Dr Nayudu writes (p. 171), 'By the end of the mission, India was unpopular with the US, the Soviet Union, Ghana, and Egypt, for not forming a coalition with either of them.'

Does the book land?

The book has been structured carefully. Almost one-third of the book is dedicated to bibliographies, which are as useful as the book. Dr Nayudu's promise in the introduction is sharp and the erudition beautiful, but it somehow collapses towards the end of the book. It can be referred to for its rich arguments and perspectives; however, it is not an all-encompassing book about the diplomatic years of Nehru or the history of international nonalignment. Given the eloquent prose, masterful writing, and argumentative rigour of Dr Nayudu, a reader would insist on a lengthier volume. While most contemporary books on Indian foreign policy seem sloppy and heavily generalised, contributing nothing new, Dr Nayudu's work stands far ahead of them.

Often conflated as one in academia and popular imagination, the underlying distinction between the Non-Aligned Movement and nonalignment comes across as the core thesis of the book, along with Nehru's conceptual grasp. It is something of interest that nonalignment was a term preferred neither by Nehru nor his chief diplomat, VK Krishna Menon. While the textbooks often want to portray nonalignment as a force of neutrality, Dr Nayudu is successful in

illustrating how it was about being a moral force to let peace prevail in the world, whose purpose was to exercise sovereignty after years of anti-colonial struggle. It would not be unfair to say that nonalignment never died and lives on as strategic autonomy. Like a lonely traveller singing the old Bengali song: If nobody hearkens to your call, march ahead alone, India moved ahead on the road not taken. But did she successfully plough what Nehru called a 'lonely furrow' (The New York Times, 1947)? It is too early to conclude.

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