

India in BRICS+: Between Western Liberalism and Civilizational Multipolarity

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Abstract: *The emergence of BRICS+ has intensified debates surrounding the transition from a Western-dominated international order toward a more multipolar global system. Within this transformation, India occupies a unique and strategic position, balancing its engagement with Western liberal institutions while simultaneously promoting a civilizational and multipolar worldview rooted in strategic autonomy and Global South solidarity. This paper examines India's evolving role in BRICS+ by analyzing how its foreign policy navigates the tension between liberal internationalism and alternative models of global governance. It argues that India does not seek a complete rejection of the Western order; rather, it aims to reform and diversify global power structures to create a more equitable and representative international system. This study examines India's evolving role within BRICS+ amid the transition from a predominantly Western-led international order toward a more multipolar global system. It examines how India balances engagement with liberal international institutions while advancing a civilizational, strategically autonomous vision of global governance. Using qualitative analysis of policy discourse, geopolitical developments, and BRICS+ expansion, the study argues that India seeks not to reject the existing international order but to reform it through greater inclusivity and representation. The findings indicate that India employs its democratic credentials, civilizational identity, economic growth, and Global South engagement to position itself as a bridge between developed and developing countries. The paper concludes that India's participation in BRICS+ reflects a broader strategy of promoting multipolarity, strategic autonomy, and institutional reform in global governance.*

Keywords: BRICS+, Multipolarity, Civilisation, Global South

1. Introduction

The development of BRICS as a platform for massive coordination among emerging powers has become a characteristic trend of international politics in the twenty-first century. The term was originally coined in 2001 by Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neill to describe the economic potential of Brazil, Russia, India, and China, but over time it came to encompass a market category and later a diplomatic and institutional gathering. South Africa became a member in 2010, making BRIC into BRICS, and the 2023 Johannesburg Summit has opened a new stage with new memberships, popularly known as BRICS¹. What used to be a financial acronym has become a political statement of discontent with unbalanced systems of world governance and a desire for a more representative world order.

India has a unique and even paradoxical place among the founding members. It is both a member of BRICS and part of the Quad, a strategic ally of the United States, an ancient friend of Russia and is a self-proclaimed representative of the Global South. India's role in BRICS cannot be reduced to bloc politics. Instead, it represents an older tradition of revolutionary independent statecraft and the advocacy of multipolarity in world politics². The Indian state has, in recent years, expressed visions for the future, including Viksit Bharat 2047, Atmanirbhar Bharat, Digital India, and manufacturing-led growth strategies. These projects are a

blend of economic modernisation and national pride, technological self-sufficiency, and civilizational self-confidence.

The relevance of India's role is further enhanced by the growth of BRICS. Countries like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and many others that have now been included have broadened the geographical and political scope of the grouping. BRICS is currently enjoying a significant portion of the global population, energy reserves and world GDP in terms of purchasing power parity³. It does not imply that BRICS is a coherent alliance; the internal political systems, the security interests, and the economic models vary greatly. But the grouping has in common the objective of reforming international institutions, giving developing nations a stronger voice, and lessening over-reliance on Western-dominated financial systems. The study uses qualitative document analysis, policy analysis, and secondary literature, clearly identifying the sources examined and explaining how the five analytical dimensions were selected and evaluated.

This study focuses on the future vision of India under BRICS in the light of five analytical questions: firstly, the ideological direction presented by the Indian state; secondly, there is an expert debate about the future direction of India; thirdly, the narrative of the Indian civilization and its relation to BRICS; fourthly, there is popular opinion about the direction of the state; finally, the importance of multipolarity in Indian

¹ Jim O'Neill, "Building Better Global Economic BRICs," Goldman Sachs Global Economics Paper No. 66, November 30, 2001; BRICS, "Johannesburg II Declaration," Fifteenth BRICS Summit, August 23, 2023.

² C. Raja Mohan, *Crosswinds: Nehru, Zhou and the Anglo-American Competition over China* (New Delhi: HarperCollins India, 2022),

214–18; Ashley J. Tellis, "India as a Leading Power," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2016.

³ International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Database*, 2025 edition; BRICS, "Johannesburg II Declaration," 2023.

political thought and society. These questions structure the discussion, and the article argues that India does not view BRICS merely as an economic alignment but as a strategic space in which it can pursue national development, civilizational visibility, and greater autonomy in an emerging multipolar world. Simultaneously, the Indian strategy is reserved and pragmatic, emphasising flexibility rather than ideological congruence. The Indian example thus reveals how emerging and rising powers in the contemporary world utilise multilateral platforms not only to attain material rewards but also to present competing visions of the future.

India's State Vision within BRICS+

The first question is whether the Indian state provides a consistent ideological framework for society. In the modern era, there is no official state ideology in India in the strict sense of the term, as it relates to one-party systems. Instead, it propagates a general governing discourse that is an amalgamation of economic growth, national independence, technological modernization, cultural renewal, and strategic independence. The ideological framework is not rigid enough to be popular among the various constituencies, yet it reflects India's role in BRICS+ and the Global South in general. It can be called developmental nationalism: the idea that national greatness will be attained through swift growth, robust state capacity, expanded infrastructure, and the revival of civilisation.

One of the key messages of the ideology presented by the Indian state is that development was a practical need and a patriotic obligation. Since the 2010s, state discourse has increasingly emphasised economic growth as a measure of national prestige. The development is viewed as the roadmap through which India will re-establish itself in the world or regain its rightful position in the world⁴, with programs like *Make in India*, *Digital India*, *Startup India*, *Smart Cities Mission*, and most recently *Viksit Bharat 2047* discussing development as a civilizational revival following centuries of colonial exploitation and postcolonial underperformance. This story is very close, as it touches on ongoing societal issues: employment, infrastructure, state provision, technological potential, and improved quality of life. Major projects such as highways, railway modernisation, renewable energy development, digital payment systems, and the computerisation of welfare are often presented as the embodiment of a strong, modernising state⁵. The popularisation of the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) in India, in particular, has not only become a financial innovation but also a symbol of state success.

This ideology of development also applies to BRICS+. India is a testament to the fact that democracy and high growth can co-exist. India tends to focus on open institutions, entrepreneurial activity and demographic dynamism, unlike the state-capitalist structure of China or the centralized political regime of Russia. This helps New Delhi project a unique identity within BRICS+, where several development

models coexist. On a more fundamental level, the concept of transitioning to a developed India by 2047, the centennial of independence, provides a time frame within which the state's legitimacy can be established. It establishes a social contract of the future: present-day sacrifice, discipline, and reform are rewarded with future national change. This way, development is not just policy, but ideology in time, pride and shared goal.

Self-Reliance and Strategic Autonomy

The second substantial element of state ideology in India is self-reliance, often expressed through the slogan 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' (self-reliant India). Although the concept is sometimes used strictly in the narrow sense of economic protectionism, it is broader⁶. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted global supply chains, defence production, and technological self-sufficiency, and decreased exposure to foreign shocks heightened the urgency of this agenda. In ancient times, the concept of self-reliance was deeply rooted in Indian political tradition. Since the Swadeshi movements against colonialism and, later, the planning, Indian leaders have linked the idea of autonomy to sovereignty. The modern policy redefines this legacy in the era of globalisation. India does not want to be pushed out of global markets but wants to be selectively integrated, on favourable terms: it wants to attract foreign investment and at the same time increase domestic production, it wants to join the supply chains without losing policy space, and it wants to engage with major powers without strategic subordination.

The posture of BRICS+, which is very visible in India, is based on this principle. India favours alternative options to the unequal world order and does not want BRICS to become an anti-Western alliance. It also has links with the United States, Europe, Russia, the Gulf states, and East Asia. This multi-alignment is a manifestation of strategic independence in a new guise⁷. The idea of India buying Russian energy and strengthening its security relationships with Western countries demonstrates this balancing logic. In the case of domestic society, self-reliance would be politically appealing as it links national pride to economic possibilities. Demands to shift to semiconductor production, defence exports, local production, and indigenous innovation offer employment and sovereignty. Consumption decisions, entrepreneurship and adoption of technology are all viewed as nation-building activities that citizens should embrace. So, Atmanirbhar Bharat is not just an economic programme. It is a foreign policy independent bridge between home building and foreign policy. In BRICS+, it enables India to collaborate on institutional reform and South-South initiatives, while maintaining freedom of manoeuvre in a fragmented international system.

Civilisation Identity, and Democratic Legitimacy

The third ideological thread provided by the Indian state is the civilizational identity combined with democratic legitimacy. India is becoming more and more a modern republic, formed in 1947, yet an ancient civilisation, the modern emergence of

⁴ Government of India, Press Information Bureau, "Viksit Bharat @2047: Vision for Developed India," 2023; Government of India, "Make in India," official initiative portal.

⁵ Nandan Nilekani and Viral Shah, *Rebooting India* (New Delhi: Juggernaut, 2015), 55–79; Reserve Bank of India, Annual Report 2024–25.

⁶ Government of India, Ministry of Finance, *Economic Survey 2020–21*, vol. 1, chap. 1.

⁷ C. Raja Mohan, *Modi's World: Expanding India's Sphere of Influence* (Noida: HarperCollins India, 2015), 101–26.

which is not a new start but a continuation of history. This story is expressed through the official accounts of yoga, Buddhism, the Sanskrit tradition, traditional information systems, the restoration of temples, and India as the mother of democracy⁸. This framing serves several purposes. Domestically, it offers symbolic cohesiveness in a socially diverse nation characterised by pluralism in linguistic, religious, caste and regional terms. The state would like to find a broader identity that cuts across narrower divisions by evoking a long civilizational past. It also provides citizens with a vocabulary of pride that counters colonial discourses of India as backward or a divided nation. The discourse of civilisation is seen as an international one that helps India distinguish itself within BRICS+. China constantly speaks the language of a civilisation-state, whereas Russia appeals to the traditions of Eurasians and to sovereign particularity. India will have its own historical account: a plural civilisation, a democratic polity, and a tradition of knowledge that can play its part in global governance. Programs like International Yoga Day, which was successfully promoted at the United Nations in 2014, are illustrations of statecraft based on civilizational symbolism as a form of soft power⁹.

Meanwhile, the Indian state complements this civilizational rhetoric with electoral legitimacy. India, unlike some of the BRICS+ members, stresses that its emergence is based on mass democratic involvement. Sources of resilience are projected to include large-scale elections, federal-level competition, public debate, and constitutional institutions. This enables India to point out that development and civilizational confidence do not have to be based on authoritarian centralisation. Yet tensions remain. The majoritarian cultural narratives are questioned by critics as to whether they might marginalise minorities or diminish the pluralistic cultures of India. Some believe that economic performance, not symbolic heritage, establishes state legitimacy. These discussions are factual and significant. However, in the eyes of political rhetoric, the fusion of civilisation and democracy has emerged as a strong ideological weapon. This mix makes India a stronger leader in BRICS+. It provides an alternative to Western liberal universalism and to centralised authoritarian modernisation. The state, in general, is communicating to society through this that India is capable of modernising at the material level, and still be a sovereign state at the strategic level, and emerge as a global power without losing its civilizational character or democratic system.

India's Future within BRICS+: Growth, Power, and Structural Constraints

The second focus area is to shift state messaging to the expert community: economists, strategic thinkers, policy shops, scholars, business executives, and popular thinkers who discuss India's future path. In India, these are debatable and controversial. Although there is widespread consensus that

India is going through a historically important period of global influence, experts are sharply divided on the avenues, risks, and institutional changes that must be sustained to maintain this trajectory. In the BRICS+ context, India is often referred to as a possible balancing force- big enough to influence the global order, but still facing developmental challenges in its own country. There are three generalized expert positions that dominate modern discourse: India as an emerging economic giant, India as a swing power in a multipolar order and India as a state whose ambitions are limited by internal structural weaknesses.

There is a great current of punditry which makes India the next big growth driver of the world. This perspective highlights India's demographic size, rising middle-income status, digitalisation, entrepreneurial culture, and long-term potential growth. International institutions and investment analysts have on numerous occasions predicted that India would be the third-largest economy in nominal GDP terms in the next ten years, surpassing Germany and Japan, should the growth momentum continue¹⁰. According to those who support this line of thought, India is enjoying a historical moment. With China and many developed economies slowing and ageing, India has a relatively young population and a huge labour force. With the assistance of education, manufacturing growth, and urbanisation, this demographic profile has the potential to create a sustained demographic dividend¹¹. Digital public infrastructure, particularly Aadhaar, UPI, and e-governance, is also noted by experts as a transformative benefit that can reduce transaction costs and increase inclusion. In BRICS+, such economic growth holds strategic value. An improved Indian economy would decentralise leadership within the grouping, decreasing overdependence on China. It would also give India greater bargaining power in trade, development finance, and discussions on institutional reform. Others thus view India as the member in the best position to achieve both fast growth and legitimacy with both the Western economies and the Global South. Yet optimistic forecasts are usually conditional rather than automatic. It is still necessary to increase productivity, reform logistics, involve labour, skilling, and deepen finances. Nevertheless, a prevailing positive expert discourse is evident: the future of India is as a manufacturing, services, and technology powerhouse whose emergence will redefine the global economic balance.

The major approach is not so much about economics as about geopolitics. India's most important future role is to serve as a strategic swing power in a world that is becoming increasingly multipolar. India will never have a permanent alignment with any one bloc, but through an ability to retain diversified relationships with competing centres of power, India can influence the results¹². This stance has become even more influential amid increasing competition between the United States and China, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the

⁸ Government of India, Ministry of Culture, official publications, 2022–25; Prime Minister's speeches at G20 and Independence Day addresses.

⁹ United Nations General Assembly Resolution 69/131, "International Day of Yoga," adopted December 11, 2014.

¹⁰ International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Database*, 2025 edition; Morgan Stanley Research, "Why This Is India's Decade," 2023.

¹¹ World Bank, *World Development Report 2019: The Changing Nature of Work*; United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), India demographic assessments.

¹² Ashley J. Tellis, "India as a Leading Power," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016.

disintegration of global supply chains. According to experts, India is a member of both the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Quad, the G20, and various bilateral partnerships. Such a diplomatic reach is rare with big states. Consequently, India is frequently termed as a bridge power or balancing power capable of communication between the geopolitical lines.

This strategic autonomy includes India, which plays a unique role in BRICS+. It advocates greater voice for the developing world, trade in local currencies, and reform of the Bretton Woods institutions, but opposes any move to turn BRICS into an outright anti-Western alliance. The fact that India has insisted on issue-based cooperation over bloc discipline is indicative of a very old tradition of a non-alignment-based foreign policy independent of blocs, but now modified to multi-alignment¹³. Scholars supporting this view hold that India's future power will not be based on its formal relationships but rather on its indispensability to various players. When Washington, Moscow, Gulf capitals, African allies, Southeast Asia, and BRICS members all consider India a valuable strategic location, New Delhi will gain leverage without being reliant. Therefore, to most strategic thinkers, India has no future in BRICS+, but to create a flexible multipolar system in which no single power is at the helm when making decisions.

2.3 Structural Constraints: Jobs, Inequality, Institutions, and Social Cohesion

A third, more cautionary, expert opinion is that India's global ambitions may be compromised by unresolved domestic structural limitations. These critics do not oppose India's potential, but they claim that potential is not a sufficient condition for becoming a great power. External prestige can exceed internal capacity without long-term institutional change, social inclusion, and development of human capital. One of the most mentioned issues is employment.

The development of India has been criticised for being labour-intensive, notably in manufacturing. Many young entrants enter the labour market every year, but not every year has seen quality job creation keeping pace with the scale of demographic advantage¹⁴. When the demographic advantage is not translated into productive labour, the so-called demographic dividend risks becoming a source of frustration. The same thing applies to education and skills. The experts emphasise that to become competitive in advanced manufacturing, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, biotechnology, and clean energy, significant changes in the quality of schooling, vocational training, and research ecosystems are needed. There has been enhanced infrastructure; however, there are uneven gaps in human capital across regions and social groups.

Federal disparities and inequality are also the subject of expert debate. India has world-class technology centres and regions with poor health systems, rural distress, and industrialisation. The only way to ensure long-term national growth is through territorial inclusion and not islands of

prosperity. Political economists thus focus on state capacity at the provincial and local levels, rather than central leadership. The other theme is institutional quality. A common barrier to long-term transformation cited by investors and policy analysts is judicial delays, regulatory uncertainty, bureaucratic complexity, and land acquisition challenges. Democratic vitality is regarded as a strength, whereas polarisation and social tensions may undermine reform consensus when not well managed.

In BRICS+, these limitations are important since credibility is based on domestic performance. Part of the reason India is demanding greater say in world governance is that it represents a successful example of democratic development. If internal inequalities increase or the expansion decelerates sharply, that story becomes less acceptable. On the other hand, successful reforms would make India the leader amongst the emerging powers. For this reason, numerous observers find the future of India to be more dependent on domestic fundamentals than on summit diplomacy: jobs, productivity, institutions, and social cohesion. BRICS+ offers strategic opportunities, but only internal change can turn them into sustainable power.

BRICS+: Heritage, Soft Power, and Plural Globalism

The aspect is to understand whether the nation is engaged in, promotes or associates with any wider civilizational projects. In the Indian case, yes is clearly yes, albeit in a unique way. India is gradually establishing itself not just as a nation-state but also as an ancient civilisation, the modern awakening of which has world-historical implications. This framing of civilisation has been more evident in domestic politics, diplomacy, and international branding. As opposed to the narrowly territorial nationalism, civic nationalism attempts to secure legitimacy through protracted historical continuity, philosophical profundity, and cultural impact. In BRICS+, where China and Russia also utilise civilizational language, India deploys heritage discourse to enhance status, soft power, and leadership assertions within the Global South. The civilizational efforts of India, though, are not like exclusivist or imperial models. They tend to be articulated in terms of pluralism, spirituality, coexistence based on democracy, and the common human good. Of particular significance are three dimensions: restoration of historical consciousness, culture as diplomatic capital, and the demonstration of plural civilizational leadership in a multipolar world.

One of the first dimensions of the Indian civilizational project is the quest to reclaim the past and rediscover national pride. For most of colonial rule, European accounts depicted India as submissive, discontinuous, and reliant. The intellectual and political projects of the postcolonial South thus attempted to reclaim indigenous pasts, knowledge practices, and philosophical successes. This has been more evident in recent decades in the form of state-level museum development, monumental restoration, curriculum arguments, commemorations, and references to ancient, at least mathematical, astronomical, medical and governance

¹³ C. Raja Mohan, *Modi's World: Expanding India's Sphere of Influence* (Noida: HarperCollins India, 2015), 101–26.

¹⁴ International Labour Organization, *India Employment Report 2024* (Geneva: ILO and Institute for Human Development, 2024).

accomplishments in the public¹⁵. The message is not just antiquarian. Instead, the state connects past memory to trust in the future. The citizens are made to think that it is possible to revive a civilisation that had been the source of great intellectual and trade cultures. This story is particularly significant in a developing nation where modernisation has been seen as an imitation of Western patterns. Through the focus on indigenous heritage, India tries to modernise without being psychologically addicted.

These projects are related to renewed interest in Nalanda as a seat of learning, the commemoration of personalities like Swami Vivekananda and B.R. Ambedkar, and symbolic projects within cities like Varanasi or Ayodhya, which relate the national development to a longer historical context¹⁶. Such historical consciousness is strategic in BRICS+. China and Russia tend to use long civilizational continuity as an excuse to take independent routes to modernity. The discourse of India itself enables it to treat these narratives on a par with symbolic terms rather than appearing as a postcolonial state in need of late development. Historical recovery, therefore, serves as a domestic legitimation and extrinsic status assertion.

Culture, Spirituality, and Soft Power Diplomacy

The second aspect of the Indian civilizational project is the exploitation of culture and spirituality as tools of foreign policy. In contrast to hard power, which relies on military violence or coercion, soft power relies on attractiveness, legitimacy, and symbolism. India has its own unique resources in this area: yoga, Ayurveda, classical traditions, cuisine, cinema, literature, religious diversity, and diasporic networks across various continents¹⁷. The most conspicuous one is the International Day of Yoga, unanimously endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in 2014 following an Indian diplomatic initiative¹⁸. Since then, the annual yoga festivals in capitals around the world have become a typical symbol of India's cultural influence. On the same note, Buddhist diplomacy has also been involved in its interactions with East and Southeast Asia, with the popularity of Indian cinema and music still influencing perceptions outside of the official state machinery. This soft power of civilisation is particularly applicable in BRICS+. Some member states have strong military or economic potential but less transnational cultural appeal. India can thus find a unique niche: an emerging power not just in markets and geopolitics, but also in wellness, spirituality, democratic discourse, and cultural diversity.

Analysts tend to observe that this influence is enhanced by the Indian diaspora. The big Indian-origin communities in the Gulf, North America, Africa, Europe, and Southeast Asia establish trade, political, and cultural networks. The image of India as a talent-rich civilisation linked to global modernity is also strengthened by the success stories of the Diaspora. To the state, soft power is pragmatic: it enhances investment

climate, tourism, relationships, and goodwill in diplomacy. It also augments BRICS+ politics, enabling India to exert influence without causing the anxieties commonly attendant on military build-up. In this regard, civilizational diplomacy will be a low-cost yet high-visibility element of India's future strategy.

Multipolar Plural Civilizational Leadership

The third and more ambitious aspect of the Indian civilizational initiative is the assertion that India can provide a plural model of leadership in an impending multipolar order. The official rhetoric of India tends to emphasise concepts like *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (the world is one family), inclusive development, democratic participation, and respect for sovereignty. Such themes were highly evident during India's G20 presidency, where New Delhi focused on consensus-building, the Global South, and developmental inclusion¹⁹. This discussion is important because BRICS+ is not just an economic forum but also a platform for discussing other norms of the world order. China propagates ideas like a community of a common future of humankind. Russia often uses the idea of civilizational sovereignty and opposition to Western domination. The contribution of India is different, as it is inclined to integrate sovereignty with pluralism, national identity with democratic legitimacy and tradition with openness.

This kind of positioning enables India to reach many people simultaneously. For developing countries, it is a postcolonial restitution narrative seeking more equitable representation. In democracies, it provides a large electoral system that reflects social diversity. In the case of civilizational states, it provides historical richness without overt ideological export. This allows India to increase its diplomatic attractiveness. Meanwhile, plural civilizational leadership is challenged. Local societal conflicts, minority rights, and imbalanced development may develop inconsistencies between general rhetoric and local facts.

There is also the question of whether cultural symbolism can replace more powerful economic or technological leadership. These are important issues which influence international perceptions. Still, the larger trend is evident: India is seeking to transform its civilizational identity into a system of global relevance. In contrast to classical great powers, which were mainly based on conquest or ideological universalism, India tends to define leadership as a mediating relationship, coexistence, and a developmental alliance. Such a narrative may be especially handy in BRICS+, where members have divergent systems and interests. India can become a state that can bridge heritage to future governance innovation, should it succeed. Their civilizational project would not be the nostalgic revivalism of some soft-power decor, but a political instrument to establish norms in a discontinuous world. This is why the discourse of civilisation cannot be dismissed as

¹⁵ Government of India, Ministry of Culture, annual reports and official publications, 2022–25.

¹⁶ Diana L. Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography* (New York: Harmony Books, 2012); Government of India project announcements on Kashi Vishwanath Corridor and Nalanda University revival.

¹⁷ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), applied conceptually;

Shashi Tharoor, *Pax Indica* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2012), 245–72.

¹⁸ United Nations General Assembly Resolution 69/131, “International Day of Yoga,” adopted December 11, 2014.

¹⁹ G20 New Delhi Leaders’ Declaration, September 9–10, 2023; Government of India, G20 Presidency official materials.

merely one aspect of the Indian strategic imagination in BRICS+.

Social Expectations and Political Imagination in India within BRICS+

The fourth aspect shifts the discussion of state elites and expert discourse to that of society. Do the people have ideological conceptions of where the state is leading them? The answer to this in India is quite obvious, yes, but these ideas are varied, not uniform. The population of India is socially diverse, regionally diverse and politically disputed. But amid these variations, widespread popular desires for development, dignity, security, opportunity, and national position have become increasingly evident. These aspirations need not always be expressed by citizens in scholarly language, but they inform voting choices, social movements, media discourses, and foreign policy attitudes. In modern India, the ideology of the population is rarely dogmatic but real-world. The concerns of many citizens are not about abstract theories of capitalism or socialism, but about jobs, inflation, welfare provision, education, infrastructure, anti-corruption measures, and social mobility. Meanwhile, symbolic messages like nationalism, cultural pride, and great leadership, and the global rise of India have a high appeal because of their emotional impact. These expectations within the domestic context are important in the BRICS+ context, as external prestige is often measured by internal results. There are three general dimensions that are remarkable: developmental aspirations, strong and effective governance demands, and increasing support for India's international status.

Development, Jobs, and Social Mobility as Popular Ideology

Development, associated with upward mobility, is the most potent ideological need for large segments of the Indian population. The citizens of all classes and all regions desire improved livelihoods, good jobs, education, housing, health and infrastructure. This renders developmentalism as one of the most potent popular belief systems in contemporary India. We often see elections in which roads, electricity, water supply, welfare delivery, and economic opportunity can play a significant role in shaping people's opinions²⁰. The youths are particularly at the centre of this game. India has one of the largest young populations in the world, with millions of first-generation aspirants from agrarian/informal livelihoods seeking to move into salaried, entrepreneurial, or skilled jobs. This mobility is manifested in competitive tests, urban migration, freelancing online and the creation of small businesses. To most households, the state is not so much judged by classical ideology as by whether it provides avenues for improvement. Another factor that has influenced people's expectations is welfare expansion. Food security schemes, direct benefit transfers, rural employment, sanitation, housing and health insurance schemes have reinforced the notion that the state, in addition to trickle-down growth, must be growth-oriented and socially protective²¹. In BRICS+, this domestic orientation is significant, as national

growth can be considered a legitimate force behind India's rise as a power, provided that common citizens experience the physical effects of this development. When external alliances yield investment, employment, energy security and market opportunities, social backing is strengthened. Otherwise, geopolitical prestige can seem far-fetched in everyday life. Therefore, the most popular ideology in India is not a dogma but a material desire: the state must facilitate social mobility, alleviate precarity, and enhance material life at the mass level.

Good Leadership, Discipline and Good Governance

The second large stream of contemporary political imagination among the people is the demand for an effective, strong government. Indian citizens have encountered bureaucracy, delays, corruption, poor service delivery, and disjointed administration among many other issues. Consequently, there is a high level of support for leaders and institutions that are seen as decisive, efficient, and implementable²². This does not necessarily mean anti-democracy. Instead, most voters want a performance-based democracy. It is not uncommon to find strong leadership appreciated when linked to anti-corruption initiatives, the execution of infrastructure projects, national security, disaster management, or welfare distribution. The administrative proficiency, then, may have ideological sense: it is a symbol of the seriousness of the state and national impetus.

This has been amplified by digital governance. Citizen demands have increased government responsiveness through direct transfers, digital identity systems, online services, and rapid communication. Tolerance to inefficiency goes down once the population has experienced faster delivery mechanisms. In this sense, technology transforms political expectations in the same way it transforms economic life. Security issues also affect the promotion of strong governance. The strains of the border, terrorism, ethnic violence, or any social unrest can raise the need for a state that is perceived as security-conscious and tough. This trend can be seen in the popular support for military modernisation and the aggressive response to security threats. The BRICS+ image of good governance is important because people tend to compare India's development with that of other key world powers, particularly China. Although a large number of Indians appreciate democracy, they also desire a perceived pace of development. This exerts pressure to demonstrate that democratic systems can be competitive in terms of infrastructure, production, and state capabilities. Thus, a strong popular ideological bias in India can be summarised as follows: the state must be democratic yet able, orderly, and capable of bringing about national change on a grand scale.

National Pride, Identity, and Support of Global Rise

The third and most significant aspect of public ideology concerns national pride and India's role in the world. Most citizens are no longer looking at India merely as a developing nation that is merely dealing with its own internal issues but a state that will soon take its place among the influential states around the world. This change can be traced in popular reactions to space missions, diplomatic summits, sporting

²⁰ Christophe Jaffrelot and Gilles Verniers, eds., *India's 2019 Elections: The Hindutva Wave and Indian Politics* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2020).

²¹ Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *An Uncertain Glory: India and Its Contradictions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); Government of India welfare scheme annual reports, 2022–25.

²² Devesh Kapur and Milan Vaishnav, eds., *Rethinking Public Institutions in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2020).

performances, military strength, technological advancements in the digital sphere, and the acknowledgement of Indian-origin leaders in other countries²³. As seen with Chandrayaan-3 in 2023, the spacecraft's success has sparked widespread celebration for its symbolic significance as a demonstration of scientific capability at a comparatively low cost. In the same vein, the G20 presidency and India's hosting of international forums were also sold domestically as signs that the world is becoming more aware of India's significance. These incidents help make foreign policy a mass political issue.

In BRICS+, a significant number of citizens would be in favour of engagement, since it would be linked to a more level world order in which India would be heard as a great power rather than a peripheral actor. The BRICS tends to be popularly interpreted not as technical aspects of the policies but as symbolic meaning: India sitting together with other powerful states, influencing global discussions. This increases the sense of prestige and sovereignty. National pride also coincides with cultural identity. Support for modernisation is often accompanied by appreciation for yoga, traditional heritage, indigenous products, classical symbols, and historical narratives. Other visions, based on constitutionalism, welfare justice, or federal balance, are also promoted by opposition parties and civil society actors. Despite these disparities, one major trend is evident: the increasing percentage of the population expects India to be respected globally, economically more influential, and strategically self-reliant. This expectation can motivate governments to pursue visible international participation, such as active BRICS+ participation. Therefore, the current ideology of the people in India is a blend of the daily needs of development and the emotional horizon of national ascendancy. Better lives at home demand citizens more and more recognition abroad. The future of the state, as popularly imagined, is thus both national and international.

Multipolarity, Strategic Autonomy, Popular Imagination: India and BRICS+

The concept of a multipolar world has a significant impact on society, particularly in India. To answer the fifth question, we need to understand what this idea means to different people. For those who make policy and think about strategy, a multipolar world is one in which several powerful countries share control, rather than a single superpower dominating everyone else. But for ordinary people, the term "multipolar" might not be used often, yet the idea behind it - that India should be strong, respected, and independent on the global stage, without being controlled by any other country or group - is very appealing. This idea of India standing tall among other major powers has wide appeal and plays a crucial role in shaping the country's identity and its place in the world. In the Indian context, the concept of multipolarity is not just a theoretical idea, but a reflection of the country's aspirations and values. It represents a desire for India to be a major player in global affairs, to have a voice that is heard and respected, and to make its own decisions without being influenced by other countries. Overall, the idea of a multipolar world is an important part of India's discourse, both among policymakers

and the general public, and it continues to shape the country's foreign policy and its engagement with the rest of the world.

India has a long history of making its own decisions when dealing with other countries. This started with the fight against colonial rule and the idea of not taking sides during the Cold War. Today, India wants to be in charge of its own destiny and not be bossed around by other powerful countries. The BRICS+ group is an important forum where India can express these ideas. The concept of multipolarity is key to understanding India's approach. It means that India wants to be strong and independent, and not be dominated by any one country or group of countries. There are three main ways that multipolarity is important for India: it allows India to make its own decisions, it gives India a sense of pride and status on the world stage, and it offers a different path for development that is not controlled by the rich and powerful countries of the North.

India's approach to international relations is shaped by its desire for strategic autonomy, which is greatly influenced by the concept of multipolarity. This means that Indian policymakers prefer not to be tied down to a single alliance, instead choosing to cooperate with different countries on a case-by-case basis. In the past, this approach was known as non-alignment, but nowadays it's often referred to as multi-alignment or strategic autonomy²⁴. The idea of multipolarity provides a framework for this approach, as it suggests that no single country should have complete control over global politics. By embracing multipolarity, India can maintain its independence and flexibility in its relationships with other nations. This allows India to pursue its own interests and make decisions based on its own unique circumstances, rather than being dictated by the terms of a specific alliance.

As a result, multipolarity has become a key concept in India's foreign policy, enabling the country to navigate the complex web of international relations with greater autonomy and freedom. As the rivalry between the US and China heats up, and tensions between Russia and the West continue to rise, India's approach to international relations is becoming increasingly clear. India is walking a fine line, maintaining strong security ties with the US and its allies, while also keeping its energy and defence relationships with Russia alive. At the same time, India is engaging with powerful Gulf nations and participating in key global forums like BRICS+, SCO, and G20. This kind of diplomatic juggling act is much easier to pull off in a multipolar world, where multiple powers wield influence, rather than in a rigid bipolar system, where two superpowers dominate. By playing multiple roles, India can navigate the complex web of international relations with greater flexibility and freedom.

India is working to change the way the world is governed, making sure that emerging economies have a louder voice. They want to create new ways for countries to work together on development and trade, using local currencies rather than relying solely on the US dollar. India also thinks that countries in the Global South should have more say in global

²³ Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), Chandrayaan-3 mission releases, 2023; G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration, September 2023.

²⁴ awaharlal Nehru, selected speeches on non-alignment; C. Raja Mohan, *Modi's World: Expanding India's Sphere of Influence* (Noida: HarperCollins India, 2015), 101–26.

decisions. However, India doesn't want BRICS to become a group that is against the West, either in terms of military power or ideology. Instead, India believes in a multipolar world, where many countries have power and influence, but each country still has the freedom to make its own choices. This approach is uniquely Indian, aiming to balance different interests and priorities²⁵. For society, this posture often translates into pride that India “makes its own decisions.” Whether regarding sanctions, energy imports, or diplomatic voting patterns, public commentary frequently values visible independence. Thus, multipolarity is not only an abstract systemic theory; it is closely tied to popular notions of sovereignty and self-respect.

Another corollary of Multipolarity's second function concerns status politics. Indeed, more and more Indians see the prospect of their country being viewed as a leading power of the twenty-first century. Multipolarity furnishes a language in which such expectations are articulated. In unipolarity, hierarchy is straightforward, and room for equality is narrow. In multipolarity, several great states coexist, which compete and negotiate. Thus, multipolarity creates room for India as not only a follower but also as one of the principals. Popular support for summits, visits of top officials, military drills, space accomplishments, and participation in diplomatic conferences testifies to these aspirations. Participation of India in organising the G20 forum, conducting international initiatives, launching a mission to the moon, or mediating in conflicts may be perceived as confirmation of the shifting balance of power and inclusion of India among the top players in global affairs²⁶.

Here, BRICS+ acquires its own symbolism. To many Indians, this initiative shows that world politics is not dominated exclusively by former Western powers. The presence of India, alongside other countries like China, Russia, Brazil, and South Africa, alongside some newer members from West Asia and Africa, proves that emerging powers can shape agendas together. Though ordinary citizens may be ignorant of the technical specifics of trade or financial cooperation, they tend to interpret BRICS in terms of prestige language: India is seen as important on the international scene. Status recognition has its emotional value; thus, it helps to legitimise ruling elites. Particularly, narratives about overcoming colonial inferiority gain extra weight when coupled with the prestige language of multipolarity.

Multipolarity as Developmental Opportunity and Global South Solidarity

Another broad-based multipolarity in Indian society emerges around development cooperation with and solidarity towards the Global South. There exists considerable public perception that the current international organisations are based on past dominance by Western nations and are thus inadequate in their responses to the problems and needs of developing nations. Here, multipolarity does not only imply a balance of power dynamics but also greater equality in finance, technology, market presence, and representation. During its

G20 presidency, India hosted the "Voice of Global South Summit," illustrating how the country seeks to legitimise its foreign policy agenda beyond narrowly defined national interests²⁷. Similarly, BRICS+ aims to broaden international organisations that represent the interests of developing countries by including emerging economies and resource-rich nations from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. From the perspective of Indian society, this strategy offers tangible benefits. Energy collaboration could help lower costs domestically. Trading cooperation could create additional export markets. The New Development Bank may become a viable alternative for funding infrastructural projects. Pharmaceutical, agricultural, and technological cooperation can be beneficial.

Hence, multipolarity is a tool for development as well as a strategic approach. However, India's approach to Global South solidarity is not devoid of pragmatism, as citizens understand the real nature of state interactions and are well aware that members of BRICS+ pursue their own agendas. China dominates economically, and Russia focuses on security issues. Meanwhile, the presence of relatively new members makes this coalition even less homogeneous than other international organisations. There are several downsides to such a strategy, too. Firstly, some scholars argue that a fixation on multipolar rhetoric and policies can distract India from domestic reforms that would further increase the country's prosperity. Secondly, international fragmentation can exacerbate insecurity, thereby reducing investment in international trade and collaboration. Thirdly, multipolarity in itself has no guarantee of peace and fairness. Despite all this, the concept continues to enjoy popularity due to its alignment with national interests and moral righteousness. As such, multipolarity is both a strategic concept and a desirable outcome of international relations in the eyes of Indian society.

Conclusion

India's engagement with BRICS+ reflects a broader strategy that combines development, strategic autonomy, civilizational identity, and support for a multipolar international order. The analysis demonstrates that India seeks to reform rather than replace existing global institutions while enhancing the representation of developing countries. Its growing economic capacity, democratic legitimacy, and civilizational narrative enable it to occupy a distinctive position within BRICS+. Nevertheless, the long-term success of this strategy will depend on India's ability to address domestic challenges related to employment, inequality, institutional effectiveness, and social cohesion. If these challenges are managed successfully, India is likely to emerge as a significant contributor to the evolution of a more inclusive and representative global order.

Five related issues will help us understand the future of India as seen through the lens of its involvement in BRICS+: the ideology offered by the state, expert discussions concerning

²⁵ Ashley J. Tellis, “India as a Leading Power,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016.

²⁶ G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration, September 9–10, 2023; Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), Chandrayaan-3 mission releases, 2023.

²⁷ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Voice of Global South Summit,” official releases, January 2023 and November 2023.

India's future, civilizational considerations, popular aspirations, and the concept of multipolarity in society. Together, these dimensions indicate that India's engagement with BRICS+ goes beyond the scope of diplomacy, rather forming part of a much broader national agenda in which internal development, strategic independence, identity and heritage, and great power ambitions converge.

First, the Indian state provides a future-oriented narrative for its society, grounded in ideas of development, self-reliance, scientific advancement, and confidence in national potential. Initiatives like *Viksit Bharat 2047*, *Atmanirbhar Bharat*, and modernisation through digitalisation are not just administrative policies; they represent a political promise that India can be rich and sovereign at the same time while preserving its uniqueness.

Second, expert communities largely agree that India is entering a historical stage, though the nature of this stage remains a source of disagreement. Those who are optimistic expect that India will become a powerful economic state and an essential balancing power in international politics. Meanwhile, other experts remind us that India's success will depend on factors such as job creation, educational quality, institutional reforms, inequalities, and social unity. In this regard, India's global status will result from domestic potential rather than rhetoric.

Third, India's increasing emphasis on the civilizational paradigm proves that identity becomes a crucial resource in geopolitics. By promoting itself as a unique democratic civilisation, India tries to claim its rightful place in international politics without being either a copy of the Western world or a junior partner of another major state.

Fourth, there is growing public opinion evidence that citizens desire both practical betterment and renewed national pride. Indians may seek jobs and welfare, infrastructure and security, social mobility and opportunity, but they also seek respect for India on the global stage. For that reason, foreign policy today has more social salience than it did several decades ago. Summits, space launches, digital success stories, and strong diplomatic leadership are now politically consequential because they validate public feelings of national resurgence.

Finally, the notion of a multipolar world order brings all of these threads together. Multipolarity resonates with Indians because it suggests space to make independent choices, greater voice for developing states, and power that is more diffused rather than concentrated. BRICS+ has therefore naturally emerged as one of the primary vehicles for this vision.

However, India's success within BRICS+ going forward will depend on how well it can balance competing pressures. It will need to balance growth with inclusion, sovereignty with collaboration, identity with pluralism, and aspiration with realism. If managed well, India has the potential to emerge not just as one of the great powers of the twenty-first century, but as one of the architects of that century's international order. BRICS+ would therefore become less about India

joining a forum and more about how India shapes the future through it.

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