

Reconstructing India's Identity in World Politics: An Emerging Convergence between Public Diplomacy and Constructivism

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Abstract Public diplomacy has become one of the most significant instruments of foreign policy since the operation of international relations has become more public, and the public, in turn, has become more involved. While challenging the importance of material power in achieving various political outcomes, Public Diplomacy (PD) offers an alternative model of practice that enables an understanding of the normative or ideational structures that help in determining audience identities. It furthers our knowledge of international relations by engaging in shared understandings of this inter subjective dimension, mainly through social interaction and interplay. Here lies the convergence between public diplomacy and social constructivism. In defining PD, Bruce Gregory (an expert in PD and foreign affairs) suggests that PD is 'the means by which states, associates of states and non state actors understand cultures, attitudes and behaviour, build and manage relationships; and influence opinions and actions to advance their interests and values. When a country seeks to achieve objectives and set targets, realize values, or defend interests, it must express, exchange and share its views and ideas with those whose actions and behaviour they wish to alter, deter, or reinforce. Such an interaction may vary from vividly defining the government's objectives, and the various ways to realize them especially with regard to concluding agreements on contentious issues. The constructivists place IR and public diplomacy in the context of broader social relations. They lay emphasis on how state's interests and identities are shaped by rule-governed (or norm-governed) interactions. In brief, the theory points out how norms influence state interests and behaviour. Thus, as rightly pointed out by Joshua Goldstein (an international relations expert), the state's conception of interests, its presentation of itself on the international stage, and its behaviour all might change as a result of inter-state interactions. States, according to this view, come to see themselves as others see them quite similar to the general human tendency. The present article analyses the ways in which constructivist theories of international relations can

inform public diplomacy practice. The paper draws on India's approach to diplomacy and the significance of a virtual convergence between public diplomacy and constructivism in reshaping India's identity in world politics.

Keywords Public Diplomacy, Foreign Policy, International Relations, Social Constructivism, State Identity

1. Constructivism and International Relations: a Reality Check

Constructivism is being widely recognized today for its ability to capture significant features of global politics and is viewed as an important theory of International Relations (IR). The constructivists seek to develop theory focused on where state interests come from as against the Realists who tend to simply take state interests as given. They maintain that the state's conception of its interests, its presentation of itself on the international stage, and its behaviour all might change as a result of interstate interactions. States, like people, tend to see themselves as others see them (Goldstein 2007: 152). Constructivism is a social theory that is broadly concerned with the relationship between agents and structures, but it is not a substantive theory since the constructivists hold different arguments regarding, for instance, rise of sovereignty and the impact of human rights norms on states. Some draw from the insights of James March, John Meyer, and organizational theory, whereas others from Michel Foucault and discourse analysis. Some prioritize agents and other structures. Similarly some focus on inter-state politics and others on transnationalism (Baylis, Smith & Owens, 2005, p. 162).

Constructivism is about human consciousness and its role in international life. Much of international theory and especially neo-realism is materialistic since it focuses on how balance of power is defined by the distribution of

material power between states and explains the behaviour of states. Constructivists purely reject such one-sided material focus by arguing that the most important aspect of international relations is social, not material. They believe that the international system is nothing but a human creation not of a material or physical kind but of a purely ideational and intellectual kind. The system represents a set of norms, ideas and thoughts which have been arranged by certain people at a particular time and place.

The core observation of social constructivism is the social construction of reality. The emphasis is on the socially constructed nature of actors and their identities and interests. Constructivists believe that actors are not born outside and prior to society, as individualism claims. Rather, actors are produced and created by their cultural environment. In brief, they believe that reality does not exist out there waiting to be discovered, instead, historically produced and culturally bound knowledge enables individuals to construct and give meaning to reality. Thus, the social construction of reality also shapes what is viewed as legitimate action. Do we only choose the most efficient action? Do the ends justify the means? Or, is certain action just unacceptable? (Baylis, Smith & Owens, 2005, p. 163).

The social construction of reality also emphasizes on certain concepts which are now part of our social vocabulary. For instance, concepts such as sovereignty, anarchy and power did not always exist; rather they were a product of historical forces and human interactions that shaped our understanding about the interplay between existing ideas and institutions. Security, human rights, humanitarian intervention, legitimacy, development are all orienting concepts that can be interpreted in different ways conveying different meanings. The category of weapons of mass destruction is modern invention and so is the political and legal category of 'refugees' which is merely a century old. The above mentioned points denote that constructivism is a social theory which operates at a high level of abstraction i.e., it tells something about international relations, but is not concerned with IR specifically. Constructivist theories of IR focus specifically on how IR can be better understood and explained with the help of a constructivist approach. Alexander Wendt (IR Constructivist) changed the neo-realist position by asserting "anarchy is what states make of it". By this he meant that anarchy is basically a social construction and as such it is not inherently dangerous, scary or unstable, but becomes so when the states interpret it as such. It is, however, not just interpretation that matters but also interaction with others that creates one structure of identities and interests.

Further, the internationalization of norms, to a great extent defines the behaviour and identities of the actors. Norms of humanitarianism, citizenship, military intervention, trade and arms control, human rights and the environment not only regulate what states do, they also can be connected to their identities and thus expressive of how they define themselves and their interests. Constructivists are thus interested especially in how norms influence state interests and

behaviour. For instance, civilized states are expected to avoid settling their differences through violence not because war may not fetch them the expected result but because it violates how 'civilized' states are expected to act. The domestic debates on the USA's treatment of 'enemy combatants' was concerned with not only whether torture worked, but also whether it is a legitimate practice for civilized states (Baylis, Smith & Owens, 2005, p. 169).

The socially constructed realities are powerful structures that can have real consequences and the constructivists understand that social structures once created are extraordinarily difficult to change. In other words, the constructivists believe that the international system is an inter-subjective awareness among people and is constituted by ideas and not by material forces.

2. Public Diplomacy: Projecting India's Foreign Policy Concerns

Public diplomacy has become a most relevant instrument of foreign policy because the conduct of international relations has become more public, and the public has become more involved. The "new public diplomacy" is a term now widely discussed in scholarly literature but with varying interpretations.

Confidentiality and conventional diplomacy go together. As diplomacy is about communication and negotiation involving governments, they have inevitably to undertake their sensitive work outside the media's reach. However, the 21st century is characterized by globalization, assertive public opinion, an ever present 24x7 media and Web 2.0 technology. This combination lends increased significance to public diplomacy. Recognizing the magnitude of the changing scene, India has begun well, but it has miles to go for securing optimal projection of its foreign policy concerns.¹

The fundamental purpose of India's foreign policy and for that matter of any other country is to promote its national interest. But national interest is not as simple as it may appear. There exists a hierarchy of national interests of which security occupies preeminent position. In the modern world, security has both military and non-military dimensions such as economic security, energy security, environmental security, food security etc. However, the task of pursuing national interests through the conduct of foreign policy has been rendered very difficult and complex on account of the recent perception of a growing divergence between the interests of the state and that of the people. Today, people in many parts of the world, particularly in the developing countries, perceive the state as their greatest enemy. The state is largely seen as being engaged in protecting and promoting the interests of the elite which controls it. This creates foreign policy problems. Since a large section of people in several countries perceive that the

¹ "Public Diplomacy- The Tasks Ahead", Rajiv Bhatia, The Hindu, January 10, 2011.

state, in collusion with the elite, indulges in actions such as compromise with law and order, suppression of human rights and pursuit of an elitist development strategy in which the vast number of the poor do not participate and are increasingly marginalized, all of which creates domestic threats to security. For instance, if, because of the upsurge of majoritarian communalism, the Indian state decides to compromise its basic principles of secularism or treats its minorities virtually, if not legally, as second-class citizens, it puts India's foreign policy to a more severe test than would be warranted otherwise (Dubey 2013: 18-19).

Hence, constructivists rightly point out that "reality" that surrounds us is not merely a product of purely subjective (or material) forces, but is essentially a product of our shared perceptions, beliefs, values, ideas and understandings. Thus, the foreign policy of a nation is also a social construction of reality and public diplomacy forms an integral part of a nation's foreign policy.

New Public Diplomacy has highlighted the significance of "soft power," the power to exert influence through the force of ideas, institutions, values, and culture.² Foreign assistance to other countries is one of the most striking yet least analyzed aspects of Indian foreign policy. Indian foreign aid is a reflection of both India's strategic interests as well as its self-perception as the main regional power and an emerging global power. The recent governmental efforts to centralize and harmonize Indian aid are a manifestation of the gradual integration of the country's aid policy into its vision of India as an emerging global power. It also illustrates the central role entrusted to this soft power tool of Indian foreign policy.

The meaning of Public Diplomacy can be rightly inferred from what Barack Obama meant when he told the Indian Parliament in 2010 that he was "mindful" he might not be standing before it as the U.S. President "had it not been for Gandhi[ji] and the message he shared and inspired with America and the world." Michelle Obama, on the other hand, won hearts by dancing with Indian children. Carla Bruni, the French President's wife, communicated by doing a perfect namaste, besides informing the public that she prayed for "another son" at a shrine near Agra. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao proclaimed that China and India "would always be friends and would never be rivals." Our distinguished guests were thus using tools of public diplomacy to connect with their hosts in India.³

Public diplomacy refers to a web of mechanisms through which a country's foreign policy positions are transmitted to its target audiences. The term was first used by U.S. diplomat and scholar Edmund Guillion in 1965. He saw it as "dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy, the cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries ..." Indian diplomats, however, rightly maintain that public diplomacy has to do with both foreign

and domestic audiences. When you put up a story on television, blog or any social networking site today, it is consumed by a university student in India as much as by a financial analyst in Toronto.⁴

However, against this backdrop, it needs to be pointed out that in recent years, the formulation and conduct of India's foreign policy has significantly suffered from the absence of long-term thinking and a holistic approach. It has been ad hoc and reactive rather than pro-active and also has lacked in transparency. As such, diplomacy has played more against India's own people than against foreign powers. For instance, on several sensitive issues, including security matters, what has been conveyed to the people of India has been at variance with what has transpired in discussions with major powers. What is therefore required is long term thinking and a holistic approach to the formulation and conduct of India's foreign policy coupled with greater transparency in its projection to the people and the world at large. This implies that in a democratic system, no government can withstand pressures from abroad without the support and preparedness of the people to make sacrifices. And this cannot happen until the people are clearly told what is at stake. For this purpose, the people should be given the opportunity to participate in formulating foreign policy through open and transparent public debates both within and outside the Parliament. This was, however, lacking on several occasions, for example, on the exercise of India's nuclear option, on the issues in the Uruguay Round of trade negotiations, particularly on TRIPS, and on the Indo-US nuclear deal. The government ended up misleading the people on these issues (Dubey 2013: 23-24).

Of late, the way one's message is put across has also undergone a fundamental change. The advice now is to transcend government-to-public communication and, instead, focus on two-way communication, on "advancing conversations." Today, public diplomacy is about listening *and* articulating. Beyond the traditional media, the cyber space sustains a "Republic of Internet" and a "Nation of Facebook" which cannot be ignored. If the government does not cater to their needs, someone else, possibly with an adversarial orientation, will. Perhaps this perspective led the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) to embark on a new journey in 2010, establishing an interactive website, a Twitter channel, a Facebook page, a YouTube channel, a BlogSpot page and a presence in online publishing sites like Scribd and Issuu.⁵

Further, Public opinion has greater influence on foreign policy in democracies than in authoritarian governments. However, the fact remains that no government can rule by force alone. It certainly needs legitimacy to survive i.e., it must convince people to accept (if not like) its policies, because in the end policies are carried out by ordinary people like the soldiers, workers and bureaucrats (Goldstein 2007: 186).

Again, in any strategy of India's foreign policy, relations

² Joseph Nye, first introduced the concept of "soft power" in "Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power", New York: Basic Books, 1990.

³ "Public Diplomacy- The Tasks Ahead", Rajiv Bhatia, The Hindu, January 10, 2011.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

with neighbours have always been accorded the highest priority. For, a country is judged by the world through the prism of its neighbour's perception. And India is no exception to this. India's standing in the world very much depends on its ability to maintain good relations with its neighbours. Adverse relations with neighbours are bound to be a major constraint to India playing its rightful role in the comity of nations (Dubey 2013: 50). The Indian tradition has always nurtured the idea of an interlinked neighborhood with a sense of enlightened national interest⁶ which has been captured in this verse from the Mahopanishad, "*Ayam bandhurayam neti ganana laghucetasam udaracharitanam tu vasudhaiva kutumbakam*", or "only small men discriminate by saying 'one is a relative, the other is a stranger'. For those who live magnanimously the entire world constitutes but a family". It was Jawaharlal Nehru (India's first Prime Minister) who believed that while foreign policy must be rooted in a spirit of realism, it should not be obstructed by the narrow realism that lets you look only at the tip of the nose and little beyond. However, the Gujral Doctrine was perhaps the strongest articulation of a policy of reaching out to the neighborhood, even through gestures that did not demand reciprocity. In case of the new government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India will likely employ, in its foreign policy, a nuanced combination of all three of Nye's instruments of international influence, what Nye terms as "*smart power*": a clever combination of the tools of conventional hard, or military and economic, power and soft power.⁷

India's multilateral diplomacy also needs to be seriously addressed, which Indian MEA veterans think of as a sphere of particular accomplishment for India over the years. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) wherein Nehru played the most significant role was a useful placeholder for India at a time when its leaders needed to devote the bulk of their time to pressing internal challenges. Indeed, Nehru is credited with coining the term 'Third World' to describe those states uninvolved in, indeed seeking to stand apart from, the Cold War ideological conflict – although, as Paul Krugman points out, on account of their modest levels of development, it rapidly morphed into a term connoting backwardness or poverty, hardly Nehru's intent (Malone 2011:17).

3. PD Practice within a Constructivist Framework

Understanding diplomacy from a Constructivist perspective has considerable advantages. First, being a sociologically inclined IR theory, its prime concern is on the state's agency and interpreting 'what the state makes of the

⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville, in his masterly work "Democracy in America" has described enlightened national interest as that which made the United States unique: the ability of its citizens to work for the common good since the pursuit of a better life for everyone serves the self-interest of all (in "A doctrine of economic levers, soft power", Amitabh Mattoo, The Hindu, June 12, 2014).

⁷ "A doctrine of economic levers, soft power", Amitabh Mattoo, The Hindu, June 12, 2014.

anarchy of international politics'. Second, Constructivism permits the use of major indicators of culture and context in the study. Finally, a Constructivist analysis involves novel methods, such as the interpretive method in IR, ethnography. According to the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu's, *habitus* refers to the disposition which establishes that each person has a worldview shaped by their socialization. With the study of IR incorporating refreshing spheres of interdisciplinary perspectives, the constructivist approach highlights the advantages of the utilization of sociological idioms and paradigms since the early 1990's. A sociological analysis helps understand the basic constructivist strategy, such as what people do and how the structure shapes their actions which is mutually constitutive.

Further, New public diplomacy with a constructivist framework combines traditional government to government diplomacy, traditional public diplomacy (government policies to influence foreign publics), public affairs (government policies to inform/influence its own public), and image management. "It is a way of telling others about the positive characteristics of your society. Joseph Nye maintains that if a country promotes values that other states want, leadership will cost less" (Lamy, Masker, Baylis, Smith and Owens 2012: 116-117).

Wendt's constructivist theory depicts a different logic of the inter-state relations. They are more inclined to see national interests of a sovereign state governed by ideas and identity at play, the latter two of which are, first of all, socially constructed products in an interactive process of states. It is as a result of social interaction among states that the meaning of national interests, state identity and power status has to be inter-subjective by nature (Wendt 1992: 396:403).

4. Public Diplomacy and Constructivism: Developing Synergies within Indian Framework

A noted occupant of India's Ministry of External Affairs and a keen bilateralist, when asked what India does best internationally replied without a second's hesitation 'multilateral diplomacy'. As India continues to seek a greater role in the management of the multilateral system at the high table of international relations alongside actors such as the USA, the EU, China, Brazil, and South Africa, there is a dichotomy between how Indians perceive their engagement with the multilateral system on the one hand, and how India's interventions play out and are at times perceived by its partners on the other (Malone 2011:270).

The gap in perceptions is emphasized by a commentator on the issue of climate change: 'In an ironic and to most Indians quite disturbing turn, India is increasingly portrayed as an obstructionist in the global climate negotiations. How did a country likely to be on the frontline of climate impacts – with a vast proportion of the world's poor and a reasonably good record of energy related environmental policy and

performance, reach this diplomatic *cul de sac*?' The same is the story in trade where India holds up its economic liberalization as a major achievement in facilitating the free flow of goods and services across borders, yet gets saddled with the blame for upending the Doha round. Similarly on nuclear technology, India trumpets its record on non-proliferation and nuclear safety yet is excluded for three decades from multilateral access to nuclear technology and is consistently chided for refusing to sign up to the NPT and CTBT. A close look at the above mentioned instances point out that India's stance in multilateral forums is influenced by a variety of factors, the major one being its domestic politics which to a great extent determines its position on international issues. India's former Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh (1998-2002) comments: 'Multilaterally, many Indian voices have been very conscious of years of colonial "subjecthood". The result has been excessive Indian touchiness at times. Underlying Indian positions in some international economic negotiations has been a fear of foreign economic looting rooted in our history (Malone 2011:270).

However, it can still be maintained that India has a broader conception of public diplomacy encompassing all facets: media, cultural, educational, economic and diaspora diplomacy. Today, even though India's approach remains somewhat fragmented and much of the planned PD activity places prime emphasis simply on message projection, there is still an evidence of a shift towards a two-way, even collaborative discourse with regional partners, including bilateral dialogues, transnational technological and education partnerships, sporting outreach and extended two-way cultural programs. For instance the India-Russia annual cultural exchange programmes. Both the countries have encouraged the traditional fine culture of each country emerge in the cultural markets of the other countries, so as to counter the danger of westernization.

Countries also engage very often in certain goodwill gestures to rescue a frayed relationship as has happened in the case of India and the US. After a recent diplomatic row between the two strategic partners over the arrest of an Indian diplomat in the US which caused tensions in the bilateral relations, as goodwill gesture, the officials of the US department of homeland security returned \$1.5 million worth of artifacts to India, which were stolen from Indian temples and found by American authorities.⁸ Further, the presence of heads of governments or senior representatives from all the South Asian countries at the swearing-in of Mr. Narendra Modi (the present Prime Minister of India) and his cabinet, effectively turned the ceremony into a regional celebration of democracy which in turn, was a remarkable development in India's democratic history since in the recent past India has not been seen explicitly as a champion of democracy in the region. The above mentioned political development can also be seen as the first step towards strengthening democracy in the region through building,

what the political scientist Karl Deutsch described as a *security community* (a region in which the large-scale use of violence has become unthinkable).⁹

India's foreign policy and diplomatic interactions have largely been shaped by the socially constructed identity of the country. Much of 'modern' India's self-conception was originally devised around Indian nationalist discourse and led by the highly-dominant Congress party before and following independence. While India claims to be a truly secular although a multicultural state, its neighbouring countries like Pakistan, Srilanka and Bangladesh consider India as largely a Hindu state based on majoritarianism and dominance which in turn influence their primary foreign policy goals. This shows the role of identity in shaping actors and foreign policies.

5. Conclusions

Given the complexities inherent in the Indian democratic society with regard to its values systems, beliefs and local normative structures, the country has found it very challenging to build domestic political support for diplomatic and foreign policy initiatives by merely invoking the argument of power. In this context the principle of national interest seems to be more compelling to Indians. But the task goes beyond simply defining national interests since its actions are also required to be justified on the world stage and this necessitates a different set of norms and values. As a consequence, the tension between 'power and principle' continues to have an enduring effect on India's foreign policy. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that India's democratic credentials and values are unlikely to be favoured over its key strategic interests.

In India Projection is driven by the External Publicity division as well as the Public Diplomacy division of the MEA. Beyond them, a sizeable amount of work is handled by our missions abroad, often the unnoticed members of our collective choir.

Although they all perform very well, but room for improvement still exists. Our ambassadors need be trained at effectively handling TV interviews and other aspects of mass media. Similarly, our diplomats should also rapidly acquire skills relating to Web 2.0 technology. Besides, the rising importance of non-state actors should be fully recognized.

Finally, the most striking disconnecting lines between India's self-perception and the world's view should be addressed. The previous government in India under the UPA regime had got caught up in a storm of internal concerns — scams, onion prices and excessive politics. The present government under the NDA regime has pledged to make India a truly Great Power, and for that we must deepen interest in world affairs. Besides, the MEA should do well to use all its weaponry of public diplomacy so as to increase

⁸ "India-US ties with Gods", Charu Sudan Kasturi, The Times of India, January 14, 2014.

⁹ "A doctrine of economic levers, soft power", Amitabh Mattoo, The Hindu, June 12, 2011.

Indian awareness of the world and India's place in it and vice-versa. Every effort needs to be made to project India's soft power and the task certainly begins at home.

Diplomacy functions and sustains on a very thin margin of practical possibilities. In case of India, as has been discussed in the above mentioned paragraphs, that margin is provided by the perception of outsiders' about the country's strengths and weaknesses. This perception primarily depends on what is happening inside the country than outside. It can, therefore be rightly maintained that in the recent years, the formulation and conduct of India's foreign policy has immensely portrayed a lack of a futuristic and holistic approach. Diplomacy in India has very often been played mainly against its own people than against foreign powers. For instance, on several sensitive and contentious issues, including security matters, what have been conveyed to the people has contradicted with what has transpired in discussions with major powers. The need of the hour is greater transparency in the projection of India's foreign policy to the people and to the world at large. In order to build confidence among its own people and to mobilize them to withstand foreign pressures, the country needs transparency and accountability in all its diplomatic operations. Since in a democratic system, no government, how much ever powerful, can withstand pressures from abroad without the support of the people and without the spirit of the people to make sacrifices. This can be possible only when people are clearly told what is at stake. As such, the people should be given the opportunity to participate in formulating foreign policy through open and transparent public debates both in and outside the Parliament. This is one of the pre-requisites for the attainment of the principle of good governance, which in turn, would get automatically reflected in the country's foreign policy.

In the massively changed and still changing global situation, coupled with its own uncertainties, Indian diplomacy has to maintain a through balance between transparency and flexibility and this can be possible only when it comes out of its stereotypes and outmoded paradigms and take recourse to new initiatives like public diplomacy with a considerable understanding of social constructivism.

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