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Philosophical and cultural foundations of Bharat's overseas policy: *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*

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Abstract

Bharat's foreign policy is deeply shaped by its profound cultural heritage and philosophical traditions that distinguish it from the traditional realist approach which have dominated global geopolitics. This paper explores the philosophical and cultural foundations of Bharat overseas policy from classical works like the *Arthashastra* and *Mahabharata* to the contemporary interpretations by influential figures like Nehru and Gandhi. The main issue discussed is how India's philosophical and cultural ethics-such as *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, *ahimsa* (non-violence), and *dharma* (duty)-interplay with its pragmatic overseas policy choices in a world that is becoming more interconnected and competitive. There are three main research issues that will be addressed in this study first, how has Indian foreign affairs been impacted historically by its social and philosophical beliefs? Secondly, to what extent do these concepts still influence contemporary diplomatic strategies and strategic choices? Lastly, how does India balance practical geopolitical demands with its normative obligations? Key findings demonstrate that Indian foreign policy is characterized by a dynamic interaction of cultural idealism and realistic realism, with enduring principles such as non-alignment, peaceful coexistence, and strategic autonomy playing important roles.

Keywords: Bharat overseas policy, cultural diplomacy, non-alignment, philosophical tradition, strategic autonomy

Introduction

Bharat overseas policy is a distinctive paradigm, shaped not just by strategic imperatives and geopolitical realities, but also by the country's deep cultural and philosophical traditions. India's approach to international relations shows a deep-rooted combination of ancient ethical values and pragmatic concerns, in contrast to many other countries whose policies are primarily determined by modern socio-political factors. Bharat's overseas policy is an area of great scholarly interest due to interaction between modernity and traditional values, particularly in a world where power politics and competing national interests are becoming more and more prevalent. India's civilizational ethos, as alive in ancient texts such as the *Mahabharata*, *Arthashastra*, and *Upanishads*, serves as the intellectual grounds for its global involvement strategy. *Dharma* (moral order), *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (the world as one family), and *Ahimsa* (nonviolence) are fundamental ideas in this ethos, emphasizing the necessity of ethical behaviours, global interconnection, and peaceful cohabitation. These philosophical concepts, historically continue to affect Bharat's external policy frameworks, from the Cold War emphasis on non-alignment to the current emphasis on multilateralism and strategic autonomy. This consistency is emphasized by Indian foreign policy's historical trajectory. Mahatma Gandhi's advocacy of non-violence and peaceful coexistence influenced India's views on anti-colonial movement and post-independence diplomacy. Nehru codified these ideals through the non-alignment program, which asserted India's commitment to world peace and cooperation while rejecting the Cold War's bipolar alignments (Jain, 2000) ^[17]. These decisions were not just strategic but also reflected India's philosophical perspective that prioritized dialogue and mutual respect over confrontation and dominance. However, the influence of these cultural and philosophical beliefs is not without obstacles. In a multipolar world characterized by fluctuating power dynamics, economic interdependence, and regional conflicts, frequently demand pragmatism above idealism. For example, India has

acknowledged the value of strategic alliances and military preparedness to protect its national interests, even as it promotes values like non-violence and international harmony. This duality-balancing idealism with pragmatism is a distinguishing aspect of Bharat's distant strategy, demonstrating its adaptive endurance in a dynamic global system. The Republic of India overseas plan in the modern era still reflects its cultural values while addressing emerging global issues (Chatterjee & Das, 2021) [5]. The notion of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* resonates with Indian leadership in multidimensional organizations such as the UN, where it strives for a more egalitarian global order. Similarly, its emphasis on Dharma is obvious in its dedication to tackling international problems such as climate change, terrorism, and sustainable development. However, India demonstrates geopolitical pragmatism with initiatives like as the "Act East" policy, its participation in the Quad, and its emphasis on strengthening connections with foremost countries such as America, Russia, and China. This paper aims to explore the philosophical and cultural roots of Bharat's external policy, tracing its evolution over time and evaluating their applicability in the present. By exploring the relationship between ancient values and modern imperatives, it seeks to give a comprehensive picture of how India navigates the difficult terrain of global diplomacy while keeping anchored in its civilizational legacy.

Review of Literature

Bharat overseas policy is profoundly entrenched in its philosophical and cultural underpinnings, which reflect the country's diversity and historical context. The fundamental idea of "*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (the world as one family)" shapes India's foreign policy strategy and its aspirations for worldwide recognition. This response will inquire into the ideological foundations, the communication of both interior and exterior factors, and the role of cultural values in determining the extraneous affairs of India. The idea of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, promotes a worldview in which all humans are viewed as members of a single family, fostering empathy and cross-border cooperation (Ranganathan, 2015) [34]. The overseas strategy of India is based on the cultural and philosophical idea that "the world is one family." It concentrates on India's multi-alignment strategy, foreign policy autonomy, and socioeconomic growth within a polycentric international system (Wojczewski, 2017) [46]. The external policy of the Republic of India under Shree Narendra Modi is shaped by the philosophical and cultural underpinning of the idea "*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*," which means "the world is one family," stressing interconnection and shared global obligations in international relations (Srivastava, 2023) [41]. This is a reflection of India's cultural focus on peace, harmony, and universal goodwill, which encourages international collaboration and non-violence (Das, 2014) [9]. Bharat's extraneous program is inclined by its varied cultural heritage, which places a robust stress on non-alignment, peace, and adherence to international law-all of which are crucial to promoting world peace (M., 2023) [21]. Bharat overseas policy advocates for a just economic system that benefits all countries while advancing human freedom and social development (Chaturvedi, 2012) [6]. The Bhartiya Janata Party and the Congress have different foreign policy philosophies, although they both place more emphasis on

India's internal growth and standing as a great civilization over foreign engagements (Destradi & Plagemann, 2022) [10]. Jawaharlal Nehru and other historical leaders placed a strong emphasis on sovereign equality and non-interference, which are still relevant in contemporary politics (Chaulia, 2016) [7]. India's complex cultural terrain needs a foreign policy that considers ethnic sensitivities, blurring the barriers between domestic and global concerns (Schmidt, 2017) [35]. The emphasis on soft power, leveraging cultural legacy, is crucial to expanding India's global influence (Purushothaman, 2010a) [31]. India's G20 leadership illustrates the country's dedication to tackling global concerns via collaborative efforts, which is consistent with the *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* philosophy (Raina & Kumar, 2023) [33]. "The teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, which emphasize peace and non-violence, continue to outline Bharat's external policy, advocating for dialogue over confrontation" (Upreti & Samal, 2013) [45]. Relations with neighbouring nations, notably China, provide important dilemmas as India navigates territorial and geopolitical concerns (Scott, 2021). While India's philosophical approach encourages unity and cooperation, the actual realities of international relations sometimes call into question these objectives, demanding a delicate balance between cultural values and pragmatic policymaking.

Cultural and Historical Background

Pluralism, living together, and interaction with the outside world have been hallmarks of India's civilizational history. The notion of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* ("the world is one family"), which originated in ancient Sanskrit scriptures such as the *Mahopanishad*, represents India's inclusive worldview (Pethiyagoda, 2020) [30]. Indian approach to overseas affairs has been moulded by this philosophy, which prioritizes collaboration above conflict. The Mauryan Empire's legacy under Ashoka provides an early example of morally and ethically grounded diplomacy. Ashoka's adoption of Buddhism and propagation of its ideas throughout Asia with non-violent means exemplifies India's preference for soft power (Thussu, 2013) [43]. Culture has a significant impact on foreign policy, functioning as a bridge between states via shared heritage, beliefs, and customs. India has historically held a favourable position in international relations due to its rich cultural heritage. India's strong cultural impact is demonstrated by its historical connections to Southeast Asia, Iran, and Rome (Mohanty, n.d.) [27]. Sanskrit linguistic remnants in languages like Bahasa in Indonesia and temples like Angkor Wat in Cambodia highlight the long-lasting influence of Indian customs (Script, 2020) [38]. India's status as the home of Buddhism strengthened cultural relations, as monks and academics visited Indian Universities, promoting a favourable interchange of ideas that resonated across Asia (Sen, 2003) [39]. Yoga, which is today accepted not just as a health practice but also as a cultural phenomenon, is a manifestation of India's soft power (Mahapatra, 2016) [22]. Indian music and movies have a wide appeal, from Russia to South Asia and beyond, with cross-border collaborations increasing cultural diplomacy (Blarel, 2012) [3]. India's marine trade networks during the medieval period promoted commerce and cultural connections with the Arab world, East Asia, and Southeast Asia (Hall, 2009) [13]. These encounters fostered a culture of mutual respect and understanding, which continues to shape India's relations

with this region. The British government had a major effect on Indian foreign policy throughout the colonial epoch. With freedom India formulated a visionary foreign policy based on anticolonialism, anti-imperialism, and peaceful coexistence. Nehru's strategy was grounded on the aims of the Nehru's Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which sought to put Bharat and other newly independent countries outside the Cold War conflicts between America and Russia. The movement was a collective response to superpower conflicts, arguing for independence and non-alignment. In a 1956 address to the Indian Parliament, Nehru outlined this policy: "We aim, as far as practicable, to remain aloof from the power blocs. Our foreign policy is independent and non-aligned, allowing us to exercise our own judgment (Sharma, 2024)." "The Panchsheel Agreement, which outlined the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, was signed by China and India in 1954" (Arpi, 2004) ^[1]. The philosophies for nonviolent living include respect for one another, refraining from violence, and not interfering in one another's domestic matters. This pact was a daring declaration of India's commitment to peaceful diplomacy and placed a strong focus on non-aggression and respect for one another's sovereignty. The name "*Panchsheel*" is derived from medieval Buddhist inscriptions that include five restrictions for Buddhist monks. The term "*Panchsheel*" comes from the terms "*Panch*" and "*Sheel*," which indicate "five principles" or "five thoughts." Nehru's successor, Indira Gandhi, significantly altered Bharat's overseas program. India's overwhelming victory in the war of 1971 led to the establishment of new country Bangladesh. The victory in the Bangladesh Liberation War strengthened Bharat's position as a local power compared to Pakistan (Raghavan, 2013) ^[32]. "Indira Gandhi further solidified India's strategic alliance with the Soviet Union in 1971 by signing the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation" (Mastny, 2010a). According to historian S. Gopal, "Indira Gandhi's foreign policy was defined by assertiveness and strategic depth, crucial in a period of regional turbulence (Kapur, 2013) ^[18]." When Rajiv Gandhi came to power in 1984, His visit to America in 1985 eased Cold War tensions and improved economic and scientific collaboration, signalling a thaw in Indo-U.S. ties throughout his tenure (Mastny, 2010). India played a vital part in the founding of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The SAARC wanted to encourage collaboration among South Asian countries in spite of regional tensions. In addition to advocating for world peace, Rajiv Gandhi demonstrated India's commitment to nuclear disarmament by presenting a detailed disarmament plan to the 1988 UN General Assembly (Subrahmanyam, 2018) ^[42]. Under the Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao, the early 1990s saw a radical change. Rao implemented important economic changes in response to the economic crisis, including as opening up to foreign investment, privatizing state-owned businesses, and liberalizing trade regulations. In addition to addressing the economic crisis, this action changed Bharat's overseas program from non-alignment to multi-alignment and improved relations with China, Russia, and the United States. "Rao implemented the "Look East" policy in 1991 with the intention of enhancing Bharat's strategic and economic connections with Southeast Asia and the larger Asia-Pacific region" (Haokip, 2011) ^[14]. This strategy aimed to strengthen India's regional standing and offset China's increasing impact. Significant changes occurred in the early

2000s under Prime Ministers Manmohan Singh and Atal Bihari Vajpayee. With a noteworthy trip to Japan in 2001, Vajpayee's aggressive foreign policy placed a strong focus on deepening relations with Southeast Asia under the "Look East" policy. Vajpayee's government also established the framework for stronger Indo-US ties, as seen by the President Bill Clinton's famous tour to India in 2000" (Hathaway, 2002) ^[15]. The 1998 Pokhran-II nuclear tests under Atal Bihari Vajpayee represented a watershed moment in India's strategic stance (Fair, 2005) ^[12]. Despite international criticism, the Vajpayee administration defended India's right to nuclear weapons and technical progress. During his term from 2004 to 2014, Manmohan Singh better-quality Bharat's international bonds, especially with America. An important turning point was the America-India Civil Nuclear Agreement 2008, which brought India into line with the international nuclear system. Under Singh's leadership, the "Look East" strategy was replaced with "Act East," emphasizing strategic interaction with the Asia-Pacific region. "Bharat's foreign policy has adopted a more assertive and strategic approach since Prime Minister Narendra Modi took office in 2014" (Irengbam & Maluleem, 2023) ^[16]. PM Modi's "Act East" strategy strengthens engagement with the Asia-Pacific region, focusing on strategic ties with Japan and Australia while also contributing to the Quad alliance of America, Japan, and Australia (Basrur & Kutty, 2021) ^[2]. The Quad Alliance's 2021 summit is going to emphasize joint cooperation on maritime and security problems in an effort to guarantee an unrestricted Indo-Pacific. "Bharat's marine cooperation policy in the Indian Ocean region is known as Security and Growth for All (SAGAR) in the region" (Schottli, 2019) ^[36]. Our honourable Prime Minister Shree Narendra Modi originally announced the strategy on March 12, 2015.

Philosophical Foundation

Bharat external program is firmly built on its philosophical foundations, which combine traditional knowledge with contemporary demands. Pluralism, spiritual profundity, and ethical pragmatism define the Indian intellectual tradition, which offers a sophisticated perspective on international affairs. The idea of Ahimsa, or non-violence, which is deeply rooted in Buddhism, Jainism, and later Gandhian philosophy, is fundamental to philosophical foundation of Bharat's foreign policy (Pethiyagoda, 2020) ^[30]. This philosophy not only emphasizes the moral high ground, but it is also reflected in India's desire for peaceful conflict resolution and dialogue, as proven by its historical partaking in the NAM. Appadorai described the tradition of non-violence in Indian overseas policy as "the deliberate acceptance of a method of approach to foreign policy problems which emphasized reconciliation and the temper of peace, as opposed to a spirit of revenge and hatred (Khanna, 2018) ^[19]." Dharma, which means obligation and moral order, is equally important that supports India's calls for a fair and just system (Creel, 1972) ^[8]. Manu said that "one should not perform a good thing by taking a wrong path." Therefore, "To try to improve the state's welfare by enriching it through deception and fraud is like putting water in an unburned pot and hoping to keep it that way" (Dhavan, 1992) ^[11]. The Indian worldview, founded on the *Upanishadic* ideal of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* ("the world is one family"), drives a foreign policy that prioritizes peace

and shared well-being over separation (Pethiyagoda, 2020)^[30]. This is demonstrated by India's dedication to climate justice and its strong involvement in global forums such as the UN. Lokah Samastha Sukhino Bhavantu ("I hope that everyone and everything is happy and free, and that my own words, ideas, and actions all help to bring about that happiness and freedom for everyone") in other words let there be peace throughout the whole planet (Purushothaman, 2010b)^[31]. India's secular and inclusive attitude is shaped by the pluralistic character of Indian philosophy, which allows diverse opinions. Secularism is defined as the peaceful coexistence of different religions. India's secular message is an important lesson for the globe today. Furthermore, it underscores its efforts to arbitrate between competing interests, demonstrating a balance of idealism and realism. This intellectual tradition assures that Indian distant rule is fundamentally aspirational, with the goal of constructing a world based on cooperation, mutual respect, and sustainable development.

The overseas policy of Bharat also founded on the five principles articulated by the Buddha are enshrined in the five principles of *Panchsheela* i.e. mutual respect, non-aggression, non-interference, mutual benefit and equality, and peaceful Coexistence. The Indian external policy of peace, as well as the policy of making autonomous choices based on the merits of particular instances, are undoubtedly based on Indian ideals of peace, non-violence, and truth. Non-alignment, anti-imperialism, anti-racialism, and anti-war principles are practical, egalitarian, and realistic to us in India because we believe in human goodness, equality of all men, universal brotherhood of man, unity in diversity, secularism, and the Spirit of sacrifice, accommodation, and tolerance. Kautilya covered a number of conflict reasons in his *Arthashastra* and places significance on a number of factors, including enlarging the state's borders, retaliating against invasions, launching invasions for personal security, and shielding citizens from competitors. Kautilya rightly said that "diplomacy is an art that focuses on attaining tangible outcomes for the state rather than principles" (Modelski, 1964)^[25]. Our overseas policymakers could not overlook a critical method of this statecraft. Consequently, understanding between "purity of means and reduce the enemy's men" had to be achieved.

Challenges

Bharat overseas program is significantly influenced by its cultural and philosophical traditions, although there are still obstacles. The friction between idealism and realism, particularly in the security and economic sectors, sometimes puts question into its fundamental assumptions of India's foreign policy (Sinha & Mohta, 2007)^[40]. Critics contend that India's commitment to strategic autonomy and non-alignment may appear to be unable to make decisions in crucial geopolitical situations (Pant & Super, 2015)^[28]. Furthermore, in a multipolar world, combining pluralistic beliefs with pragmatic concerns need frequent recalibration. For example, India's interactions with neighbours such as China and Pakistan demonstrate the difficulty of reconciling cultural values with geopolitical imperatives. Again, it is necessary to reconsider conventional wisdom in light of contemporary issues like terrorism, cyberwarfare, financial anxiety, and the weaponization of technology. While India's philosophical foundation stresses communication and nonviolence, the current geopolitical context necessitates a

more proactive approach towards safeguarding national interests. The rising influence of non-state actors and transnational challenges affects India's capacity to balance idealism with realism (Sinha & Mohta, 2007)^[40]. These issues illustrate the limitations of depending simply on cultural and philosophical traditions, emphasizing the importance of creative and adaptable tactics. Fostering international cohesion in the face of growing geopolitical fragmentation is another crucial problem. India's focus on dialogue and cooperation needs to deal with an increase of great-power rivalry and unilateralism, which frequently hamper collective decision-making.

Contemporary Manifestations

Bharat overseas policy continues to reflect its cultural and philosophical traditions, while also adapting to the complexities of the twenty-first century.

- **Strategic Autonomy:** India's goal of strategic autonomy is consistent with the non-alignment doctrine, allowing it to engage with multiple powers while protecting its national interests (Mohan, 2013)^[26].
- **Soft Power Diplomacy:** Cultural diplomacy highlights Bharat's emphasis on shared heritage and values through programs like the International Day of Yoga and the promotion of Indian spirituality and film (Kumari, 2022)^[20].
- **Global South Leadership:** India's historical dedication to anti-colonialism and development cooperation is evident in its leadership in forums such as the G20, BRICS, and International Solar Alliance (Chakrabarti, 2017)^[4].
- **Pluralistic Engagement:** Bharat's foreign policy prioritizes dialogue and inclusivity, demonstrated by its balanced ties with major powers and regional neighbours (Mehta, 2009)^[24].
- **Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief (HADR):** India's proactive approach to disaster relief and humanitarian assistance is a prime example of its *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* notion. India's dedication to international solidarity is demonstrated by initiatives like Operation Maitri in Nepal after the 2015 earthquake and aid to several countries during the COVID-19 epidemic. These initiatives emphasize a focus on non-violence, cooperative engagement that prioritizes human well-being (Upadhyay, 2018)^[44].
- **Climate diplomacy and leadership in sustainable development:** Bharat has emerged as an important player in global climate initiatives, demonstrating its adherence to Dharma and Ahimsa by promoting a sustainable and equitable future. India fosters collaborative solutions to global environmental concerns via forums such as the International Solar Alliance and its significant renewable energy ambitions. Its civilizational attitude of coexisting peacefully with nature is consistent with this strategy (Pathak & Parris, 2021)^[29].

Conclusion

Bharat overseas policy is a distinct combination of its rich cultural legacy and philosophical insight, balanced with the necessities of modern statecraft. India continues to fight for a just, inclusive, and sustainable world order via the concepts of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, *Ahimsa*, *Panchsheel* and *Dharma*. India's foreign policy provides a paradigm for

balancing traditional ideals with contemporary issues as it navigates the complications of globalization. India's leadership in combating climate change, encouraging South-South cooperation, and pushing for a multipolar world demonstrates a dedication towards collaborative growth. At the same time, India's emphasis on strategic autonomy ensures that its global interactions are grounded in sovereignty and national interests, while also constructively contributing to the shared world. Challenges, such as managing regional conflicts and responding to critiques of apparent hesitation, highlight the importance of ongoing recalibration. As a leader in the Global South and a proponent of multilateralism, India must balance local development goals with international obligations. India's foreign policy provides an alternative paradigm in a time when global governance is experiencing major upheavals. Indian foreign policy, one that reconciles traditional values with modern issue is based on ethical pragmatism and inclusion, encourages a shared vision of the future of mankind, promoting sustainability and enduring peace. India's strategy offers a guiding framework for fair international relations as well as hope for a peaceful global society at a time when the world is struggling with serious issues like terrorism, cyberwarfare, inequality, climate change, and geopolitical conflicts.

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