

The Religions Factors in The Construction of India National Identity

Siyu Wang^{1, a}

¹Department of Diplomacy and Foreign Affairs Management, China Foreign Affairs, University, Beijing, 100091 China

^aE-mail: wsy12321@yeah.net

Abstract

India's national identity is a "South Asian regional hegemon" and under this guidance, India seeks to establish a South Asian system with India at its core. This national identity is based on the ideology of Hindu nationalism, which draws on the ideological foundation of the Indian order, a unique Indian-centric worldview that plays an important role in India's national identity construction.

Keywords

National identity, South Asian politics, Indian diplomacy, Indian centrism.

1. Introduction

India's national identity is intrinsically linked to Hindu nationalism, which gives paramount importance to the Hindu faith. This process of national identity construction has significantly influenced India's political culture and behavior. In the context of its regional and international engagements, particularly in South Asia, India views itself as a significant player shaped by its regional power aspirations guided by this identity.

Through continuous internal and external interactions, India has asserted its role as a promoter of "South Asian hegemony and order maintenance", driven by its self-perception as a regional power. The impact of this identity construction is profound, shaping India's interactions with other actors in the international system.

This article seeks to analyze the influence of Hinduism on India's perception in constructing a South Asian system with India at its core. The focus is on how Hindu nationalism shapes this identity construction process and the resulting effects on India's regional power aspirations.

2. Existing Understanding of National Identity

There are currently two dominant perspectives on the definition of identity in academic discussions. The first, known as essentialism, maintains that human beings possess a set of inherent and unchanging traits, resulting in a stable internal identity. According to essentialists, certain fixed "essences" or "traits" are universal and defining features that form the identity of specific groups of people.[1] In contrast, constructivist scholars have traditionally held a fluid perspective of identity, suggesting that its development is a gradual process shaped by external factors through continuous interactions. In this view, identity is not static and unchanging but rather dynamic, with its characteristics evolving over time and influenced by historical factors.[2]

In the realm of international politics, the American scholar Huntington presented his definition of the term "identity." According to Huntington, identity in this context refers to the self-image of an individual or a group, which is shaped by self-awareness and distinguishes them from others based on their unique and distinguishing characteristics. It is these qualities that define

what makes them distinct and different from other groups or individuals.[3] Huntington also believed that identity is a constructed concept.

National identity, as an extension of the concept of identity in the study of the state, refers to the attributes of the state, as well as the motives and characteristics of state behavior. National identity is a multifaceted and intricate concept that comprises various cultural, historical, and political factors. Essentially, national identity represents a country's self-perception of its distinct traits and values and its connection to other actors in the global system.

The topic of national identity was first introduced to the field of international relations by Alexander Wendt, a constructivist scholar. Wendt posited that identity is an inherent characteristic of intentional actors, who possess the capability to generate motives and behavior traits. In other words, identity shapes an actor's self-awareness, which in turn influences their actions and behaviors in significant ways.[4] Professor Qin Yaqing has built upon the original theoretical foundation to further the study of national identity in China. According to Qin, national identity is defined as a country's position within the global community. More specifically, it refers to the extent to which a modern sovereign state identifies with its leadership role in the international system. In other words, national identity is closely tied to a country's cooperation and participation in international affairs.[5]

National identity is a complex concept shaped by both subjective and objective factors. It comprises both material and spiritual components, including hard indicators like population, territory, government type, and economic development level, as well as soft indicators such as political culture, historical experience, ideology, and psychology. It is imperative for a state to clarify its national identity before defining its specific national interests and formulating foreign policies that align with them. By analyzing its relative relationship with other actors in the international community, a state can design specific actions and adjust its national identity accordingly. This process of continual analysis and refinement enables a state to navigate the complex global landscape and pursue its national interests more effectively.

3. The Construction of India's National Identity

India's basic self-perception is that of a regional hegemon. Hinduism and Indian cultural identity provide the ideological and cultural basis for India's national identity, while India's comprehensive national power serves as its material foundation. India's interactions with other countries have formed its perception and concerns regarding regional hegemony.

For India, the objective advantages and strong subjective consciousness have laid the cognitive foundation for India's regional hegemonic identity.[6] Under India's perception of its hegemonic identity, there still exist some "Secondary identities," leading to India's multiple identity affiliations, such as "strategic stakeholder in the Indian Ocean," "Security Provider in The Region," "Fastest Growing Economy," and "Regional Leader." [7] However, these secondary cognitions are still formed under the identity of the hegemon.

During the early stages of India's national identity construction, a dilemma emerged between India's regional identity and its global identity. While India established a dominant position in the South Asian region during this period, its leaders recognized the need to project India as a great power on the global stage. However, despite India's regional hegemony and global ambitions, significant strategic insecurities continue to beset the country. These challenges can be attributed, in part, to India's unique geopolitical position and political culture. It is worth noting that the concept of Hindutva, rooted in Hindu nationalism, has played a significant role in shaping India's national identity. As India continues to develop its identity and role in the international community, it will need to navigate these complex internal and external dynamics effectively.

4. The Religious Foundation of Regional Hegemony

In the process of constructing national identity after India's independence, Hindu nationalism has played a crucial and irreplaceable role. Particularly since Modi came to power, contemporary political elites represented by the Bharatiya Janata Party have further developed Hindu nationalism.[8]. In the changing, often tumultuous landscape of Indian politics, Hindu nationalism has gradually supplanted the earlier Indian nationalism[9] that had been advocated in the early days of India's independence. It has become the ideological foundation and political philosophy behind India's contemporary ascent. Therefore, in the process of constructing national identity, the doctrines and worldview of Hinduism have inevitably influenced India's external decision-making thinking.

4.1. Religious and Cultural Aspects - The Order Ideology of "Dharma"

India's unique culture and religious beliefs have guided its particular nationalistic self-awareness. Therefore, in discussing India's foreign policy decision-making and the shaping of its national identity, it is inevitable to discuss the influence of Hinduism on its way of thinking. And when discussing Hinduism, we cannot avoid discussing one of its core ideas - "Dharma".

"Dharma" (धर्म) is a fundamental concept of religion and spiritual belief originating in India. Originating from "Sanatana-dharma", which includes Buddhism and Jainism as branches, Hinduism is also the successor of Sanatana-dharma. Sanatana-dharma constitutes the psychology, philosophy, spirituality, religion, and other aspects of the Indian nation, covering all aspects of Indian life.[10]

"Dharma" is transliterated from the Sanskrit धर्म (dharma), and Chinese ancient Buddhist scriptures generally translate it as "law". This word comes from the root word "dhr" and first appeared in the Rigveda, meaning "support", "maintenance", and "inherent order of things". [11] In the doctrine of Hinduism, "Dharma" is explained by the classics of the "Mahabharata", which includes respect for all orders of the world and for the order itself. Therefore, under the influence of the "Dharma" system, Indian civilization has a special pursuit of hierarchy and order. In Indian culture, many classical elements reflect the pursuit of hierarchy and order in Indian culture—the caste system represents this pursuit.

4.2. Indian centrism and Mandalaism

Mandala (मण्डल) is a concept originally rooted in Indian religion, represented by a series of concentric circular diagrams written in Sanskrit. In its original form, Mandala signifies a hierarchical system that depicts a "sacred space" or a "miniature of the universe," aimed at expressing a divine world order. The core idea of Mandalaism posits that the universe is infinite, and all phenomena are interrelated and interdependent. This fundamental concept is reflected in the construction and structure of Mandala. The center of Mandala symbolizes the origin of the universe, while the surrounding levels and meanings represent different aspects and levels of the universe.

The concept of Mandala was introduced into the political field by Chanakya's "Arthashastra". The Mandala system, which was developed by combining Indian religious concepts, represents an international relations cognitive framework. This important strategic thinking of India aimed to construct national diplomatic relations centers around an international system that is conqueror-centric, where other countries are perceived as either allies or enemies. In this system, nations that are considered "allies" or "neutrals" are temporary strategic positions, and any subject would not be worthy of long-term trust. Therefore, trust-building in such a system must be approached with caution. This system reflects the hierarchical worldview of ancient India, where the powerful conquered others, and smaller nations were forced to form alliances or face the prospect of being conquered. Despite its origins in ancient India, the Mandala system

remains relevant today as a tool for understanding international relations in South Asia and beyond.

The Mandala system is essentially an anarchic system, where the conqueror and its neighboring countries exist in a state of security dilemma. The basic logic behind the relationships between countries is quite simple: a conqueror's neighboring countries are regarded as potential or real enemies; the countries adjacent to a conqueror's allies are also considered friendly, while nations adjacent to an enemy's allies will be seen as enemies themselves.[12] This cognitive framework of confrontation and distrust in the international system has contributed to India's long-standing distrust of its neighboring countries. Despite its relevance in ancient times, this system of international relations poses many challenges for building stable and lasting relationships today.

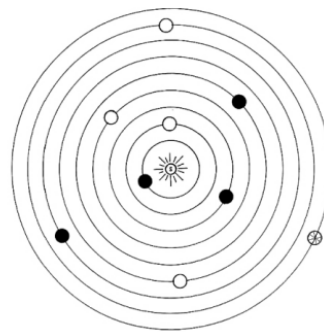


Figure 1. The schematic diagram of the Mandala International System [13]

"The sun represents the "conqueror", the black ball represents the "enemy", the white ball represents the "ally", and the flower ball represents the "neutral."

Under the Mandala system, it is assumed that all countries are potential enemies. Additionally, all nations neighboring these enemy countries are regarded as potential temporary allies, who may eventually become future adversaries. In such a scenario, the conqueror must remain constantly vigilant and uncompromising in its dealings with neighboring countries, always prepared to defend itself against any perceived threats. At the same time, the conqueror must be wary of current allies becoming the next enemy. This paradigm places a heavy emphasis on self-preservation, and the international relationships built under this system are characterized by suspicion and mistrust. As a result, maintaining stable relations between countries can be challenging, and any diplomatic ties must be built with great care and caution.

The Mandala system is based on the perspective of the "conqueror" and offers an analysis of the global situation from the standpoint of "India," viewed as the conqueror. As such, this system reflects a strong Indian-centric view of international relations. Moreover, the Mandala system promotes the idea of a "destined great power" for India, which remains deeply ingrained among Indians, regardless of whether other countries accept it or not. This notion has been inherited by the Indian strategic community and is widely regarded as a valuable asset of Indian diplomacy.[14] It imbues the country with a sense of self-confidence and provides a framework for its foreign policy, helping to shape its relationships with other nations.

4.3. India's View of Military and Conflict.

In the political culture of India, the foundational narrative of the international political order comes from Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. It is a Sanskrit text on the art of governance, believed to have been written around 300 BCE. It laid the basic logic of politics in Indian culture. The *Arthashastra* primarily reflects the ideas of power politics, total war, and political amorality. [15]

The ideology of Kautilya was greatly influenced by the theories of Mandala and Dharma. In his work "Arthashastra", Kautilya describes a world of disorder and chaos, where danger is

prevalent and the law of the jungle, "the big fish eat the small fish", governs the survival of states, regardless of their size. The size of a state determines its security, and a state's strength can be increased by sacrificing other states to enhance its own power. [16] In this system, the conqueror (India) is at the center, and the identity of other states is defined by their size and location. The neighboring countries closest to the conqueror are likely to be real or potential enemies, while the neighboring countries of enemy states may be allies. The allies and enemy states are clearly distinguished, and one can clearly distinguish between one's own allies and enemy states.[17]

At the same time, Indians believe that the external world is chaotic rather than peaceful. Peace is not the order of the world, but war and violence are. The peace advocated by ancient India rarely equates to the elimination of war and violent behavior, but rather refers to seeking inner peace in the pursuit of personal cultivation in a world full of violence. [18] Therefore, the use of force to solve problems is not a matter of self-reproach and introspection for Indian culture, but rather a normal and orderly means, and even a duty.

For example, the ancient Indian epic "Mahabharata" depicts a war between two royal families, and the use of force is seen as a legitimate means of resolving conflicts. Similarly, the "Arthashastra" also advocates the use of force to achieve political goals.

5. The Influence of Religious Concepts on India's Foreign Policy Decision-Making

India has established itself as a regional hegemon, exercising significant influence in the internal affairs of the South Asian region. However, when it comes to its interactions with countries outside the region, India pursues a relatively independent and self-reliant diplomatic strategy. India views itself as the international voice and representative of South Asia, actively participating in global interactions.

5.1. Decision making preference

India's emergence as a regional hegemon is reflected in its foreign policy and decision-making preferences. As a dominant power in South Asia, India has sought to promote its interests by using a combination of coercive and persuasive tactics. India's strategic interests include maintaining political stability and economic growth within the region while preventing any external interference that could undermine its regional dominance.

Under the influence of political and religious cultures, India's perception of order in relation to other South Asian countries has been influenced by political and religious cultures. India places great importance on maintaining order in its political view. This order is reflected in the dominance of the strong over the weak and the expectation of obedience from the weak. Additionally, India believes it should be the central power in this political system.

At the global political level, India's Indian-centric view and emphasis on order are reflected in its limited respect for international order and law. India advocates for the international community to follow principles of fairness and equality, while opposing the hegemonism and inequality of other major powers. At the same time, India advocates for reforming the existing international system to align with its national interests and elevate India's position on the world stage.

Based on its regional hegemonic position, India has adopted a foreign policy approach that is characterized by pragmatism, non-alignment, and independence. India maintains a degree of strategic autonomy when it comes to its interactions with great powers like the United States and China, balancing between them while pursuing its interests without becoming overly dependent on either. At the same time, India seeks to be an influential player in regional and

global forums, representing the interests of South Asian countries on issues such as climate change, trade, and security.

At the regional level, India considers itself the only great power in South Asia and has the responsibility of a great power. As the regional hegemon, India believes it is necessary to interfere in the internal affairs of weaker countries to maintain order and reinforce the hierarchy. This interference is intended to maintain and reinforce the hierarchy and order.

At the same time, Neighboring major powers are viewed as natural enemies, and the enemy of a neighboring enemy is seen as a potential ally. Therefore, India has long maintained high pressure in South Asia, hoping that other countries in the region will obey the hierarchy and show respect and recognition for its great power status. For neighboring countries that do not obey its will, especially Pakistan, India tends to display its strength, either through the use of force or the threat of force, to compel the other party to submit.[19]

Regarding China, India also has a very strong sense of suspicion and distrust. C China, as a neighboring major power, is viewed as India's natural enemy. However, India currently lacks the ability to engage in comprehensive confrontation with China alone, and thus seeks to ally with countries such as the United States. India views countries such as the United States as temporary allies, and while seeking to gain benefits, it also maintains a certain distance to prevent infiltration by these countries. B This is because these countries may become India's new enemies in the future.

In sum, India's emergence as a regional hegemon has given rise to a foreign policy that is marked by strategic autonomy and pragmatism. While asserting its dominance in South Asia, India seeks to balance its relationship with other great powers and represent the interests of the region on the global stage.

5.2. Military practice of India

India has been a powerful country in the South Asian region and has frequently resorted to the use of force as a normal means of handling internal issues in the region. This approach is rarely avoided in India's foreign policy decision-making process, as India believes that only through a hardline approach can it safeguard its national interests and regional security.

India's use of force in the Third Indo-Pakistani War resulted in the successful dismemberment of Pakistan, which was the most devastating war in India's history. However, India ultimately emerged victorious, which solidified its position in the South Asian region and earned it more respect and recognition internationally. In dealing with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) issue in Sri Lanka, India also considered military action as an important measure. India successfully resolved this issue through military action, which further enhanced its influence in the South Asian region. In addition, India has also armed itself to annex Sikkim and control Bhutan. Although these actions have been criticized by the international community, India believes that they are necessary measures to safeguard its national interests and regional security.

In recent years, India has continuously engaged in military provocations against China along the border, which is a reenactment of this approach. India's common tactic is to seek diplomatic initiative through military action. However, after military failures, India's diplomatic behavior in this direction is also prone to stagnation.

It can be seen that India's use of force in handling internal issues in the South Asian region is a normal behavior. India's common tactic is to seek diplomatic initiative through military action. In recent years, India's continuous military provocations against China along the border are also a reenactment of this approach.

6. Conclusion

Hindu nationalism has had a profound impact on the construction of the Indian national identity. The Hindu nationalist movement combines religion and nationalism, promoting the formation of the Indian state and unity among Indians by linking Hinduism with patriotism and national pride. Hindu nationalists seek to align the values and cultural advantages of Hinduism with India's national interests to establish a sense of shared consciousness and values among Indians.

In the political movements and national construction process in India, Hindu nationalism has played an important role. After India gained independence, it became a diverse country, and the Hindu nationalist movement became the bond connecting the various groups. The core idea of Hindu nationalism is that Hinduism is a native culture of India, and this culture should be regarded as a part of Indian nationalism and national identity. The order and power doctrines in Hinduism, as well as the unique political ideas derived from Hinduism, have played an indispensable role in the construction of contemporary Indian national identity.

The formation of the Indian "South Asian hegemony" identity based on Hinduism and India's unique political culture has had a significant impact on India's foreign policy, becoming a guideline for India to establish itself as the center of South Asia and to use force and order to maintain its hegemony over South Asia.

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