

Political Emergence of the Bhartiya Narrative: India's Civilizational State and Foreign Policy Recalibration

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ABSTRACT

The Bharatiya narrative has gained significant political traction in recent years, especially since the re-election of the governing administration in 2019, symbolizing a resurgence of India's indigenous identity and strategic self-reliance. This paper explores the multifaceted dimensions of the Bharat narrative, tracing its historical roots to contemporary political implications. The term "Bharat" represents not merely a linguistic preference but a comprehensive statement of independence and cultural pride, encapsulating India's journey from colonial subjugation to a confident, self-sufficient nation. Methodologically, the article employs a qualitative, interpretive design combining historical–institutional analysis and critical discourse analysis of speeches, policy documents, and electoral trends. The narrative functions as a multidimensional strategic instrument operating across political, economic, cultural, and diplomatic domains. Politically, it challenges external frameworks and advocates for engagement with the world that reflects India's unique personality and values. Economically, it aligns with the vision of "Aatmanirbhar Bharat," promoting resilience and self-sufficiency. Culturally, it embraces India's diverse heritage, languages, and traditions, projecting an image of India as "Vishwamitra"—a reliable friend stepping up in crucial moments of global crisis. This paper argues that the Bharat narrative constitutes a strategic tool for redefining India's national identity and international standing while fostering unity and purpose among citizens. By examining key political speeches, policy initiatives, and cultural discourses, this study provides comprehensive understanding of the political emergence of the Bhartiya narrative and its potential to shape India's developmental trajectory and global role in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Aatmanirbhar, Bhartiya, Civilizational state, Foreign policy, Strategic autonomy

Conceptualizing the Bhartiya Narrative: Definition, Context, and Significance

The conceptualization of a "Bhartiya narrative" has emerged as a transformative force within Indian political, cultural, and diplomatic spheres in recent years, particularly since 2014. This phenomenon represents far more than a linguistic preference or rhetorical flourish; it constitutes a comprehensive reorientation of how India perceives itself and engages with the world. This timing is significant—coinciding with India's economic ascendancy, growing strategic importance in global affairs, and the electoral dominance of political forces committed to advancing this narrative as central to national governance. This concept, prominently championed by Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, India's External Affairs Minister, reimagines India's role on the global stage by drawing deeply from the nation's ancient

heritage while addressing contemporary global challenges (Economic Times, 2023). The Bhartiya narrative transcends conventional political ideology; it constitutes a comprehensive worldview aimed at redefining how India interacts with the world by leveraging its unique historical and cultural experiences. Within global international relations discourse, the Bhartiya narrative aligns with broader civilizational state paradigms—a phenomenon gaining prominence among major powers challenging Western-centric frameworks and asserting deep historical continuities as foundational to contemporary statecraft.

Jaishankar outlines several foundational elements of the Bhartiya narrative that merit careful examination. First, it emphasizes India's identity as a civilizational state possessing continuous historical continuity spanning thousands of years, thereby distinguishing this conception fundamentally from conventional post-colonial nation-states born through decolonization. This perspective prioritizes drawing upon India's rich philosophical and cultural traditions—including concepts from Vedantic philosophy, Arthashastra, and Buddhist thought—when formulating modern governance approaches and policies. This represents a deliberate intellectual shift away from Nehruvian secular nationalism toward frameworks that position Hinduism and Hindu civilization as central organizing principles for understanding Indian identity. Second, the narrative advocates for a more assertive and confident India on the global stage, explicitly rejecting the "defensive mindset" inherited from the colonial period in favor of a proactive stance reflecting India's growing economic and strategic importance. This assertiveness manifests through greater focus on strategic autonomy—resisting alignment with superpower blocs—and multi-alignment in foreign policy, positioning India as an independent player capable of pursuing national interests without external dictation. Third, the Bhartiya narrative seeks deliberate balance between tradition and modernity, encouraging technological advancement and economic reform while maintaining strong connections to India's cultural roots, as evidenced in policies combining digital initiatives with traditional governance concepts, exemplified through initiatives like "Digital India" paired with promotion of Sanskrit and classical Indian knowledge systems.

However, the rise of this narrative has not proceeded without substantial controversy and significant opposition. Critics, including prominent scholars, civil society organizations, and opposition political parties, argue that it represents significant departure from India's post-independence secular and pluralistic ethos, potentially marginalizing minority communities and suppressing alternative viewpoints (Jaffrelot, 2021). Concerns center on how this narrative may fundamentally alter India's constitutional commitment to secularism and equal protection for all citizens regardless of religion. Conversely, proponents contend that this narrative constitutes a necessary recalibration of India's national identity, one more accurately reflecting the country's historical legacy and aspirational future. They argue that India's secular framework, rather than being threatened by civilizational assertion, can accommodate cultural pride grounded in historical continuity.

This paper aims to explore systematically the origins, evolution, and implications of the Bhartiya narrative in contemporary Indian politics and society. By examining its historical foundations tracing back to nineteenth-century Hindu reform movements, analyzing its current manifestations in governance, policy, and diplomatic practice, and considering potential future trajectories as India advances through the twenty-first century, this study seeks to understand comprehensively how this narrative reshapes India's political landscape, social fabric, and global engagement. The analysis deliberately considers both opportunities the Bhartiya narrative presents—enhanced national unity, renewed confidence in international forums, reclaiming of cultural agency—and challenges it poses for India's evolution as a diverse, democratic nation

navigating twenty-first century complexities while maintaining constitutional pluralism and democratic institutions.

Theoretical Frameworks and Scholarly Perspectives on Civilizational Nationalism Civilizational State Paradigm and National Identity Formation

Academic discourse surrounding the Bhartiya narrative intersects multiple social science subdisciplines, including international relations theory, comparative politics, political sociology, and critical discourse analysis. Contemporary literature increasingly locates this phenomenon within the broader global resurgence of civilizational states—political entities challenging Western liberal universalism through claims of deep historical continuity and unique cultural distinctiveness (Jaffrelot, 2021; Nussbaum, 2007). This civilizational state resurgence extends beyond India to encompass China's emphasis on Confucian traditions, Russia's Orthodox Christian heritage claims, and Turkey's Ottoman legacy invocations—all representing deliberate contestations of post-Cold War liberal international order assumptions.

Scholars differentiate the conventional nation-state, predicated on territorial sovereignty and civic identity (often secular), from the civilizational state, which derives ultimate authority from continuous, geographically expansive cultural heritage (Chatterjee, 1993). Recent analyses posit that the Bhartiya narrative strategically frames the contemporary Indian state not as an entity born through decolonization in 1947, but rather as the modern political manifestation of ancient Hindu civilization (Vanaik, 2017). This discursive framing permits policymakers to assert profound strategic autonomy, contest external normative frameworks concerning human rights and democracy, and position India as a civilizational pole within an emerging multipolar world order. International relations theorists including Buzan and Jackson have provided frameworks for analyzing civilizational states as non-Western actors challenging Westphalian sovereignty assumptions. Within this theoretical context, the Bhartiya narrative functions as an epistemic tool legitimizing India's deviation from Western governance and foreign policy norms.

Historical Evolution of Hindu Nationalist Thought

The Bhartiya narrative's intellectual lineage extends to nineteenth-century Hindu reform movements and twentieth-century ideological frameworks. The Arya Samaj (founded 1875) and Brahma Samaj (founded 1828) movements sought reinterpreting Hindu traditions to address modern challenges while maintaining cultural authenticity (Chakrabarty & Pandey, 2009). Key ideological figures including Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Veer Savarkar, and Swami Vivekananda provided foundational conceptual frameworks that remain operative in contemporary discourse (Sharma, 2013). Savarkar's concept of Hindutva provided philosophical scaffolding later adopted by political organizations, particularly the Bharatiya Jana Sangh and its successor, the Bharatiya Janata Party (Bhatt & Mukta, 2000).

Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920) proved instrumental in synthesizing nationalist political movements with Hindu symbolism, thereby bridging civic and religious identities in innovative ways that resonated powerfully with emerging educated classes. Tilak's invocation of historical figures including Shivaji and his promotion of Ganesh Chaturthi as nationalist festivals demonstrated sophisticated understanding of how cultural symbols could mobilize political consciousness while maintaining legitimacy within Hindu traditions (Bhatt & Mukta, 2000).

Veer Savarkar's (1883-1966) concept of Hindutva provided comprehensive philosophical framework defining "Hindu" not merely as religious identity but as civilizational belonging encompassing all who respected Indian soil, thereby potentially including non-Hindu communities within the framework while

centering Hindu civilization as foundational (Savarkar, 1969). This conceptual innovation proved crucial for subsequently enabling political movements to claim inclusive Indian nationalism while maintaining Hindu primacy.

Swami Vivekananda's (1863-1902) neo-Vedanta philosophy introduced spiritual dimensions to nationalism, emphasizing India's potential for global spiritual leadership grounded in Vedantic wisdom (Narayan, 2009). Vivekananda's vision of India as possessing superior spiritual heritage capable of providing moral guidance to materially advanced Western nations established intellectual foundations for later civilizational superiority claims.

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), established in 1925 by K.B. Hedgewar, marked significant organizational advancement in systematically spreading these ideological concepts through structured membership, disciplined activism, and institutional reproduction mechanisms ensuring ideological continuity across generations. The RSS developed elaborate organizational infrastructure including daily shakhas (local cells), training academies, and hierarchical leadership structures that transformed ideological discourse into institutionalized political practice (Andersen & Damle, 2019).

Colonial experience profoundly shaped this narrative's development in complex and paradoxical ways. Although British historical interpretations were frequently distorted and dismissive of Indian civilizational achievements, they paradoxically stimulated renewed interest among Indian intellectuals in recovering, reclaiming, and revalidating authentic cultural traditions and civilizational heritage supposedly lost or degraded under colonial administration. Colonial administrative practices, particularly population categorization through decennial censuses beginning in 1871, inadvertently consolidated communal identities by imposing census categories demanding religious self-identification, thereby contributing substantially to defining "Hindu" as a coherent collective category susceptible to political mobilization and identity consciousness (Brass, 2003). The anti-colonial struggle, though predominantly secular in mainstream nationalist expression under Indian National Congress leadership, simultaneously generated currents of cultural nationalism that eventually fed into the emerging Bhartiya narrative framework.

Mainstreaming of Hindu Nationalism in Contemporary Politics

The Bhartiya narrative transitioned from ideological marginality to mainstream political dominance through institutional evolution and strategic adaptation spanning seven decades. The Bharatiya Jana Sangh, established in 1951 by Syama Prasad Mookerjee, functioned as the primary political vehicle for this ideology, operating within India's secular democratic framework while advancing Hindu nationalist principles (Palshikar et al., 2017). During 1951-1977, the party captured marginal electoral support, never exceeding 8% of votes cast in national elections, reflecting limited appeal beyond Hindu-majority constituencies and educated urban populations.

The party's reconstitution as the Bharatiya Janata Party in 1980 marked strategic inflection point, substantially broadening appeal through ideological moderation and coalition-building strategies that expanded acceptance among diverse voter constituencies beyond core Hindu nationalist base. The Ram Janmabhoomi movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s represented a critical turning point, bringing the Bhartiya narrative into prominent national consciousness through sophisticated mobilization of religious symbolism, mass rallies, and grassroots organization (Varshney, 2002).

The 2014 and 2019 electoral victories under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership marked decisive mainstreaming of this narrative within national political discourse (Jaffrelot, 2021).

Foreign Policy Dimensions and Strategic Autonomy

Within international relations literature, substantial attention addresses relationships between domestic political narratives and foreign policy outcomes. Theoretical frameworks including neoclassical realism and "two-level game" analysis explain how leaders utilize domestic cultural narratives to legitimize external diplomatic postures, thereby mobilizing domestic support for foreign policy initiatives while signaling commitment to international audiences (Varshney, 2002).

The concept of strategic autonomy—India's resistance to incorporation into Western alliance structures or superpower bloc subordination—represents a core principle underlying the Bhartiya narrative's foreign policy dimensions. Strategic autonomy extends beyond conventional non-alignment, encompassing active assertion of independent agency in international forums, cultivation of multi-alignment relationships with competing powers, and deliberate assertion of civilizational distinctiveness as legitimizing framework for policy deviation from Western norms (Economic Times, 2023).

The "Jaishankar Doctrine," referring to the foreign policy approach articulated by the current External Affairs Minister, represents a hybrid realist-Hindu nationalist philosophy systematically soft-balancing competing regional powers—particularly China—while advancing indigenous vocabulary in bilateral and multilateral forums. This doctrine emphasizes India's civilizational contribution to global governance, reclamation of historical agency suppressed during colonial periods, and assertion of distinctive voice for Global South constituencies (Economic Times, 2023).

Scholarship emphasizes that promoting ancient concepts such as "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" (the world constitutes one family)—rooted in Maha Upanishad—in premier global forums serves dual purposes: it projects benevolent soft power internationally while simultaneously resonating with domestic constituencies' desire for civilizational validation (Guha, 2007; Rajagopal, 2001). India's positioning as a voice for the Global South draws upon non-aligned historical legacy while reframing this identity within more assertive, civilizational-grounded contexts, thereby claiming moral authority for advancing alternative development models and governance approaches (Hansen, 1999).

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in historical–institutional analysis and critical discourse analysis. It addresses the central question of how the Bhartiya narrative has emerged and been operationalized as a civilizational state project in contemporary India. Rather than estimating causal effects in a statistical sense, the study reconstructs and interprets how key political actors frame India's identity, past, and global role, and how these framings interact with institutional developments over time (Chatterjee, 1993; Jaffrelot, 2021).

Data Sources and Collection

The analysis is based on three broad categories of material.

First, the study relies on primary political and policy texts produced by the central government after 2014. These include selected speeches and statements by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar—such as United Nations General Assembly addresses, major foreign policy speeches, and key interviews—as well as core policy and legislative documents including the Citizenship Amendment Act 2019, the constitutional changes abrogating Article 370, and the National Education Policy 2020. The primary texts were collected using purposive sampling: speeches were

included when they explicitly addressed India's identity, civilizational role, or strategic posture, drawing on official transcripts from the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of External Affairs, Parliament records, and United Nations document repositories.

Second, the study uses secondary scholarly literature on Hindu nationalism, civilizational state discourses, Indian democracy, and foreign policy to provide historical and theoretical scaffolding. Foundational works by Christophe Jaffrelot, Partha Chatterjee, Ashutosh Varshney, Thomas Blom Hansen, Ramachandra Guha, Achin Vanaik, Walter Andersen and Shridhar Damle, Suhas Palshikar and colleagues, and Jyotirmaya Sharma are used to situate the Bhartiya narrative within longer trajectories of Hindu nationalist thought, postcolonial state formation, and the transformation of the Indian party system (Brass, 2003; Guha, 2007; Hansen, 1999; Jaffrelot, 1996, 2021; Varshney, 2002).

Third, the study draws selectively on electoral data and institutional chronologies—such as vote shares and seat counts in the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections, dates of major legislative and constitutional changes, and the timing of flagship initiatives like Make in India, Atmanirbhar Bharat, International Yoga Day, and India's vaccine diplomacy. These data points are integrated into the narrative to anchor discourse shifts in concrete political and institutional developments.

Case Selection and Scope

The article covers developments from the early twentieth century to the post-2014 period, but the core empirical window is 2014 onwards, when the Bhartiya narrative becomes central to governing discourse and policy practice (Guha, 2007; Jaffrelot, 2021). Earlier historical episodes—such as nineteenth-century Hindu reform movements, the formation of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the evolution of the Jana Sangh and the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Ram Janmabhoomi mobilisation, and the first BJP-led governments under Atal Bihari Vajpayee—are treated as historical foundations and *longue durée* antecedents rather than as standalone case studies (Hansen, 1999; Jaffrelot, 1996; Sharma, 2011; Vanaik, 2017).

Within this temporal frame, the analysis is organised around four clusters that correspond to the main empirical sections: (1) historical foundations of the Bhartiya narrative in reformist, nationalist, and Hindutva thought; (2) the rise and mainstreaming of Hindu nationalism in electoral and party politics; (3) contemporary manifestations of the Bhartiya narrative in domestic policy and foreign policy; and (4) challenges, contestations, and possible future trajectories. Together, these clusters allow a process-tracing of how ideas about civilization, nation, and state moved from the ideological margins to the centre of Indian statecraft.

Analytical Strategy

Analytically, the study proceeds in two steps. In the first step, it undertakes a historical–institutional reconstruction of the Bhartiya narrative's intellectual and organisational genealogy. Primary historical texts and secondary scholarship are read to identify recurring themes such as civilizational continuity, the relationship between Hindu identity and Indian nationhood, attitudes towards secularism and minorities, and the role of cultural nationalism in political mobilisation (Chatterjee, 1993; Jaffrelot, 1996; Vanaik, 2017).

In the second step, the article conducts a critical discourse analysis of contemporary speeches, policy documents, and symbolic practices associated with the current government. Texts are read iteratively and coded for key signifiers (for example, “civilizational state”, “strategic autonomy”, “Vishwaguru”,

“Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam”, “Aatmanirbhar Bharat”), the oppositional binaries they construct, and the ways in which these discourses are linked to specific institutional changes in areas such as citizenship, federal arrangements in Jammu and Kashmir, and education policy. The four empirical sections—on historical foundations, political rise, contemporary manifestations, and challenges and future implications—are thus organised as analytic lenses through which the operation of the Bhartiya narrative is examined.

Limitations

Several limitations follow from this design. The study is primarily text-based and focuses on elite political discourse and formal policy; it does not include systematic fieldwork, survey data, or interviews with political actors or citizens. The analysis privileges national-level institutions and leaders, particularly the central government, and therefore cannot fully capture the diversity of responses at state, local, or grassroots levels. Finally, because the article seeks to construct an interpretive narrative of emergence and consolidation rather than to test a specific hypothesis, its conclusions are analytical and heuristic rather than predictive. These limitations shape the scope of the findings but do not detract from the value of offering an empirically grounded and theoretically informed reading of how the Bhartiya narrative operates as a civilizational state project in contemporary India.

Result and Discussion

This section presents the main findings of the study and discusses their implications in light of the existing literature and the analytical framework outlined above. The analysis is organised into four interrelated parts: the historical foundations of the Bhartiya narrative, its rise and mainstreaming in Indian party politics, its contemporary manifestations in domestic and foreign policy, and the challenges and possible future trajectories that follow from its consolidation.

Historical Foundations Of The Bhartiya Narrative

The Bhartiya narrative is deeply embedded in India’s long civilizational history, which has generated sophisticated ideas about statecraft, social order and ethical governance. Ancient texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads and the Arthashastra articulated concepts of rajamandala (circles of kings), varna-based social organisation and dharma-oriented rule, later reappropriated as indigenous alternatives to Western political theory in modern nationalist discourse. These intellectual resources created a repertoire from which contemporary proponents of the Bhartiya narrative could retrospectively derive legitimacy for framing the Indian state as a civilizational entity rather than a purely territorial nation-state.

Nineteenth-century Hindu reform movements such as the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj reinterpreted Hindu traditions in dialogue with colonial modernity while insisting on civilizational continuity, thereby linking religious reform to emerging forms of national consciousness (Chakrabarty & Pandey, 2009; Sharma, 2013). These movements sought to purge what they regarded as superstition and social decay, but they did so by appealing to an “authentic” Hindu past, thus reinforcing the idea of an enduring civilizational core. In doing so, they helped shift the locus of identity from narrow sectarian affiliation to a wider Hindu civilizational frame that would become crucial for later ideological projects.

Key nationalist figures further developed this linkage between cultural heritage and political community. Bal Gangadhar Tilak played a pivotal role in fusing nationalist aspirations with Hindu symbolism, transforming festivals such as Ganesh Chaturthi into public events that combined religious devotion with

anti-colonial mobilisation and thus bridged civic and religious identities (Bhatt & Mukta, 2000). Veer Savarkar's conceptualisation of Hindutva redefined "Hindu" as a civilizational category grounded in shared territory, culture and historical memory, providing philosophical scaffolding for political movements that could claim to represent the "Hindu nation" while still operating within the formal institutions of a modern state (Savarkar, 1969). Swami Vivekananda's neo-Vedanta emphasised India's spiritual superiority and potential global moral leadership, anticipating later arguments that India's civilizational heritage provides normative guidance to a materially advanced but spiritually deficient West (Narayan, 2009).

The establishment of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) by K.B. Hedgewar in 1925 translated these ideological strands into an organisational project focused on long-term cadre-building. Through daily shakhas, training camps and a hierarchical structure, the RSS institutionalised a Hindu nationalist worldview and ensured its intergenerational transmission, turning diffuse cultural sentiments into routinised practices and disciplined activism (Andersen & Damle, 2019). At the same time, British colonial practices—especially census classifications that fixed religious identities—helped consolidate "Hindu" as a coherent demographic and political category, while the trauma of Partition and the creation of Pakistan intensified demands for a more assertive Hindu identity within Indian politics (Brass, 2003; Hansen, 1999). Together, these historical developments laid the groundwork for a Bhartiya narrative that presents the contemporary Indian state as the latest manifestation of a much older Hindu civilisation, rather than a polity born solely from mid-twentieth-century decolonisation.

Rise Of The Bhartiya Narrative In Mainstream Indian Politics

The Bhartiya narrative's journey from ideological marginality to mainstream dominance unfolded through the evolution of Hindu nationalist parties and the transformation of India's party system. The Bharatiya Jana Sangh, founded in 1951, functioned as the principal political vehicle for the ideology in the early decades of independence, but remained electorally marginal, rarely surpassing 8 percent of the national vote and confined largely to pockets of northern and urban India (Palshikar et al., 2014). Its participation in the Janata Party coalition government after the Emergency briefly brought Hindu nationalist leaders into national office, yet under a broader anti-Congress umbrella that limited explicit ideological assertion. The reconstitution of the Jana Sangh as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 1980 marked a strategic inflection point. Under leaders such as Atal Bihari Vajpayee and L.K. Advani, the party combined coalition-building and rhetorical moderation with a willingness to mobilise around explicitly Hindu nationalist themes when politically advantageous (Jaffrelot, 2007). The Ram Janmabhoomi movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s proved decisive in propelling the Bhartiya narrative into the centre of national politics, using religious symbolism, mass rallies and media campaigns to frame the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the demand for a Ram temple as acts of historical rectification and civilizational justice (Varshney, 2002). This mobilisation not only expanded the BJP's geographic reach but embedded core elements of the narrative in the vocabulary of everyday political debate.

The BJP's assumption of national office in 1998 and 1999 under Vajpayee signalled the first period in which proponents of the narrative controlled the central government, even though coalition constraints imposed limits on ideological maximalism. Initiatives such as the 1998 nuclear tests were framed as expressions of national sovereignty and civilizational pride, while attempts at curriculum revision reflected a desire to institutionalise cultural nationalism within the state, though they met with resistance (Guha, 2007). The 2002 Gujarat violence under Narendra Modi's chief ministership became a highly controversial

episode, simultaneously triggering domestic and international criticism on grounds of secularism and minority protection while also consolidating parts of the Hindu nationalist base through polarisation effects (Varshney, 2002).

The 2014 general election marked a decisive consolidation of the Bhartiya narrative within mainstream politics. Led by Modi, the BJP secured a single-party majority in the Lok Sabha, emphasising a combination of development credentials, strong leadership and cultural pride, supported by unprecedented use of social media and professional campaign machinery (Jaffrelot, 2021). The 2019 election further strengthened this position, with the BJP-led coalition increasing its seat share and vote percentage and explicitly linking national security, civilizational heritage and majoritarian mobilisation. Since 2014, the narrative has acquired a hegemonic position in national political discourse, shaping not only electoral competition but also the terms on which opposition parties must engage with questions of identity, nationalism and development.

Contemporary Manifestations in Domestic Policy and Foreign Policy

In domestic policy, the Bhartiya narrative has informed a series of high-profile legislative and institutional changes that embody its civilizational and majoritarian emphases. The abrogation of Article 370 and the reorganisation of Jammu and Kashmir into Union Territories in 2019 were presented as correcting a historical anomaly and fully integrating a restive border region into the Indian Union, aligning national security imperatives with a narrative of territorial and civilizational unity. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019, which offers a fast-track to citizenship for non-Muslim migrants from neighbouring countries, has been defended by proponents as a humanitarian measure for persecuted minorities but criticised by opponents as eroding the secular, religion-neutral basis of citizenship, revealing how the narrative can reconfigure the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.

The New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and associated textbook and curriculum reforms similarly reflect attempts to foreground classical Indian languages, texts and knowledge systems, thereby institutionalising a particular reading of cultural heritage within state-sponsored education. Economic initiatives such as Make in India and Aatmanirbhar Bharat combine industrial and trade policy with appeals to self-reliance and national pride, projecting economic policy as an arena for asserting civilizational agency rather than merely adapting to global market forces. The proliferation of media outlets and cultural programmes aligned with the narrative further reinforces its presence in public discourse, while social media campaigns amplify its themes among younger, digitally connected demographics.

In foreign policy, the Bhartiya narrative provides ideological scaffolding for a more assertive, multi-aligned and civilizational self-conscious external posture. Building on the long-standing concept of strategic autonomy, the current approach—often associated with the “Jaishankar Doctrine”—frames India as a civilizational pole that engages pragmatically with competing power centres while resisting incorporation into formal alliance structures (Economic Times, 2023). This has been visible in India’s management of relations with the United States, Russia and China, where New Delhi has sought to maximise room for manoeuvre, maintain diversified defence and energy partnerships, and avoid binary alignment in great-power rivalries.

The deployment of ancient concepts such as “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam” in multilateral forums, including during India’s presidency of the G20, exemplifies how civilizational vocabulary is integrated into global diplomacy. Internationally, this language projects India as a benevolent, inclusive actor and a voice for the Global South, while domestically it reinforces claims that foreign policy is rooted in indigenous values

rather than borrowed Western norms (Guha, 2007; Rajagopal, 2001). India's positioning as a partner for developing countries on issues such as climate finance, vaccine distribution and digital public goods further draws on this narrative of civilizational responsibility and moral leadership, even as critics question how far this rhetoric aligns with domestic practices and constraints (Hansen, 1999).

Challenges, Contestations, and Future Trajectories

The consolidation of the Bhartiya narrative has also generated significant challenges for India's constitutional order, social cohesion and intellectual life. Critics argue that the narrative's majoritarian orientation risks marginalising religious minorities and eroding the secular, pluralist commitments embedded in the Constitution (Jaffrelot, 2021; Vanaik, 2017). Legal controversies over measures such as the CAA and the Kashmir reorganisation, and the mixed responses of courts, highlight ongoing tensions between civilizational claims and constitutional principles, with jurisprudence itself becoming a site where the narrative's limits and possibilities are negotiated.

Contestation is also visible in the realms of education and academic freedom. Curriculum changes, textbook revisions and public pressure on universities and scholars have sparked protests, faculty resignations and statements by academic bodies warning of shrinking space for critical, pluralistic scholarship (Vanaik, 2017). These developments suggest that the institutionalisation of the narrative is not uncontested, and that elite and sub-elite arenas of knowledge production remain important sites of resistance and reinterpretation.

Looking to the future, several factors will shape the trajectory of the Bhartiya narrative. Demographic change, urbanisation and the growth of a digitally networked youth population may alter patterns of receptivity, potentially amplifying narrative dissemination through social media while also exposing citizens to alternative perspectives and transnational solidarities (Chakrabarty & Pandey, 2009). Federal dynamics and regional diversity are likely to produce uneven responses, with some states embracing elements of the narrative while others articulate distinctive regional or linguistic identities that complicate a uniform civilizational frame. Internationally, liberal democracies and civilizational or authoritarian regimes will interpret India's ideological turn through different lenses, influencing partnerships, expectations and India's soft power profile (Varshney, 2002).

At the core, however, remains a fundamental tension between cultural assertiveness and constitutional pluralism. The long-term viability of the Bhartiya narrative will depend on whether it can evolve beyond a polarising instrument of majoritarian mobilisation into a framework that affirms diversity, protects dissent and accommodates alternative histories, even as it seeks to anchor India's statehood in a civilizational past. How political elites, institutions, social movements and citizens negotiate this tension will shape not only the future of the narrative itself but also the quality and resilience of Indian democracy in the decades to come.

Conclusion and Recommendations: India's Path Forward

The political emergence and institutionalization of the Bhartiya narrative represents a fundamental recalibration of how India's national identity, statecraft, and external role are conceived. Rather than an entirely organic cultural renaissance, the narrative functions as a deliberately constructed political framework that shifts the state's ontological foundations from a conventional post-colonial republic towards an ancient, continuous civilizational entity. This reorientation has redefined the language through which political authority is legitimised, reshaped ideological boundaries in domestic politics, and provided

a new vocabulary for articulating India's place in a changing global order.

Domestically, the Bhartiya narrative has operated as a powerful mobilising resource. Through emotionally resonant appeals to cultural pride, historical rectification, and economic self-reliance—exemplified by the “Aatmanirbhar Bharat” framework—political elites have consolidated substantial electoral and institutional authority. This consolidation has been translated into concrete policy shifts, including educational reforms that foreground indigenous knowledge systems, legal and constitutional changes to citizenship and regional autonomy, and the progressive marginalisation of secular and pluralist historical narratives within official discourse. At the same time, the analysis indicates that this hegemonic expansion generates friction within a constitutionally plural society, particularly where majoritarian cultural claims intersect with the rights and security of religious and social minorities.

In the realm of foreign policy, the Bhartiya narrative provides ideological scaffolding for a more assertive, multi-aligned external posture. By discarding earlier defensive diplomatic styles and foregrounding concepts such as strategic autonomy and civilizational diplomacy, India has been able to project itself as an independent pole and a leading voice of the Global South.

The deployment of ancient normative concepts, notably “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam,” in high-profile multilateral forums signals a confident challenge to the epistemic dominance of Western international relations frameworks and underpins India's efforts to act simultaneously as mediator, partner, and norm entrepreneur in a fragmented world order.

Yet the same discursive architecture that strengthens external projection also exposes internal vulnerabilities. Sustained reliance on ideological polarisation and majoritarian historicization risks deepening tensions between cultural assertiveness and constitutional commitments to secularism, democratic inclusion, and academic freedom. If left unaddressed, these tensions could erode social cohesion and undermine the institutional resilience necessary for long-term developmental goals. Normatively and practically, the central challenge for India's political leadership is to ensure that civilizational assertion does not come at the expense of constitutional pluralism. This study therefore recommends: first, that policymakers and opinion-shapers consciously frame the Bhartiya narrative in ways that affirm minority protections and dissent as integral to the civilization it invokes; second, that academic and civil society actors continue to scrutinise how narrative shifts interact with institutional change; and third, that future research undertake sub-national, comparative, and citizen-level studies to assess how the Bhartiya narrative is received, contested, and reinterpreted across India's diverse social landscape.

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