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POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN INDIA UNDER THE MODI ADMINISTRATIONS

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POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN INDIA UNDER THE MODI ADMINISTRATIONS

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From «Neighbourhood first» to «Neighbourhood lost»? India's foreign policy towards South Asia under Modi

Filippo Boni

This paper examines the trajectory of India's «Neighbourhood First» policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi (2014-2025), analysing its underlying drivers, implementation, and implications. While India's geographic centrality and strategic self-perception position it as a key player in South Asia, critics argue that there is a widening gap between India's rhetorical commitment to regional engagement and the actual substance of its neighbourhood diplomacy. This paper investigates this puzzle by identifying in the China challenge, status-seeking ambitions, and domestic political agenda three key drivers of India's engagement in South Asia. In doing so, it argues that India's foreign policy in South Asia is marked by a struggle to sustain regional primacy against China's economic inroads and its own ideological constraints. Through an analysis of official speeches, academic literature, newspapers as well as policy reports, the paper provides an empirical survey of India's relations with Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Understanding the trajectory of India's neighbourhood policy under Modi offers critical insights into the country's evolving international posture, its willingness to assume regional leadership, and the potential constraints on its global ambitions.

1. Introduction

The swearing-in ceremonies of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi have been closely observed for the diplomatic signals that they display. In 2014, the headlines were all for the presence of leaders from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Notably, then Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif attended the ceremony, a first in the two countries' history since independence (BBC, 2014). 5 years on, at the ceremony in 2019, most regional leaders were again present, this time with the important exception of Pakistan (following the post-Pulwama border skirmishes earlier in the year). In 2024, the tradition of inviting leaders from South Asia continued (as it did the absence of Pakistan), this time including leaders from the Indian Ocean region, highlighting New Delhi's attempts at deepening its regional outreach. Following the ceremony in 2024, Modi reaffirmed India's commitment to its «Neighbourhood First» policy and «Security and Growth for All in the Region» (SAGAR) vision, stating that India would continue working for «peace, progress and prosperity of the region in close partnership with these countries» (Laskar, 2024). As these three snapshots suggest, the presence of South Asian leaders at these inaugurations signals, at least nominally, the centrality of regional engagement in Modi's foreign policy.

This shouldn't be surprising. Looking at the map of South Asia, the region includes India and six countries that share a border with India but not with one another (Jacob, 2024). The geography of the sub-continent thereby highlights the centrality of New Delhi in the region's geopolitics, which has long informed India's strategic self-perception. As Aparna Pande (2011) noted, there is a sense that India must be «the arbiter of its own destiny, and the region's». Such a vision is echoed by many in India who view the subcontinent as a cohesive entity with New Delhi as its natural leader (Mohan, 2022).

Despite the self-perceived centrality of India in the sub-continent and Modi's «Neighbourhood first» initiative, critics opine that there is a disconnect between rhetorical commitments to regional leadership and the reality of the Indian government's actual engagement with the region. They contend that Modi's administration has prioritised the country's global ambitions and the domestic

consolidation of a Hindu nationalist agenda over substantive regional engagement. As Congress MP P. Chidambaram remarked, the government's approach has shifted from «Neighbourhood First» to what some now describe as «Neighbourhood Last or Neighbourhood Lost» (Indian National Congress, 2024).

In exploring this puzzle, the paper answers the following questions: what are the drivers of India's «Neighbourhood First» policy? How effective has India's engagement with South Asia been under the prime ministership of Narendra Modi? These questions are important not only because they interrogate India's regional credentials as a rising power, but also because they illuminate broader strategic implications for Western policymakers. Understanding the trajectory of India's neighbourhood policy under Modi offers critical insights into the country's evolving international posture, its willingness to assume regional leadership, and the potential constraints on its global ambitions.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first part outlines the spectrum of drivers behind India's foreign policy. This debate cuts across international and domestic considerations, and weaves in themes ranging from New Delhi's relations with China and status ambitions to India's domestic politics. Any future foreign policy decision that India takes vis-à-vis its neighbourhood is likely to emerge from this set of ideas and drivers that are prevalent in India's foreign policy thought. The second part explains how these drivers can be found in New Delhi's engagement with its neighbouring countries, by presenting a survey of India's ties with Afghanistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Pakistan.

2. India's foreign policy drivers: navigating status ambitions, China's rise, and Hindu nationalism

To better understand the trajectory of India's neighbourhood policy, it is essential to examine three major drivers of Indian foreign policy: the China factor; the pursuit of international status and recognition; and the influence of domestic political agendas. While the ensuing analysis isolates these drivers for analytical clarity, they often overlap and weigh in simultaneously in charting India's foreign policy course.

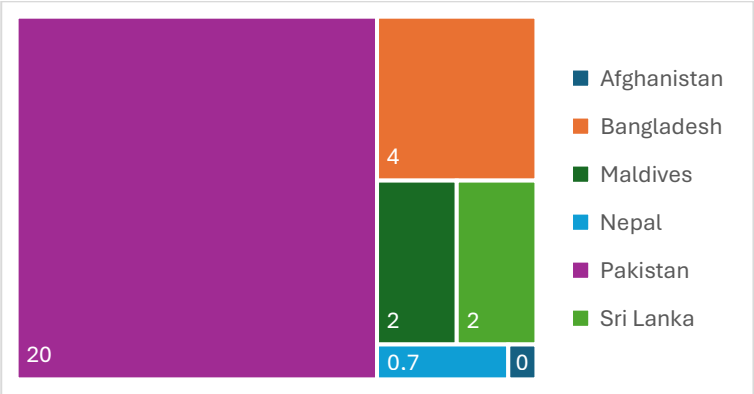
2.1. Engaging China: confrontation and cooperation

To understand the importance of China in India's foreign policy vis-à-vis South Asia, consider the following figures. Between 2014 (the year in which Modi was first elected) and 2023 (the latest year for which data is available), China has invested nearly 29USD billion in the South Asian region, for a total of 444 projects (Aiddata, 2025). In Pakistan only, China has invested around 20USD billion in infrastructure and energy projects that fall under the umbrella of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

The investments coming under CPEC are the ones that have attracted the most attention as well as India's staunch opposition. A December 2018 survey of India's strategic community revealed that 73 percent of respondents considered CPEC a major security threat, with 63 percent also concerned about Chinese influence in neighbouring island nations (Jaishankar, 2019). India's objections to Chinese investments in Pakistan stem from three main concerns. Firstly, the corridor passes through Gilgit-Baltistan, a territory that is part of the contested Kashmir region, thereby infringing, in New Delhi's view, on what India considers its sovereign territory. Secondly, Indian policymakers see the development of the Gwadar port under CPEC with concern, fearing it could eventually serve as a Chinese naval outpost in the Arabian Sea, giving Beijing a strategic military foothold near Indian waters and close to the port of Chahbahar in Iran, managed by India (Boni, 2023). Thirdly, India

perceives China's expanding presence in South Asia, including in countries like Sri Lanka and the Maldives, as a challenge to regional stability.

Figure 1. Chinese investments in South Asia, 2014-2023 in billion USD



Source: data collected by the author from the Global Chinese Development Finance dataset, available at: https://china.aiddata.org

On top of China's increasing economic influence in the sub-continent, the unresolved border dispute between India and China represents an ongoing concern for New Delhi, despite attempts between 2024-2025 to mend fences between the two. Tensions between China and India reached their peak in 2020 during the clashes in Ladakh, which many analysts view as a turning point in New Delhi's foreign policy (Maiorano, 2023; Torri, 2022). According to Ian Hall, the Galwan incident marked a pivotal moment that led India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar to recalibrate India's stance, from traditional non-alignment to seeking deeper strategic ties with Western powers in attempt to balance the rise and assertiveness of China (Hall, 2025). Proponents of this viewpoint suggest that evidence of this can be found in India's strengthening of its security and cooperation ties with the United States, Australia, and Japan through the Quad alliance, which now serves as an important platform for India to balance China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region.

Such a view of closer alignment with the West with an eye on China is however mitigated if we take into account the substantial economic relations between New Delhi and Beijing. In 2024/25, China became India's second-largest trading partner, with bilateral trade reaching $127.7 billion, just behind the United States (Kumar, 2025). Between 2014 and 2022 (the latest year for which World Bank data is available), China had the largest share of imports in India with an average 15% percent, while having only 4.6% share of India's total exports (World Bank, 2025). Moreover, India's rising exports of electronics goods, pharmaceuticals and engineering goods are also fuelling imports from China, due to their heavy dependence on imported components (Kumar, 2025). These dynamics are important for two reasons: first, they demonstrate India's reliance on imports from China of components and raw materials for its industrial development; second, they suggest that these economic considerations, coupled with the country's long-standing preference for strategic autonomy, will likely limit the extent of India's alignment with the West against China (Bajpaee and Jie, 2025).[1]

[1] For more on Sino-Indian economic ties, see: Singh, Suhsant (2025) "How vulnerable is India to Chinese economic coercion?", USIP, 16 June 2025, https://www.usip.org/publications/2025/06/how-vulnerable-india-chinese-economic-coercion.

2.2. International status ambitions

Closely linked to the dynamics of China-India relations is India's enduring pursuit of major power status, a constant theme in its foreign policy since independence. Strong of its economic growth over the past two decades, India today has embarked in what T.V. Paul (2024) described as an «unfinished quest» for global recognition. While India's centrality in the Indo-Pacific has brought it closer to the US, its foreign policy actions simultaneously represent an attempt at challenging the Western-dominated global order. This is articulated around membership in international organisation (e.g. Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) and groupings (e.g. BRICS) as well as in India's repeated calls for reforms to international institutions to better reflect the growing influence of emerging economies (Maiorano, 2023). In the words of the Indian Minister of External Affairs, one of the rationales behind the BRICS was «a sense among very major powers that they were not getting their due place or share of global conversations and decision-making» (Jaishankar, 2025, 16:15). After all, as Manaj Chetterjee Miller (2016: 217) notes, «a rising power is a state that increasingly globalizes by taking on responsibility in the international system, through both alliances and institutions». It is through maintaining relations with multiple global poles that India seeks to conduct its foreign policy. According to Jaishankar, «the country which has the maximum flexibility and the least problems is obviously better off [in a multipolar world] » (Jaishankar, 2025).

In its quest for global recognition, India has adopted a two-pronged approach. First, New Delhi has engaged over the years with a growing number of multilateral and minilateral groupings, including the BRICS, East Asia Summit (EAS), Forum for India-Pacific Islands cooperation (FIPIC), India Brazil South Africa Dialogue Forum (IBSA), Quad, and SCO. Each of these provides New Delhi with the opportunity to advance or defend its interests and/or stymie others' agendas (Hall, 2023). Importantly, many of these groupings include (and are often led by) China, but they also provide platforms in which to engage countries from the Global South. In addition, India has sought to position itself as a key player in the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI), a trilateral initiative with Japan and Australia aimed at reducing dependency on China, as well as in the India-Middle East-Europe economic corridor (Imec) (Miraglia, 2025).

Second, in the last decade, India has reoriented its strategic focus from Pakistan to China and from the continental theatre to the maritime one. It has embarked on a wider economic journey by signing and negotiating several important free-trade agreements (Jacob, 2024). Amongst, the most significant one has been the free trade agreement signed between India and the UK on the 6th of May 2025 (Webb, 2025). In addition, since 2014, the Modi government has leant more heavily into the relationships with Israel and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia (Boni, 2023; Blarel, 2021), and the UAE, but in general it has pursued a strategy of regional «multialignment», aiming for good relations with most of states in the Middle East.

2.3. Hindu nationalism and foreign policy

While wider systemic factors like China or by India's pursuit of great power status play a key role in determining New Delhi's approach South Asia, another significant driver of India's foreign policy under the Modi government also lies in its domestic political agenda.

A central element shaping this agenda is the nationalist orientation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Modi's foreign policy reflects a deliberate effort to cultivate a narrative of India as an independent power, a posture which appeals to the nationalist pride of India's political elite and the BJP's support base, reinforcing Modi's image as a decisive, strong leader capable of steering India toward great power status. It also reflects India's growing consciousness of its economic strength and its desire to see that recognised (Mukherjee, 2024).

Modi's strongman politics have been reflected in more assertive postures toward neighbouring countries. Notably, the passage of the 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which fast-tracked citizenship for non-Muslim minorities from neighbouring states, drew widespread criticism in the region. The act was perceived as discriminatory and indicative of a broader Hindu nationalist agenda, thereby complicating India's regional relationships with other Muslim-majority countries (e.g. Bangladesh).

At a deeper ideological level, Modi's foreign policy is underpinned by what has been described as a form of «Hindu internationalism» (Wojczewski, 2020). This worldview draws on Hinduism's universalist ethos to project India's foreign policy as a natural extension of its Hindu identity, reimagining India as fundamentally a Hindu nation on the global stage (Destradi and Plagemann, 2019). The concept of Akhand Bharat, a vision of a unified Hindu civilizational space across South Asia, further underlines India's self-perception as the region's natural hegemon (Wojczewski, 2020).

In light of these considerations, India's foreign policy cannot be fully understood without accounting for the domestic political context in which it is embedded. Under Modi, foreign policy has become a tool for projecting internal nationalist aspirations outward.

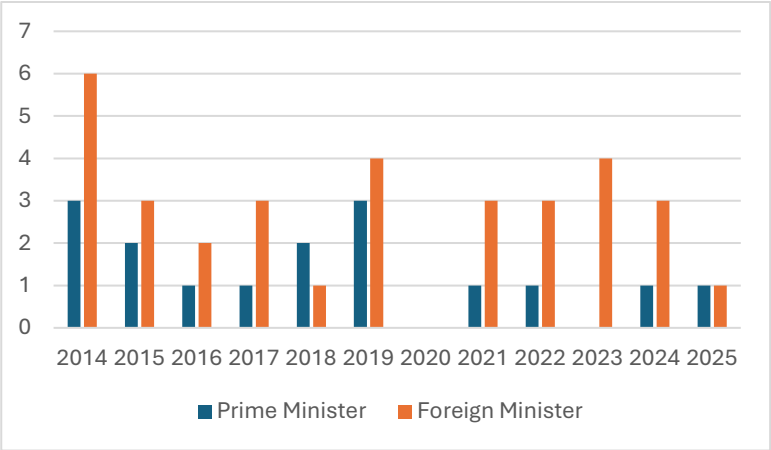
3. A survey of India's ties with South Asia

Before delving into how the strategic drivers outlined above have influenced the evolution of India's engagement with its neighbouring countries, it is instructive to examine some data snapshots. These figures suggest that, despite geographic proximity, South Asia occupies a relatively modest position in India's broader foreign policy, both economically and politically. Economically, only 6.9% of India's total exports are directed toward South Asia, making it the second-lowest export destination among global regions. The import figures are even starker: a mere 0.6% of India's total imports originate from South Asia, rendering it the least significant source of imports.[2] Politically, the pattern is similar. Of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 91 international visits, only 16 (approximately 17%) were to South Asian countries, with just four of those occurring between 2020 and 2025. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has made 17 visits to South Asia out of a total of 133 trips (13%) between 2019 and August 2025, as illustrated in Figure 2 below.

These numbers highlight a paradox: while South Asia constitutes India's immediate neighbourhood and is often invoked in official rhetoric as central to its foreign policy vision, the region remains relatively peripheral in practice. To detail more granularly New Delhi's engagement with the region, the paper now focuses on India's bilateral relations with Afghanistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Pakistan.

[2] Data elaborated by the author based on the World Bank's World Integrated Trade Solution dataset. The averages were calculated based on the import/export data between 2014 and 2022.

Figure 2. Visits to South Asian countries by India's Prime Minister and Ministers of External Affairs, 2014-2025[3]



Source: data elaborated by the author based on: https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/pm-visits/?visittype=international_visit, Wikipedia pages of foreign ministers, triangulated with news and policy reports.

3.1. Afghanistan: prospects and limitations of India's engagement

At the outset of the new Taliban era in 2021, New Delhi's position vis-à-vis the regime was arguably the weakest among regional actors. Years of consistent support for anti-Taliban forces had hindered Indian policymakers from establishing meaningful ties with the Taliban leadership. Nonetheless, over the past four years, India's engagement with the Islamic Emirate has seen a modest but steady progression. This trend suggests a growing recognition on both sides that a degree of engagement is necessary, and potentially mutually beneficial. The most visible symbol of this evolving relationship was the telephone exchange in May 2025 between India's External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, and Amir Khan Muttaqi, the Acting Foreign Minister of Afghanistan's Taliban administration. This marked the first ministerial-level contact between the two countries since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021 (Bhattacherjee, 2025).

One notable area where India has sought to enhance its visibility in Afghanistan is through aid and humanitarian assistance. In March 2023, New Delhi, in collaboration with the World Food Programme, delivered 20,000 metric tonnes of wheat to Afghanistan (Kaura, 2023). Significantly, this shipment was routed through the Iranian port of Chabahar which presents a strategic alternative to Pakistan as a corridor for trade and aid to Afghanistan (Boni, 2023a). In addition, India's annual union budgets over the past three years have consistently included special provisions for development assistance to Afghanistan (The Hindu, 2022).

The growing engagement with Afghanistan carries direct implications for India's national security. Reports indicate that in response to India's outreach, the Taliban has pledged to take action against jihadist groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), which have established safe havens in Afghanistan (Bacon and Mir, 2022) and are the ones that New Delhi accuses of carrying out attacks on its soil. India's diplomatic overtures also appear to aim at driving a wedge between the Taliban and Pakistan, particularly as Islamabad grows increasingly uneasy about the Taliban's relations with the Pakistani-focused Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Whether the Taliban can deliver

[3] The chart includes visits by PM Modi, and Foreign Ministers Sushma Swaraj (2014-2019) and Subrahmanyam Jaishankar (2019 onwards). The visits include also attendance to institutional forums (e.g. international organisations, consultation mechanisms, diplomatic conferences).

on their promises to contain LeT and JeM remains uncertain, as does the potential impact on Taliban-Pakistan relations (Boni, 2023b).

Despite recent overtures, the trajectory of Indo-Afghan relations remains constrained by a number of structural and ideological limitations (Boni, 2024). Chief among them is India's historically vocal opposition to the Taliban regime and its repeated calls for more inclusive governance in Afghanistan. While such appeals are now routinely echoed by many international actors during bilateral meetings with the Taliban, in Kabul this discourse is largely perceived as Western-driven. India's alignment with this narrative, especially in the context of its strategic partnership with the United States, complicates its position vis-à-vis the Taliban regime. Moreover, ideological and religious divergences further strain the relationship. The Taliban leadership often perceives India through a sectarian lens. According to former Afghan Minister of Education Mirwais Balkhi, many within the Taliban view India as a Hindu-majority nation that has historically oppressed Muslims, and therefore, as an entity to be resisted (Balkhi, 2023).

While India has managed to gain some ground in Afghanistan, its progress remains limited. Further complicating its efforts, the appointment in May 2025 of Pakistan's Permanent Representative to the United Nations as Chair of the UN Security Council's 1988 Sanctions Committee, which oversees sanctions targeting the Taliban, may enhance Islamabad's leverage over the Taliban leadership (Azizi, 2025).

3.2. Nepal: Countering China's Expanding Footprint

In recent years, Nepal has pursued a delicate balancing act between China and India. Despite Katmandu's economic and logistical dependence on India, Nepal has increasingly diversified its partnerships, particularly by engaging with China through the BRI. As such, the «China factor» is the perhaps the most relevant lens through which one can understand India's engagement with Nepal.

Over the past decade, Nepal's decision to join China's BRI in 2017 was perhaps the most significant development in its foreign policy. Through the MoUs signed between Katmandu and Beijing, the former secured promises of substantial investments aimed at improving its infrastructure and alternative trade routes that could reduce its traditional dependency on Indian transit points (Paul, 2024). While such a move signalled an important, symbolic moment in Nepalese foreign policy, tangible progress on the ground has been minimal (Baral, 2025). In December 2024, the two countries signed a framework for BRI cooperation during Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli's visit to China (Kathmandu Post, 2024) aimed at giving new impetus to the BRI in Nepal. As part of the agreement, 10 projects were identified by Nepalese side as priority areas. A key point of contention between the two sides remains the funding model: while China prefers to offer loans, Nepal insists that the only projects which should proceed are either grant-funded ones or those supported by concessional loans in line with the interest rates offered by the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and other bilateral and multilateral agencies (Kathmandu Post, 2024).

Domestically, Nepal's political parties are divided on this issue. The communist parties, currently ranking as the second and third largest in the country, are more receptive to Chinese loan agreements. In contrast, the Nepali Congress, the largest party and the leading force in the current ruling coalition, maintains a more cautious stance, emphasising Nepal's limited capacity to absorb additional foreign loans. The Nepali Congress also retains closer ties with New Delhi, which further complicates the decision-making process on Chinese-funded projects (Baral, 2025).

India, for its part, views BRI projects with concern, especially those with potential strategic implications. The proposed industrial park in eastern Nepal, which is located near India's Siliguri Corridor (the narrow stretch of land connecting India's northeastern states to the rest of the country) is a case in point. New Delhi's concerns have grown sharper amid reports of China's involvement in

constructing a military air base in Bangladesh, not far from this sensitive region (Baral, 2025). From India's perspective, Nepal's hedging between New Delhi and Beijing has exposed significant limitations in India's traditional approach toward its smaller neighbour. While Nepal has reaped economic promises from both sides, India has found its influence eroding in areas where it once held uncontested sway. Going forward, India's ability to maintain its strategic foothold in Nepal will depend not only on offering competitive economic alternatives but also on adopting a more nuanced diplomatic approach. With Nepal's domestic politics divided and China's presence steadily expanding, India faces the challenge of recalibrating its neighbourhood policy to secure its interests without alienating its traditional partners in Kathmandu.

3.3. Bangladesh: China and the implications of Hindu nationalism on bilateral ties

Similarly to Nepal, Bangladesh represents an interesting example of a secondary power seeking to maximise its benefits while cooperating with both India and China. Despite strong personal ties between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and former Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh became part of China's BRI. Against such a backdrop, two of the drivers introduced above are key to understand India foreign policy: the China factor and Hindu nationalism.

Starting with the former, in October 2016, Bangladesh signed a memorandum of understanding with China for BRI projects worth $26 billion USD, in addition to $14 billion USD in joint venture agreements, for an overall total of $40 billion USD (Casolari, 2017). This agreement starkly contrasted with India's more modest offering of $2 billion USD in socioeconomic development assistance to Bangladesh around the same period (Paul, 2024). One of India's responses to China's expanding influence on its border, was to lead the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), as an alternative regional platform to the largely dormant South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which has been hamstrung by Indo-Pakistani tensions. BIMSTEC, which includes India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand, has emerged as an important component of India's regional engagement strategy (The Hindu, 2025). As noted in the introduction to this paper, the Modi government's prioritisation of BIMSTEC was notably symbolised by the invitation extended to all BIMSTEC leaders to attend his inauguration in 2019. Besides regional organisations, India as tried to use its levers over Bangladesh to contain Chinese influence in the country. In April 2025, for instance, India withdrew a key transshipment facility that had allowed Bangladesh to route exports through Indian ports to third-country markets. Officially, the decision was attributed to logistical constraints (i.e. port congestion that affected Indian exporters). Yet in Dhaka, the move was perceived as a signal of Indian displeasure over Bangladesh's overtures to Beijing. (Singh, A. 2025).

The second driver to understand India's foreign policy towards Bangladesh is Hindu nationalism. The controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019 is a case in point. By explicitly including Hindus from Bangladesh, the CAA reinforced the perception that India sought to institutionalise Hindu primacy. (Singh, S. 2024) Such moves have contributed to growing anti-India sentiment within Bangladesh, which were further reinforced by the remarks made by Indian Home Affairs Minister Amit Shah, who referred to Bangladeshi immigrants as «termites» and «infiltrators» who threaten national security (Mazumder, 2024).

Bangladesh thus presents a cautionary tale for Indian foreign policymakers. The over-reliance on personalistic ties, coupled with exclusionary domestic narratives, undermines India's long-term regional standing. While Hindu nationalism may bolster Modi's international image among diasporic communities, it risks alienating neighbours and narrowing India's diplomatic options in South Asia.

3.4. Sri Lanka: containing China's inroads

Alongside Pakistan (discussed below), Sir Lanka is perhaps the country which has attracted most international headlines in recent years because of China's engagement in its port infrastructure. In particular, the acquisition of the 99-year lease in the Hambantota port has generated both security and status concerns for India (Paul, 2024).

In May 2017, Sri Lanka declined a Chinese request to dock a submarine at the Hambantota port, a move prompted by strong concerns from India as well as vocal opposition from Sri Lankan political groups wary of deepening Chinese naval access in the Indian Ocean (Aneez and Sirilal, 2017). Later that year, Colombo and Beijing signed a landmark agreement granting China Merchants Port Holdings a 99-year lease on Hambantota port (Al Jazeera, 2017). The deal was formally designated for *civilian use only*, a clause that was widely interpreted as an attempt by Sri Lanka to reassure India that the project would not compromise its maritime security interests. At the same time, Colombo attempted to balance regional sensitivities by inviting Indian investment in the nearby but underutilized Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport, often dubbed «the world's emptiest airport» (Brewster, 2018). Hambantota was not China's first or only strategic infrastructure project in Sri Lanka. Beijing has also poured significant resources into the massive Colombo Port City development, a flagship BRI project, as well as into major highway networks across the island (Paul, 2024). India has simultaneously stepped up its own engagement. It remains one of Sri Lanka's principal suppliers of railways, buses, trucks, and other transport infrastructure, and has pledged over $2.4 billion in investment in recent years (Paul, 2024).

By 2022, Sri Lanka found itself in the throes of its worst economic crisis since independence. Years of heavy foreign borrowing, over $51 billion in external debt, including roughly $6.5 billion owed to China, combined with fiscal mismanagement and poor governance under President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his politically dominant brothers, left the country unable to service its debt (Paul, 2024). The resulting financial collapse triggered widespread shortages of fuel, food, and medicine, sparking massive protests, riots, and ultimately the downfall of the Rajapaksa regime. In its moment of crisis, Colombo turned to both multilateral institutions and regional partners for relief. India emerged as one of the first responders, extending some $1.9 billion in assistance, along with urgently needed shipments of fuel, food, and medicine (Paul, 2024).

Overall, India has sought to counter China's growing role in Sri Lanka by expanding its own economic engagement. However, the 99-year lease of Hambantota to a Chinese firm highlighted limits to India's influence. While Sri Lanka attempted to balance regional pressures by inviting Indian investment in the Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport, China's broader role in projects such as Colombo Port City continues to challenge India's position. The 2022 economic crisis in Sri Lanka gave India an opportunity to provide aid, thereby strengthening its role. Yet India faces the ongoing difficulty of sustaining influence in Sri Lanka while competing with China's larger financial strength and presence in the country.

3.5. Maldives: leadership changes and the India-China competition

Since the Maldives' democratic transition in 2008, leadership changes in Malé have profoundly influenced the trajectory of its bilateral relations with India, with foreign policy oscillating between pro-India and pro-China orientations depending on the ruling party. The election in 2024 of Mohamed Muizzu, who campaigned on an explicitly «India Out» platform while pivoting towards Beijing and other Muslim-majority partners, displays how the China factor is a key lens to explain India's relations with the island nation.

By way of providing a cursory summary of the domestic political landscape in the Maldives, it is possible to identify two major political blocs, the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) and the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM)–People's National Congress (PNC) coalition, that have adopted contrasting foreign policy orientations. MDP-led governments under Mohammed Nasheed and Ibrahim Solih pursued an "India-first" strategy, positioning New Delhi as the Maldives' primary financial and security partner (Yadav, 2024). However, during Abdulla Yameen's presidency (2013–2018), the PPM shifted the nation's alignment toward China by deepening economic ties and joining the BRI (Yadav, 2024). At that time, it appeared that India was being edged out of the Maldives as Yameen's administration moved significantly closer to Beijing (Mohan, 2022).

The subsequent return of MDP leadership under Solih marked a renewed embrace of India, with Delhi-Malé relations reaching unprecedented levels of cooperation (Mohan, 2022). However, this trajectory shifted again when Mohamed Muizzu won the presidency, campaigning on a platform that emphasized strengthening ties with China and Muslim-majority countries while reducing dependence on India (Hall, 2024). Muizzu ran for president on an «India Out» platform and broke with the tradition of making New Delhi its first foreign visit, instead heading out to Turkey and, later, China (Yadav, 2024). During his visit to the latter, the two sides agreed to elevate their ties to a «comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership» (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Rwanda, 2024). China took the opportunity to extend its solid support to the Maldives' sovereignty. Muizzu, on his part, backed Beijing's «One-China» policy and endorsed several signature initiatives of Xi – the Belt and Road Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, the Global Civilisational Initiative and the Global Security Initiative (Mohan, 2024).

India has responded to China's growing presence with its own set of investments, including the Greater Malé Connectivity Project ($500 million consisting of a bridge, causeways, and roads linking Malé to three neighbouring islands), the Addu City Reclamation and Shore Protection Project ($220 million) and provided grants to expand ferry services and maritime connectivity across islands (Malji, 2025). While there have been political tensions between the two sides in the early phase of the Muizzu premiership (e.g. on the presence of 89 Indian personnel operating a Dornier aircraft gifted to the Maldives which was seen as an infringement of Malé's sovereignty) ties with Delhi began to stabilise following Muizzu's visit to Delhi in October 2024 (Malji, 2025). The two sides adopted the bilateral India–Maldives Vision Document, which focused on economic recovery and maritime security. India also extended a $760 million financial support package to help the Maldives address its foreign exchange crisis (Malji, 2025).

Overall, while India has a long-standing relationship with the Maldives and it remains a key partner for Malé, the latter is navigating with dexterity its relations with both New Delhi and Beijing, asserting its own interests by engaging regional powers on favourable transactional terms.

3.6. Pakistan: protracted rivalry and the China factor

The ties between the two South Asian neighbours have been characterised by mistrust and conflict ever since the partition of the Indian sub-continent in 1947. During the last 78 years, the two countries have engaged in three full-scale wars (1947–1948, 1965 and 1971), one «half-war» in Kargil (1999) and almost daily skirmishes along the Line of Control (LoC). Every potential breakthrough, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's visit to Lahore in 1998, Modi's surprise meeting in the same city with Nawaz Sharif on 25 December 2015, only to name a few, has been met by significant setbacks in the immediate aftermath. Over the past decade, the most notable incidents were the ones in Pathankot on 2 January 2016, in Uri on 18 September 2016, in Pulwama on 14 February 2019, and the four-day conflict between 7 and 10 May 2025, which brought the two countries with nuclear warheads to the brink of war yet again. Following the terrorist attack on tourists in Indian-administered Kashmir, as a result of which India unilaterally suspended the 1960 Indus Water Treaty,

hostilities escalated (Khan, 2025). In the wake of the treaty suspension, and as part of a heightened nationalist rhetoric on both sides, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared, «blood and water cannot flow together» while Home Minister Amit Shah stated unequivocally, «it will never be restored», further asserting that, «we will take water that was flowing to Pakistan to Rajasthan by constructing a canal. Pakistan will be starved of water that it has been getting unjustifiably» (Al Jazeera, 2025).

During the conflict in May, there were reports that Chinese-made JF-10 fighter jets engaged and shot down French-origin Rafale jets of the Indian Air Force (Ahmad, 2025; Barker, 2025). Besides the importance of Chinese supplies (today approximately 80% of Pakistan's military imports are of Chinese origin) in supporting Pakistan during the latest conflict, the events of May 2025 are important as this was the first time in which Pakistan used modern Chinese weapons (e.g. HQ-9 air defense system, the PL-15 air-to-air missile in addition to the JF10s), something that was closely watched by any country interested in buying Chinese weapons or concerned about a potential conflict with China (Clary, 2025).

In the broader geopolitical context, the aftermath of the conflict revealed a noticeable tilt in U.S. diplomatic posturing towards India and Pakistan. President Donald Trump praised Pakistan's handling of the crisis, stating, «Pakistan has very strong leadership. Some people don't like when I say this, but it is what it is. And they stopped that war. I'm very proud of them» (The Express Tribune, 2025). Along similar lines, General Michael Kurilla, then head of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), lauded Pakistan as «a phenomenal partner in the counter-terrorism world» (Dawn, 2025a). The two visits of Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff (COAS) to Washington in June and then again in August further cemented the US-Pakistan engagement after years of substantive disengagement during the first Trump administration as well as the Biden one (Mason et al, 2025; Dawn, 2025b).

Taken together, these developments illustrate how the India–Pakistan relationship continues to be shaped by historical grievances, recurring cycles of conflict, and the growing imprint of external powers. Exogenous factors, including China's deepening defence and economic entanglement with Pakistan and the United States' role as an important partner for India, but at the same time recalibrating its relations with Pakistan after years of disengagement, are playing an increasingly important role in the ongoing rivalry between India and Pakistan.

4. Conclusions

This paper analysed India's neighbourhood policy between 2014 and 2025, identifying in the China factor, status ambitions and Hindu nationalism the key drivers behind New Delhi's foreign policy. These drivers weaved through the empirical survey presented in the second part of the paper, which detailed some of the main developments in the bilateral ties between India and countries in South Asia. As the analysis noted, China's growing influence in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific has pushed India towards strengthening security ties with Western partners through mechanisms like the Quad, while maintaining significant economic (inter) dependence with Beijing. Concurrently, India's pursuit of international status is marked by its efforts to assert leadership in multilateral platforms, promote alternative global coalitions like BRICS, and avoid formal alliances that could constrain its strategic autonomy. Domestically, the nationalist agenda of the Modi government plays an important role in shaping foreign policy postures, projecting India as a civilisational power reclaiming its rightful place on the global stage. This nationalist dimension on the one hand it reinforces India's desire for independence in global politics but, on the other, it also complicates its regional engagements. For instance, the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) has strained relations with Bangladesh, while India's hardened stance on Pakistan has closed off diplomatic channels, leading to a deep freeze in bilateral relations. These dynamics highlight how domestic political imperatives,

particularly the BJP's Hindu nationalist agenda, often intersect with and complicate India's regional diplomacy, especially with Muslim-majority neighbours. Overall, from the empirical survey presented in this paper emerges that India's regional leadership is at a crossroads. Its influence depends less on its geographical position and inherited advantages and more on its willingness to deliver sustained economic engagement and cultivate political trust in an increasingly contested South Asian landscape.

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Indian Foreign Policy toward the US, China, and Russia under Modi: Rhetoric and Reality

Michelguglielmo Torri

The election of Narendra Modi in 2014 is widely portrayed as a watershed moment for Indian foreign policy. This article challenges that narrative, arguing that the core parameters guiding India's relations with the US, China, and Russia under Modi—namely its structural imperatives, constraints, and strategic calculations—exhibit a substantial continuity with the framework established well before his ascent. Indeed, the article locates the true watershed for India's international alignments and strategic outlook in the 2005–2008 period. It demonstrates that Modi's most significant innovation, a more confrontational approach to China, proved both limited in scope and ultimately subject to the same constraints that shaped the policies of his predecessors. In its relations with Russia and the US, continuity remained the leitmotif, even as new tensions and opportunities emerged.

Furthermore, the article contends that this underlying continuity and the limited results of Modi's policies have been effectively obscured by a powerful narrative presenting his leadership as revolutionary and his foreign policy as finally establishing India as a major world power. This narrative was forcefully reinforced by India's position of benign neutrality toward Russia during the war in Ukraine, a stance that elicited no concrete adverse reaction from the United States and its key allies. This was depicted as proof of India's ability to forge its own position on major international issues, free from subordination to any great power. This article posits, however, that counterintuitively, much of India's apparent strength is rooted in its structural weakness. Accordingly, Washington's unexpected tolerance during the Ukraine crisis is better explained by recognizing that India's supposedly independent stance was exercised within a geopolitical space defined by overriding US interests.

1. Introduction

The rise of Narendra Modi to the office of Prime Minister in 2014 was heralded by his supporters, much of the Indian media, and a significant segment of the international commentariat as a decisive break with the foreign policy traditions of his predecessors. Modi was depicted as a transformative leader, an all-powerful demiurge who reimagined India's place in the world, recalibrated its great power alignments, and restored a sense of national purpose to its diplomacy. This narrative found fertile ground in a decade marked by China's rise, Russia's resurgence and confrontation with the West, and the United States' geopolitical pivot to Asia.

Yet, as this article will demonstrate, the reality of Indian foreign policy under Modi is different. The strategic architecture within which it evolved was not a product of his vision but rather the outcome of a deepening US-India relationship initiated by Washington in the mid-2000s. The period between 2005 and 2008—marked by the strengthening of India-US military cooperation and, more importantly, the Indo-US Civil Nuclear Agreement—constituted the real watershed. This agreement represented a Copernican overturning of Washington's approach to New Delhi's nuclear ambitions and set parameters that have continued to shape policy choices not only during the Manmohan Singh-led UPA government but under Modi as well. These parameters included an increasing military and, to a lesser extent, economic closeness between New Delhi and Washington; a corresponding rise in tensions with Beijing, which Indian policymakers managed to keep under control until Modi's premiership; and a declining, yet still crucial, military connection with Moscow. Despite a massive

increase in sophisticated arms imports from the US after 2005, the bulk of the weapons and systems used by the Indian armed forces remained of Soviet or Russian origin.

This article is divided into two major parts. The first analyzes the evolution of India's relations with the US, China, and Russia prior to Modi's assumption of office in 2014, focusing on the reconfiguration that occurred between 2005 and 2008. The second, and longer part, assesses the continuities and changes in these relationships under Modi. The article argues that the caesura widely attributed to Modi exists largely at the rhetorical level. It further asserts that the successes which a quasi-hegemonic narrative has ascribed to India's foreign policy under Modi are limited or non-existent. By mid-2025, any claim that India's international position has strengthened compared to what it was on the eve of Modi's rise to power (26 May 2014) can only be met with the utmost scepticism.

2.1. Indian foreign policy up to 2005

Following the substantial failure of its foreign policy based on attempted leadership of the so-called Third World—a failure sanctioned by the 1962 war with China—and after a period of isolation, India's foreign policy between 1971 and 1991 was squarely based on the 20-year Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation signed in 1971 [Government of India 1971]. This pact anchored New Delhi in a privileged relationship with Moscow, providing diplomatic cover, economic partnership, and an enduring arms supply. The treaty was renewed for a further 20 years in the summer of 1991. However, a few weeks later, the anti-Gorbachev coup d'état precipitated the collapse of the Soviet Union and the radical decline of Russian power under the presidency of Boris Yeltsin (1991-1999). Although the Indo-Russian relationship did not cease, it became largely irrelevant as a strategic buttress for India's international position. As a consequence, New Delhi, faced with the disappearance of its principal patron, recalibrated toward the United States, seeking political protection, economic integration, and recognition as a rising power [Torri 2023b, pp. 149-150; 152-153].

This reorientation, initiated by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao (in power 1991-1996), was on the whole successful, although it was complicated by a major obstacle, the nuclear question. India, which had demonstrated its capability to build atomic weapons by carrying out the so-called Peaceful Nuclear Explosion (PNE) of 18 May 1974—also known as Pokhran-I, from the site of the nuclear explosion—had consistently refused to join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). In New Delhi's view, the NPT institutionalized a fundamentally unequal order, recognizing only those countries that had tested nuclear weapons before 1967 as legitimate nuclear powers, while requiring all others to forgo such capability in perpetuity. Accepting the NPT would have meant consigning India to a permanent status of inferiority vis-à-vis the major Western powers and, perhaps more importantly, its regional rival China, which had been an NPT-designated nuclear weapon state since 1964 [Torri 2023b, pp. 152-154; CRS 2022].

India's refusal to adhere to the NPT and other arms control agreements—in particular the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT)—directly clashed with the US position, which aimed to force India to abandon its ambition to be acknowledged as a legitimate nuclear power. In this situation, the Rao government pursued a policy of negotiation with the US, officially aimed at finding a mutually satisfactory solution to the nuclear impasse. In fact, Rao's strategy was to buy time by conveying the impression that New Delhi was amenable to a solution acceptable to Washington. His real objective, however, was to foster increasingly close and relevant economic ties with the US. The strategy was predicated on the belief that as the bilateral economic relationship grew in importance – powerfully promoted by the neoliberal reforms Rao himself had initiated in the summer of 1991 – Washington would find it increasingly costly to sever ties over the nuclear issue, eventually leading to a de facto acceptance of New Delhi's unbending stand [Torri 2023b, p. 154].

India's steadfast position on the nuclear question was justified by both symbolic and practical reasons. Symbolically, the freedom to possess nuclear weapons was regarded as an essential demonstration of India's ability to implement its own independent policies [Torri 2023b, p. 159]. Practically, Indian policymakers saw nuclear capability as essential for national security, providing a deterrent against both China and Pakistan, especially after China's nuclear assistance to Pakistan in the 1980s [Warren and Ganguly 2022].

Narasimha Rao's balancing act, which was continued by the United Front governments (1996-1998), was dramatically altered in May 1998 when the Atal Behari Vajpayee-led government conducted a series of nuclear tests (Pokhran-II), ending decades of ambiguity about India's status as a nuclear weapons state. Like the first nuclear test of 1974, the 1998 tests were driven primarily by domestic political considerations [Torri 2022, p. 121, fn. 5]. They were, however, justified at the international level as necessary to establish a credible deterrent posture vis-à-vis China. While the tests enjoyed near-unanimous domestic support, they carried a heavy international cost, as the United States and its allies-imposed sanctions, cut off technology transfers, and sought to isolate India diplomatically. Relations with China, which had been on a positive trend since 1988, also worsened [Torri 2023b, p. 155].

Over time, however, US sanctions on India were gradually lifted, mainly because of India's growing economic relevance. Furthermore, India's decision to immediately align with the George W. Bush-promoted «war on terror» after the 2001 terrorist attacks finally convinced Washington to remove the remaining sanctions [Torri 2023b, pp. 155-156].

As for the relationship with China, New Delhi had immediately started a mending process, which culminated in Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's visit to Beijing in 2003. The economic agreements signed during the visit, together with the mutual decision to de-emphasize the border problem in favour of economic cooperation, restarted a period of positive relations between the two Asian giants [Torri 2022, pp. 121-122; Torri 2023b, pp. 156]. Finally, it must be stressed that Vladimir Putin's rise to power in 2000 marked Russia's emergence from the state of weakness into which the Yeltsin government had plunged it. The Indo-Russian relationship, which had never stopped but had become hardly relevant, regained importance in parallel with the new growth of Russian power under Putin's leadership. In particular, Russia resumed its key role as a supplier of weapons and weapon systems to India and as a partner in defence co-production [Dolbaia et al. 2025, pp. 2-4].

2.2. India-US relations: the sea-change of 2005-2008

According to one line of analysis, the 1998 nuclear tests, despite the adverse international reaction, ultimately forced a reassessment in Washington and other capitals regarding the feasibility of containing India's nuclear ambitions. From this perspective, rather than resulting in lasting isolation, the Pokhran-II tests initiated a process of gradual normalization of India's status as a legitimate nuclear power. This interpretation holds that high-level dialogues between Indian and US officials, notably the Talbott-Singh talks [Talbott 2024], eventually led to a recognition—tacit at first, and later formalized—that India was an established nuclear weapons state outside the NPT system. This process supposedly culminated in the landmark 2005–2008 US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement.

In reality, while it is undeniable that high-level US-India dialogues continued after Pokhran-II, the factor that induced Washington to accept New Delhi as a legitimate nuclear power, notwithstanding the latter's refusal to join the NPT, was, rather counterintuitively, India's refusal to agree to Washington's request to send an expeditionary force to Iraq in 2004.

This refusal led to an enhanced awareness within Washington of the crucial importance India had come to enjoy at the global level [e.g. Tellis, 2005] and initiated an internal debate among senior US policymakers on how to engage with India. This debate eventually resulted in Washington's decision

to bring New Delhi within the sphere of US strategic influence, inserting it into the web of treaty and non-treaty alliances that Washington was constructing around its main Asian adversaries, particularly Iran and China.

The primary obstacle to achieving this objective was, once again, the nuclear issue and India's refusal to sign the NPT or any other international treaty intended to prevent nuclear proliferation. The Bush administration, however, having finally realized that no Indian government would abandon the nuclear policy pursued up to that point, decided to change its own. Whereas US policy had previously been geared towards thwarting India's nuclear ambitions, from 2005 onwards, it began to encourage them [Torri 2023b, pp. 157-158].

To justify such a radical political shift, the US administration needed a rationale for its acceptance of India as a legitimate nuclear power despite New Delhi's steadfast refusal to alter its nuclear policy. In an inventive move, conceived principally by Ashley J. Tellis, an American citizen of Goan origin, US policymakers achieved this by asking India to «disentangle» its civilian nuclear sector from its military one. This allowed Washington to claim that its new nuclear policy toward India would benefit only the civilian sector of India's nuclear industry. This change in US nuclear policy was coupled with the offer of a highly advantageous military pact.

The new US policy was unveiled in March 2005 by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice during her official visit to New Delhi and was formally launched a few months later, on 18 July, with agreement signed in Washington by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and US President George W. Bush. Under the terms of the 18 July 2005 agreement, India undertook to «disentangle» the civilian sector of its nuclear industry from the military sector [Government of India 2005b]. The civilian sector, representing approximately two-thirds of the industry, would become entitled to the same benefits afforded to the nuclear industries of countries that were party to the NPT.

The negotiation process, which officially began with the joint declaration of 18 July 2005, was definitively concluded more than three years later with the signing of a bilateral agreement in Washington on 10 October 2008 [U.S. Department of State 2008].

The premise and a complementary part of this policy of «nuclear enticing» pursued by the George W. Bush administration was the signing in June 2005—well before the technical details of the nuclear agreement were finalized—of a 10-year military cooperation agreement, the *New Framework for the U.S.-India Defense Relationship*. This pact had three main objectives: first, to encourage India to purchase American weapons and weapon systems, particularly the most sophisticated and expensive ones; second, to promote the growing integration of the armed forces of the two countries; and third, to encourage India to cooperate with the US in peacekeeping operations around the world, most particularly in the Indo-Pacific, by participating in joint sea patrols [New Framework 2005].

The June 2005 military pact, which predated the nuclear accord and served as its strategic backbone, signalled to both regional partners and rivals that India was being positioned as a strategic counterpart to China, with the United States providing the technological and security incentives to facilitate this role. For the US, however, the 10-year military pact was seen as merely the first step toward an increasingly close bilateral military cooperation, which would involve a tighter integration between the militaries of the two countries. This integration was to be made possible by India's signing of a series of «foundational agreements» designed to enable secure communications, logistical support, and geospatial data sharing between the two militaries.

This dual-track nuclear and military rapprochement explicitly aimed to integrate India as a key element in the US-led power system in Asia, without requiring India to formally abandon its doctrine of strategic autonomy. For the United States, leveraging India's size, resources, and location was seen as essential for counterbalancing China and constraining Iran.

For India, the prospect of nuclear legitimacy, access to advanced technology, and expanded defence cooperation with the US were enormously attractive. Nevertheless, doubts about the wisdom of this tightening of military and nuclear relations existed in both countries. In India, large sections of the politicized public and policymakers worried about the danger that the nuclear agreement and the foundational pacts could substantially reduce India's autonomy in both the nuclear and military fields. The risks that this new closeness with the US could adversely impact relations with both China and Russia were also clearly perceived and greatly feared.

In fact, up to 2014, the year the Modi government came to power, only some of the goals sought by the US through the 2005 military pact had been reached. The objective of convincing India to actively uphold the US order in Asia by taking part in joint US-India sea patrols had failed to materialize. The results concerning the integration of the armed forces were more nuanced. While joint US-India military exercises had grown spectacularly, the «foundational pacts» were steadfastly opposed by India's Defence Minister, A. K. Antony. He forcefully argued that the US-sponsored pacts would limit India's full control of its own military and give the US unfettered access to India's military installations and sensitive data, including its encrypted systems [Torri 2023b, p. 160]. Astutely, rather than openly rejecting the foundational pacts, Antony pretended that the difficulty in signing them was the result of the intractable complications of India's bureaucracy.

2.3. The adverse international effects of the sea-change of 2005-2008 and how India managed them up to 2014

As explained, the reversal of the US approach to India that took shape between 2005 and 2008 had as one of its main objectives the unravelling of the positive bilateral relations India enjoyed with Iran, China, and Russia. While the anti-Iran objective was unambiguously articulated by Condoleezza Rice during her 2005 official visit to India, the other two objectives were never openly proclaimed. They were, however, clear for all to see, including the countries concerned.

2.3.1. The relations with China

Not surprisingly—and as Washington expected—China reacted to the present and future challenges represented by the tightening of US-India military and nuclear relations. Since the 1990s and up to 2005, China had prioritized stable border management and economic cooperation with India. The two sides had signed a series of confidence-building agreements between 1993 and 2005, aimed at defusing tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and promoting dialogue [Torri 2022, pp. 120-121; Cecchi 2025, pp. 430-435]. However, as the US-India military pact was concluded and the civilian nuclear agreement was being finalized, Beijing began to react by changing its approach to India.

This change was first signalled in 2006, when the Chinese Ambassador to India, Sun Yuxi, asserted China's sovereign rights over the entire Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. This represented a dramatic shift in China's position regarding the *vexata quaestio* of the undefined Himalayan border. Up to that point, China had de facto accepted the higher crest of the Himalayan range as the border in the eastern sector; Arunachal Pradesh, however, lay to the south of these crests. Ambassador Sun's claim, made during an interview with a private Indian television channel, was clearly an unofficial warning, intended to alert India's policymakers that increasing closeness with the US would not be without adverse consequences. As this first warning appeared to go ignored, Beijing reiterated its position the following year in a stronger and more official manner. On 6 June 2007, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, during a meeting in Hamburg with his Indian counterpart, Pranab Mukherjee, officially claimed the whole of Arunachal Pradesh as part of China. In doing so, Yang breached the guidelines contained in a recent bilateral agreement signed in April 2005. Article VII of that

agreement explicitly stated that: «In reaching a boundary settlement, the two sides shall safeguard due interests of their settled populations in the border areas» [Government of India 2005a, Art. VII]. Yang, however, declared that the mere presence of populated areas (inhabited by non-Chinese populations) in Arunachal Pradesh in no way invalidated the rights over this region that China had inherited from Tibet [Torri 2022, pp. 128-130].

Beijing's hardening position on the border issue could not go undetected in New Delhi. As a result, Indian policymakers soon entered a sustained damage-control mode, implementing a complex set of strategies. These included keeping communication channels with Beijing open through high-level contacts; upholding and expanding the India-China economic connection; attempting to find a solution to the unresolved border differences; and managing the border incidents that were bound to happen through diplomatic means. The Indian government also implemented a decision, taken in 2006—clearly in conjunction with China's raising of the Arunachal Pradesh question—to judiciously strengthen India's defensive apparatus south of the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the un-demarcated Sino-Indian provisional border.

Despite India's damage-control efforts and the continuation of intense diplomatic contacts, India-China relations worsened in the post-2008 period. This deterioration became visible through China's opposition to India's global ambitions, particularly New Delhi's quest for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Nonetheless, this worsening was qualified by the efforts of both New Delhi and Beijing to prevent it from spiralling out of control. Frequent high-level meetings and the signing of several agreements played a role in this. In fact, between the beginning of 2008 and early 2014 (when India's general election brought a change in government), there were no fewer than seven bilateral high-level meetings. During the same period, the confidence-building agreements of 1993, 1996, and 2005, aimed at preventing or managing border crises, were followed by further agreements along the same lines on 17 January 2012 and 23 October 2013 [Torri 2022. pp. 134-135].

While the results of the high-level meetings did not amount to much, this continuing diplomatic interaction at least conveyed the impression that the differences between the two countries were not insuperable. The confidence-building measures—both those signed before and after 2008—resulted in speedy and bloodless solutions to frequent border incidents, most of which were due to the undefined and un-demarcated nature of the LAC. Finally, economic interchange between the two nations improved spectacularly in the period under review, and in 2009, India-China trade overtook India-US trade in value, making China India's top trading partner [Malone & Mukherjee 2010]. Concurrently, between 2008 and 2013, Indian policymakers, adhering to the Machiavellian principle that diplomacy must be backed by strength, reinforced India's defensive apparatus south of the Himalayas, aiming to remedy a situation of military weakness that could have obstructed New Delhi's pursuit of a satisfactory diplomatic solution to the border dispute.

2.3.2. The relations with Russia

During the same period, the India-Russia relationship also deteriorated, although without experiencing the dramatic twists of India-China relations, and only up to a point. The diversification of India's defence purchases and its opening toward the US and its allies, resulting from the new closeness between New Delhi and Washington, began to adversely impact Russia's position as the main supplier of weapons and weapon systems to India. Nevertheless, Russia continued to be considered by India as its historically most reliable strategic partner. Russia and India continued to sign treaties that institutionalized the «special and privileged strategic partnership» between the two countries, while regular summits and joint defence ventures continued.

Furthermore, despite the rise in military imports from the US, Israel, and France—particularly in the field of the most technologically advanced and high-value weapons—the quantitative majority of

imported weapons continued to come from Russia. Price, reliability, and Moscow's willingness to transfer technology and co-produce advanced systems powerfully contributed to the continuation of the military connection between India and Russia. Moreover, the fact that weapons and weapon systems of Soviet or Russian origin continued to dominate India's arsenal had created a bond of dependency, as Moscow played an indispensable role as a reliable source of spares and training. This dependency could not be broken by the increase in imports from the US, Israel, and France. Finally, Russia and India remained involved in the joint production of weapons, most notably the BrahMos long-range supersonic missiles. The India-Russia relationship was further underpinned by cooperation in the nuclear and space sectors, as well as a shared preference for multipolarity in global governance institutions. Accordingly, in the final analysis, although following a declining trend, the Russia-India connection remained extraordinarily strong [CRS 2022; Warren and Ganguly, 2022; Lopez, 2024; Dolbaia *et al.* 2025].

3. Indian foreign policy under Modi

Indian foreign policy under Narendra Modi was driven by two primary goals: securing India's acceptance as a major world power and acquiring the direct investment, technological know-how, and other economic resources necessary to accelerate the nation's economic growth. The relationship with the United States was central to the pursuit of both objectives. Accordingly, much like the preceding Manmohan Singh-led government, Modi pursued an increasingly close connection with Washington as his main foreign policy objective.

Initially, Modi moved along the same path as the Manmohan Singh government, attempting to gain as much as possible from the US without endangering India's strategic autonomy. While this policy yielded some economic results, they were far more limited than anticipated by either Modi or, in the initial phase, by American CEOs. As will be shown, two factors greatly constrained the growth of the economic India-US connection. The first was that, despite his bold rhetoric and promises, Modi was unable to open the Indian market to the extent desired by US entrepreneurs. The second was the first presidency of Donald Trump and the imposition of his signature neo-protectionist «America First» policy. Although these factors did not cause the bilateral economic connection to wither—it in fact continued to grow—they nevertheless greatly hampered its expansion, keeping it well below the initial expectations of the parties involved and its actual potential.

On the whole, however, the modest results of the economic relationship appeared to be compensated by the strengthening of the bilateral military connection. Indeed, the military ties, although somewhat constrained by India's persistent fears that an overly tight connection with the US would limit its strategic autonomy, continued to grow, becoming the mainstay of India-US relations by the end of the Obama presidency (20 January 2017). Modi, like Manmohan Singh and his government, tried to maximize the benefits from Washington's willingness to allow an uninterrupted and growing flow of high-tech weaponry to India without sacrificing strategic autonomy. Over time, however, Modi gradually yielded to American pressure, silently and incrementally accepting what amounted to a de facto limitation of India's strategic autonomy.

On the eve of the Ukrainian crisis (22 February 2022), Modi had effectively manoeuvred Indian foreign policy into a position constrained by US geopolitical interests. This was a situation from which, as this article will argue, he was rescued by the strategic upheaval caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Washington-led reaction to it. The unexpected freedom of action granted to New Delhi by the crisis allowed Modi and his government's narrative-shapers to claim that India was a great power, able to follow its own independent path without any compulsion to side with one or another of the great powers pitted against each other on the international stage.

This proved to be a very successful narrative, generally accepted by both Indian public opinion and most international analysts as an accurate rendering of reality. The contention of this article, however, is that India's vaunted strategic autonomy, as demonstrated by its behaviour after the beginning of the Ukraine crisis, was exercised within a political space that continued to be delimited by US interests. Accordingly, a different definition of those interests by Washington would necessarily affect India's ability to exercise its strategic autonomy. This redefinition of US geopolitical interests did in fact occur with Donald Trump's second ascent to the US presidency, a redefinition that questioned India's supposed role as a great power capable of pursuing a strategic path of its own choosing, free from external influences.

In implementing his US policy, Modi, like the preceding Indian governments, was well aware that increasing closeness with the US, particularly the tightening of the bilateral military partnership, would inevitably have negative repercussions on India's other two main international relationships: those with Moscow and Beijing. The relationship with Moscow was prudently managed, following the same path as previous Indian governments. In the case of China, however, there was a change of style. Initially, Modi's China policy was characterized not only by the continuation of the diplomatic engagement pursued by his predecessor but also by the implementation of a dual strategy based on economic engagement and political containment.

Regarding the containment aspect of Modi's China policy, two elements must be stressed. The first is that it was a product of Modi's own initiative, visible from the beginning of his premiership and in no way imposed or suggested by Washington—which, nonetheless, could not but be satisfied by it. It is also necessary to highlight that, starting in 2016, India’s dual engagement-containment policy toward China morphed into one where containment became prevalent. In 2017, this resulted in a serious confrontation along the Himalayan border at Doklam. After Doklam, the situation along the border, despite some partial easing, became increasingly tense, leading in 2020 to the most serious crisis since the late 1980s. The military risks to which the Galwan crisis exposed India, and the failed attempt to decouple the Indian economy from the Chinese one—briefly pursued as a reprisal against China—eventually induced Modi to silently return to the policy of prudent tension management followed by his predecessor.

3.1. The India-US connection under Modi

3.1.1. The economic dimension (2014-2016)

Modi's first visit to the US as prime minister took place only a few months after his election (26-30 September 2014). For a politician who, just one year prior, had been unable to obtain a visa to enter the US, the trip marked a dramatic reversal. Modi received red-carpet treatment from American authorities and rousing receptions from the influential, 2.8 million-strong Indian-American community [Torri & Maiorano 2015, p. 313]. Modi's objectives were twofold: attracting US private investment to India and renewing and expanding defence cooperation. The Indian premier pursued the former by meeting with the CEOs of several leading US corporations, striving to convince them that times had changed in India and that «archaic» labour laws and bureaucratic impediments to international capital were on their way out [Torri & Maiorano 2015, pp. 312-313].

This visit was followed by US President Barack Obama’s invitation to be the «Chief Guest» at India's Republic Day parade on 26 January 2015, the first time a foreign head of state had been so honoured. These exchanges, coupled with other high-level visits, were «extraordinarily rich in political symbolism» but proved much shorter in «substantive outcome» [Bhadrakumar 2015]. No substantial steps forward were made in opening the Indian internal market to US capital, and the bilateral investment treaty eagerly sought by the US was not finalized.

This lack of substantive progress soon brought about a change in the attitude of both the American administration and US entrepreneurs. Significantly, Modi's second visit to the US (26-30 September 2015) went almost unnoticed in the American press [Jain 2015]. He met with 47 of the US's top CEOs—some of whom, as in the cases of Google, Microsoft, and Adobe, were of Indian origin—and tried once again to convince them that «India was open for business». By this point, however, US CEOs, while still convinced of Modi's good faith, had concluded that he was unable to deliver on his promises [Sirohi 2015]. This conviction was shared by the US administration. On the eve of Modi's second arrival, US Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker, speaking at the US-India CEO Forum in Washington (21 September 2015), pointedly remarked that the World Bank ranked India 186 out of 189 countries on the ease of enforcing contracts. Pritzker also noted that it could take years to resolve a contractual dispute in India, as terms were too frequently reinterpreted after a deal had closed [Penny Pritzker 2015].

In a way, Modi's first two visits to the US set the parameters for the bilateral economic connection up to the end of the Obama presidency (20 January 2017). Modi continued his efforts to induce US entrepreneurs to invest, assuring them of his support in easing their operations but realizing very little of what he promised. Nevertheless, despite the persistent obstacles, the Indian market remained big and promising enough to induce US entrepreneurs to enter it and try to make the most of the opportunity. Accordingly, in spite of the disappointment of the US administration and entrepreneurs, US direct investment in India continued to grow—a positive trend that continued in the following years [Government of India 2025]. It is a fact, however, that this growth remained well below India's expectations and the US business community's potential [Kantha 2025].

3.1.2. The military dimension: the cautious beginning (2014-2015)

Initially, the tightening of the bilateral military connection was as slow and halting as that of the economic relationship. As previously noted, Washington aimed to closely integrate the military forces of the two countries in the Asia-Pacific through the finalization of contentious pacts, particularly the Logistic Support Agreement (LSA), the Communication Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA), and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-Spatial Cooperation (BECA). The LSA envisaged reciprocal logistical support, to be provided by each party by opening its bases and furnishing fuel and other kinds of logistics backing to the other's fighter jets and naval warships, on barter or an equal value exchange basis; the CISMOA was aimed at enabling greater communications interoperability between the militaries of India and the US, by allowing India to procure transfer-specialised equipment for encrypted communications for US-origin military platforms; the BECA would allow the sharing of geospatial intelligence, relevant for accurately hitting long distance targets [e.g., Philip 2020; Roy 2020]. As above noted, before Modi's rise to power these pacts had been steadfastly opposed by then Defence Minister A. K. Antony, who was convinced they would limit India's full control of its own military and give the US unfettered access to India's military installations and sensitive data, including its encrypted systems.

With the coming to power of the Modi-headed BJP government, negotiations for closer bilateral military cooperation were restarted. A common India-US position on the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean region was reached during Modi's September 2014 visit to the US. It reasserted Washington's anti-Chinese position on «safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and over flight throughout the [Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean] region, especially in the South China Sea». It also stated that the US and India would «treat each other at the same level as their closer partners» on matters such as «defense technology, trade, research, co-production and co-development» [Joint Strategic Vision 2015]. These positions were formalized in a bilateral document signed during Obama's January 2015 visit to India. This was followed by the signing in New Delhi, at the beginning of June 2015, of a new 10-year US-India defence framework, renewing the one signed in 2005.

The January 2015 joint document was seen by some commentators as establishing a closer integration of India's foreign policy within the US's anti-China arc of containment. Although this thesis was denied by the Indian government, it appeared to be confirmed by a development concerning «Exercise Malabar». This naval drill, first held in 1992 as a bilateral India-US exercise, had progressed from a modest beginning «to become a high point of Indo-US defence cooperation at the operational level […] with high strategic significance» [Bangara 2015]. In 2007, the exercise was expanded to a multilateral format, with Japan, Australia, and Singapore joining. This was perceived by China as a direct threat, and its formal diplomatic protests resulted in the exercise being scaled down to its original bilateral format in 2008. Now, in 2015, US pressure induced India to accept the re-inclusion of Japan [Torri & Maiorano 2016, pp.392-393]. Not surprisingly, this decision was seen by many chancelleries and analysts as indicative of New Delhi's growing integration into the anti-China arc of containment that Washington was building [e.g., Singh 2015].

For the time being, however, while India had caved to US pressure regarding Japan's inclusion in Malabar, it continued to appear hesitant to accept the «foundational pacts». Both the Modi government and most Indian commentators, while not averse to an increasingly close embrace with the US, were reluctant to openly take an anti-China stand, which the signing of formal military agreements and participation in joint patrols in the South China Sea would be seen as. As a result, while negotiations for the LSA went on, Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar denied that the government was entertaining any project of jointly patrolling the South China Sea with the US Navy (March 2016). He was also sent to Beijing (April 2016) to convince the Chinese that the pact itself was not aimed against them [Torri & Maiorano 2017, p. 341].

3.1.3. The military dimension: India caving in under US pressure (2016)

During 2016, however, New Delhi appeared to further cave in under Washington's pressure. On 12 April, the news became public that India and the US had agreed «in principle» to a somewhat modified version of the LSA, which now took the name of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA). Later, on 18 May 2016, a flotilla of four of the Indian Navy's most powerful and modern ships left for the South China Sea and North West Pacific, in what a commentator described as a mission whose only goal was «annoying Beijing» [Bhadrakumar 2016, 21 June]. Finally, in June, units of the Indian, US, and Japanese navies commenced the 20th session of «Exercise Malabar», confirming both the increasing military closeness between the US and India and the permanent insertion of Japan into the exercise [Torri & Maiorano 2017, pp. 341-342].

This gradual reorientation of New Delhi's foreign policy was encouraged by Washington through two concomitant strategies. The first was to favour India at the military level. The American administration expressed its support for India's plans to expand its navy to 166 warships, including a third aircraft carrier, and promised to sell and produce in India two state-of-the-art US military aircraft: Lockheed Martin's F-16 and Boeing's F/A-18 Hornet [Ratnayake 2016].

At the same time, however, India was put under pressure, finding itself in the crosshairs of criticism from influential American politicians and lobbies. On 24 May 2016, a hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) on US-India relations saw several senators harshly criticizing India for its dismal civil rights record and its alleged lack of concrete economic reforms. SFRC Chairman Bob Corker was particularly hard-hitting, accusing India of having «12 to 14 million slaves» [Sirohi 2016]. Furthermore, on 7 June 2016, the US Congress's Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission held a special hearing that examined the current state of human rights in India, stressing the existing «challenges to fundamental freedoms» [Bhadrakumar 2016, 2 June].

All of this occurred while Modi was undertaking another of his visits to the US. This criticism undoubtedly played a role in shaping the joint US-India communiqué of 7 June 2016, which closed

the visit. Among its most important points were the announcement of the finalization of the LEMOA text and the declaration that the US recognized India as «a Major Defense Partner». This designation implied that the US was ready to facilitate the flow of military technology to India «to a level commensurate with that of its closest allies and partners» [Joint Statement 2016, 7 June]. Significantly, in the aftermath of the joint communiqué, the US legislators' preoccupations with India's civil rights record and the presence of millions of slaves appeared to vanish into thin air.

On 29 August 2016, Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar and US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter announced the signing of the LEMOA [Joint Statement 2016, 29 August]. This was seen by most analysts as «a major and decisive step in the direction of making India a 'linchpin' of the US rebalance to the Indo-Pacific» [Paul 2016]. By then, the military connection had become so close that the number of US-India joint military exercises exceeded those held by the US with any other friendly nation [Jayasekera 2016].

By 2016, the US had become India's main supplier of weapons value-wise, as, according to Modi himself, related imports had moved «from almost zero to ten billion dollars in less than a decade» [Narendra Modi's speech 2016]. The enactment of an «India Amendment» in the US National Defense Authorization Act for 2017 on 8 December 2016 mandated the Secretaries of Defense and State to jointly act to «recognize India's status as a major defense partner» and to «facilitate the transfer [to India] of advanced technology» to «advance United States interests in the South Asia and greater Indo-Asia-Pacific regions» [National Defense Authorization Act 2016]. Although short on specifics, the amendment highlighted the bipartisan consensus that India was a precious instrument for propping up US military hegemony in the Asia-Pacific.

During his last official visit to India (8 December 2016), US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter rightly noted that «defense relations» had become a «major driver» in Indo-US bilateral relations [Jones 2016]. Although unstated, it was clear that the tightening and expansion of these military relations had as their main objective and only rationale the containment of China.

3.2.1. The economic difficulties under Donald Trump (2017-2020)

This was the situation when Donald Trump took over as president of the US on 20 January 2017. During the electoral campaign, Trump had made clear his intention to launch his neo-protectionist «America First» policy, the implementation of which could not but damage India. Modi attempted to escape this impending danger by establishing a close personal relationship with the new President and by increasingly aligning India's foreign policy with American priorities.

At first, Modi's strategy appeared to work. During his first official visit to the United States under Trump's first presidency (25-26 June 2017), the Indian premier received «red carpet» treatment. Contentious issues that could have made the interaction between Trump and Modi difficult were conveniently sidelined, while both sides stressed the «strategic convergence» between the two countries. India espoused Donald Trump's stand on North Korea and agreed to work with the US in both Afghanistan and the Indo-Pacific; in return, the US espoused India's position on Pakistan, criticizing it for allegedly giving cover to anti-India terrorist groups [Torri & Maiorano 2018, p. 284].

Modi's demarche, however, did not save India from Trump's neo-protectionist «America First» policy. In June 2018, Trump quoted India as one of the countries guilty of dishonest trade practices, accusing it of imposing 100% tariffs on certain US goods [Torri 2019, p. 302]. This was followed by the new President's decision in March 2018 to impose heavy import tariffs on steel (25%) and aluminium (10%). While the measure was not specifically aimed at India, affecting a series of other countries such as China, the EU, Mexico, Russia, and Canada, New Delhi was rightly worried that these new tariffs could be the opening move of a protectionist policy aimed at more lucrative Indian exports to the US, particularly pharmaceutical items. India requested to be exempted from the tariffs

and tried to leverage its «strategic partnership» with the US, but Washington turned down the request [Torri 2019, pp. 302-303].

India reacted by denouncing the US tariffs as protectionist before the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and threatening to hike its own tariffs on a series of US products. This, however, was a threat that New Delhi initially kept on hold, hesitating to challenge the US, particularly because of Donald Trump's unpredictability. Accordingly, New Delhi fell back on renewed negotiations, which, however, while not bringing about any concrete result, took place against a backdrop of increasing economic pressure.

Another problem was the question of the H-1B visa. In autumn 2018, news emerged that the Trump administration intended to limit the concession of H-1B visas and cancel work permissions for H-4 visa users, namely the spouses and children of H-1B visa holders. The H-1B visa—a non-immigrant visa allowing US companies to employ foreign workers in highly skilled occupations—was the most sought-after among Indian IT professionals. As of 5 October 2018, Indians held 93% of this visa category. Any restriction of the existing rules could not but adversely affect the more than 300,000 Indian citizens holding H-1B visas and their families [Torri 2019, p. 303]. Finally, on 29 May 2019, President Trump announced the imminent termination of the preferential tariff treatment allowed to India under the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP). The decision, which became effective on 5 June 2019, terminated preferential tariffs for Indian exports worth almost US$ 6 billion [Torri 2021, p. 390].

These measures were eventually damaging enough to force India to react by imposing tariff duties on 28 US products, primarily in the agriculture sector. A «mini trade war» ensued between India and the US. A solution was sought in a comprehensive trade deal, which Trump announced on the eve of his 2020 visit to India, but the deal never materialized [Torri 2021, pp. 390-91]. In 2020, the Trump administration continued to turn a deaf ear to India’s economic requests. In March, it closed the door on reinstating India’s GSP benefits; in June came the announcement that H1-B visas would remain suspended until the end of the year [Torri 2021, p. 393].

3.2.2. The limitation of India's «strategic autonomy» (2017-2020)

Washington's economic pressure was also accompanied by a strategy explicitly aimed at limiting New Delhi's strategic autonomy. The objective was not to condition the India-China relationship—which, as will be seen, was already worsening without major pressure from the American administration—but to constrain and possibly destroy the India-Iran and India-Russia connections.

Hitting the India-Iran connection was an objective openly pursued by Washington since 2005. As a result, India’s imports of Iranian oil had declined over the years, although they briefly picked up again following the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015. In December 2017, Iran remained the third-largest oil supplier to India, and in 2018, India was still the second-biggest buyer of Iranian oil after China [Torri 2019, pp. 305-306]. Iran was also relevant as the location for the Chabahar port, the strategic hub of a corridor bypassing Pakistan to reach Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Washington had maintained a tolerant attitude toward the project, as it served US interests in Afghanistan and competed with China’s nearby Gwadar port. However, on 8 May 2018, Trump’s decision to withdraw from the JCPOA brought the threat of US sanctions against countries trading with Iran. After attempting to find a way out, India substantially decreased its volume of imported Iranian oil, and in May 2019, New Delhi officially declared it had stopped importing Iranian oil altogether. On its part, the future of the Chabahar project remained shrouded in uncertainty [Torri 2021, pp. 399-400].

Simultaneously, the US Congress put in the crosshairs the India-Russia connection. In summer 2017, it passed the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which mandated secondary sanctions on countries engaging in significant transactions with Russia's defence sector. This directly affected India, which still bought most of its weapons from Russia. Although Russia's share of India's arms imports had declined from 79% in 2008-12 to 62% in 2012-17, Moscow remained the main supplier quantity-wise and offered weapons with fewer political strings attached [Torri 2019, p. 304]. This was capped by New Delhi's negotiation to purchase five Russia-made S-400 Triumf air defence missile systems, a system generally considered superior to its US equivalents. Despite US entreaties, New Delhi decided to proceed, running the gauntlet of possible CAATSA sanctions.

Against this backdrop, Washington's pressure on New Delhi to sign the remaining foundational agreements continued. This pressure was strong enough to induce New Delhi to sign the second pact, COMCASA, on 6 September 2018. The signing took place notwithstanding fears among many Indian analysts that COMCASA could allow the US to illegitimately acquire highly confidential data on India's defence and intelligence apparatuses [Torri 2019, p. 307]. The cementing of the strategic relationship continued unabated. The December 2019 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue resulted in expanded naval cooperation, the formalization of the annual «Tiger Triumph» tri-service exercise, and an industrial exchange annexe for joint defence manufacturing. Modi also used India's expanding military imports to satisfy Trump's desire to help the US economy grow [Joshi 2020, p. 417]. In 2019 alone, India agreed to buy or negotiated the purchase of over US$ 7 billion worth of military equipment from the US, including combat drones, maritime surveillance aircraft, transport and combat helicopters, and short-range missile defence systems [Torri 2021, p. 391]. In the following year, US arm sales to India continued to surge, and, according to a US Department of State's spokesperson, speaking at the end of October, as of 2020 the United States had authorized more than US$ 20 billion in defence sales to India [Defence News 2020; *U.S. Security Cooperation With India* 2025]. Against a backdrop of trade disputes, defence partnership had therefore become the engine driving Indo-US relationship [Joshi 2020, p. 417; Defence News 2020].

Interestingly, the tightening of the bilateral military connection and India's concessions to Washington's strategic desiderata saw no reciprocation on the main issues causing tension. This became clear during US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's remarks to the press in New Delhi on 6 September 2018. Regarding Iranian oil, Pompeo stated: «We have told the Indians consistently... that on November 4th the sanctions with respect to Iranian crude oil will be enforced... it is our expectation that the purchases of Iranian crude oil will go to zero from every country, or sanctions will be imposed». In relation to the S-400 purchase and a possible CAATSA waiver, he declared: «no decision has been made... We are working to... exercise that waiver authority only where it makes sense» [Remarks to the Press, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo 2018].

3.2.3. Resisting US pressure: the Quad question

India did, however, resist the pressure of the Trump administration with some success in one notable case: the transformation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)—an entente including Australia, India, Japan, and the US—into an Asian NATO. The Quad had originally taken shape from the joint humanitarian relief efforts of these four nations following the 2004 Tsunami. After a few years of promising growth, it was abruptly disbanded in 2008 [Rudd 2019]. On 11 November 2017, however, the quadrilateral entente was resuscitated in a meeting of senior officials on the side-lines of the ASEAN summit in Manila [Madan 2017; Roy-Chaudhury & Sullivan de Estrada 2018; Buchan & Rimland 2020].

In both its first and second phases, the Quad's institutional framework was limited to periodical meetings, and its objectives remained indefinite until the beginning of its second phase. Nevertheless,

few doubted that the Quad was an alliance in progress whose main, albeit undeclared, objective was the containment of China. Adhering to a well-defined anti-China strategy was complicated by the member states' different economic and military structures and, more importantly, their different geographical locations. Significantly, during the Quad's first phase, member states were consistently unable to conclude their meetings with a joint statement, instead issuing separate ones that, despite common elements, featured important differences. As some analysts noted, anti-China positions were spelled out with a clarity directly proportional to the geographical distance of the authoring state from China [Torri 2018, pp. 19-20].

The relaunching of the Quad in November 2017 was mainly the work of the Trump administration, which aimed not only to strengthen the US-sponsored anti-China arc of containment but also to transform the Quad into the nucleus of a NATO-like military organization. This was made explicit on 31 August 2020 by US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun, who argued that the Indo-Pacific region lacked «strong multilateral structures», making it necessary «at some point» to formalize a structure like NATO. According to Biegun, the Quad was the nucleus for this structure, which would hopefully expand to include Vietnam, South Korea, and New Zealand [Torri 2021, p. 394; Torri 2023, pp. 350-351].

A NATO-like anti-China alliance, though apparently tempting, was a dangerous proposition for India—the only Quad member with a long and unsettled land border with China. The Quad's de facto military arm was the naval Exercise Malabar, but the entente lacked a corresponding land-based military organization. This left India by far the most exposed to potential retaliation from China. While some Indian analysts argued that opening a second front in the South China Sea could counter China's push on the Himalayas [e.g., Pai 2020], a NATO-like Quad, however redoubtable at sea, lacked a comparable land force to deploy along its only land border with China.

Consequently, New Delhi, while a willing partner, remained reluctant to let the Quad assume the character of an open anti-China military alliance [Pugliese & Maslow 2019, pp. 123-124; Torri 2019, pp. 297-313]. Not surprisingly, Biegun's suggestion left New Delhi cold [Torri 2021, p. 395]. When the 2020 Quad security meeting was held in Tokyo on 6 October, little of tangible substance emerged. The difference in approach between the virulent anti-China speech of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the much more cautious tone of the other foreign ministers was evident [Torri 2021, p. 395].

Delhi's reluctance put a spanner in the project, as implicitly acknowledged by Pompeo, who was later to define India as the «wild card» in the entente [NDTV 2023]. However, even here, New Delhi's resistance was not unambiguous. During the Tokyo meeting, the Americans successfully convinced India to expand Exercise Malabar by including Australia, a move New Delhi had previously resisted. On 19 October 2020, Australia was invited, and Exercise Malabar 2020 was again upgraded to a quadrilateral drill. It took place in two phases in November, off the coast of Visakhapatnam and in the Arabian Sea, highlighted by the participation of two aircraft carrier battle groups: the US Navy's Nimitz and the Indian Navy's Vikramaditya [Torri 2021, p. 395].

3.2.4. India's strategic autonomy at the end of Trump's first presidency

Despite India's soft-pedalling on the Quad, by the end of Trump's presidency, it was difficult to distinguish the US-India strategic connection from a formal military alliance. Nevertheless, most Indian analysts and the public at large appeared convinced that India's strategic vicinity to the US did not amount to an alliance and that its strategic autonomy remained intact. This opinion dovetailed with criticism from the well-known US foreign relations expert Ashley Tellis, who argued from a different standpoint that the alliance existed but was weak due to a lack of systematic follow-up work on the foundational agreements. In Tellis's view, this left the two sides needing «to know much more

about each other's forces, where they are located, what their doctrines are and how they operate» [Sirohi 2020]. Along the same lines, former Ambassador M.K. Bhadrakumar noted: «The Indians at large harbour a notion that their country is cherrypicking out of the American basket of goods». This, in Bhadrakumar's opinion, was a delusion coupled with the conviction that this could be done without paying any political price [Bhadrakumar 2020, 24 October].

In short, the prevailing view was that the tightening of the India-US connection existed less in reality than as a potentiality that New Delhi believed it could exploit at will. This article contends, however, that reality was different, as the foundational agreements created both potential and actual limitations on India's strategic autonomy.

3.2.4.1. The potential limitations

The data and high-technology security equipment India received from the US through COMCASA and BECA were indeed «force multipliers». The problem, as pointed out by Indian military expert Pravin Sawhney, was that this equipment was vulnerable to US pre-implanted «nano malware (malicious software) codes that start functioning when certain conditions are met, or outside instructions are given after months or even years». Sawhney also noted that since US experts would be authorized COMCASA users, they «could corrupt datasets on command for as long as they want» and «could even overwrite Indian short-range, point to point radio frequency connections by long-range high-powered signals from beyond physical parameters». In Sawhney's opinion: «The reality is India has cut off its nose to spite the Chinese by flaunting untested strategic ties with the US» [Sawhney 2020].

A second problem, noted by M.K. Bhadrakumar, was that «the coordinates or inputs that BECA provides may not be useful beyond a point in their application, since something like seventy percent of Indian weapons are of Russian origin, which may be incompatible with the US services». The more widespread the use of BECA-supplied data became, the greater the incentive for India to progressively whittle down its dependence on Russian weaponry. This process was bound to be strengthened by the fact that «Russia would have misgivings while transferring cutting-edge military technology in future» due to the US capability to penetrate India-owned weaponry, made possible by increased interoperability. This was a success for US diplomacy, but much less so for India's ability to maintain its strategic autonomy [Bhadrakumar 2020, 28 October].

3.2.4.2. The actual limitations

Quite apart from potential limitations, New Delhi's inability to cope with Washington's pressure was already visible in the unravelling of the India-Iran connection. The steady diminution up to the de facto cessation in India's oil imports from Iran, forced by US pressure, has already been highlighted. Washington had, however, left New Delhi a free hand regarding its involvement in upgrading the Iranian port of Chabahar and building a railway to Zahedan, as the project served US interests in Afghanistan and competed with China's BRI. However, following Trump's anti-Iranian sanctions, the Modi government began to stall on the project's implementation. It is possible that, as argued by analyst Francesca Salvatore, the Indian government itself had second thoughts, prioritizing a good relationship with Trump over the grand plan of opening a privileged trade path to Europe [Salvatore 2020].

Eventually, Tehran, tired of New Delhi's delays, decided to complete the project on its own. In July 2020, Iran inaugurated the track-laying process for the 628 km Chabahar-Zahedan line, to be completed without India's assistance [Torri 2021, p. 401]. How Iran found the resources was explained by subsequent news: Iran and China had «quietly drafted a sweeping economic and security

partnership that would clear the way for billions of dollars of Chinese investments in energy and other sectors» [Fassihi & Myers 2020]. According to a leaked version of the agreement, it «would vastly expand Chinese presence in banking, telecommunications, ports, railways and dozens of other projects. In exchange, China would receive a regular – and, according to an Iranian official and an oil trader, heavily discounted – supply of Iranian oil over the next 25 years» [Haidar 2020].

The prospect of substantial Chinese funding had enabled Iran to start the project. The agreement also reportedly provided for the lease of the Chabahar port to China and for China to develop Bandar-e-Jask, a port west of Chabahar, with a potential tie-up to the Chinese-run Pakistani port at Gwadar [Torri 2021, p. 401]. By July 2020, the Modi government's caving to US pressure had damaged the India-Iran connection, apparently beyond repair, and contributed to pushing Iran into the arms of China. This made impossible the realization of the ambitious project to open a sea-land highway connecting India to Europe, circumventing the land barriers that made India a virtual island.

3.3. Breaking out from the box: the (apparent) reassertion of India's strategic autonomy (2022-2024)

3.3.1. The Ukraine crisis and its fallout on the India-US connection

The start of Joe Biden's presidency (20 January 2021) was followed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine (22 February 2022), an event that deeply impacted the geopolitical configuration not only in Europe but across the world, including Asia. For India, the Ukraine crisis offered unforeseen opportunities and advantages.

As has been argued, the India-US military connection had by this point become so close as to constitute a de facto alliance, even if Indian policymakers and analysts denied it. Whether or not this was a formal alliance, the relationship was such that Washington and its allies expected India to side with them against Russia. This expectation was reinforced by the Western tendency, led by Washington, to frame the conflict as a clash between global democracies and Russian autocracy. As the self-proclaimed «world's largest democracy»—a title widely accepted in the West—India was expected to align dutifully with this democratic bloc. This, however, did not happen. From the outset, India adopted an ambiguous neutrality, refusing to publicly condemn the Russian invasion and not hesitating to profit from discounted Russian oil and other goods. Over time, a considerable share of these oil imports was refined and found its way to Western markets, effectively bypassing the sanctions regime against Russia.

Counterintuitively, India's ambiguous neutrality—which thinly veiled a de facto pro-Russia stance—and its triangulation of Russian oil to Western markets elicited no concrete adverse reaction from Washington or its allies. This outcome appears to squarely contradict the preceding argument that India's tightening military connection with the US had come at the cost of its strategic autonomy. Indeed, Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar and a host of analysts presented India's policy and the West's non-reaction as undeniable proof of India's strength and ability to follow an independent path dictated solely by its national interest.

This narrative proved to be very enticing for the Indian public and successful in the world at large. It did, however, obscure a key factor: India's freedom of action was exercised within a political space delimited by overriding US interests. As we will see, the potential for this space to change, and thus reveal the true limits of India's supposed autonomy and major power role, would become apparent once Donald Trump returned to power.

3.3.2. India's ambiguous neutrality

On 26 February 2022, just two days after the invasion began, India was one of three countries to abstain on a UN Security Council resolution demanding the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops. It subsequently abstained on a procedural resolution calling for an emergency session of the UN General Assembly [Torri 2023, p. 358].

At a special Quad meeting on 3 March 2022, convened by President Biden to discuss the war, India was the only member not to condemn Russia. Yet, no public denunciation followed; instead, there were only «gentle efforts» behind the scenes to persuade New Delhi to change its position [Prakash 2022]. The period from March to May 2022 witnessed a «flurry of diplomatic activities», with an exceptional number of high-level Western officials visiting New Delhi, alongside virtual meetings between Modi and leaders from the US and Australia [Torri 2023, p. 358].

A fortnight after the Quad meeting, on 18 March 2022, an Indian official revealed that India would increase its imports of Russian oil, offered at a 20% discount [Al Jazeera 2022, 18 March]. In the months that followed, India's imports of Russian oil boomed, increasing tenfold by September 2022 compared to the previous year. This transformed Russia from a marginal supplier into India's third-largest. By October, Russia had become India's top oil supplier, accounting for 22% of its total crude imports and surpassing Iraq and Saudi Arabia, which had become key providers after the virtual elimination of Iranian oil. Concurrently, the value of India's coal imports from Russia rose four-fold by September 2022 compared to the previous year [Torri 2023, p. 358].

Despite these developments, there was no concrete adverse reaction from the US or its main allies. On 31 March 2022, both the United States and Great Britain signalled their acceptance of India's decision to purchase discounted Russian oil [Torri 2023, p. 359]. In the following months, high-level India-US meetings and a public statement by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (11 April 2022) made clear that India's strategy had been green-lighted by the US and that bilateral relations remained close and cordial [Torri 2023, p. 359].

Further proof of the excellent state of US-India relations was offered by another twist in the ongoing S-400 Triumf saga. As noted, India had signed a US$ 5 billion deal in October 2018 to buy five of these sophisticated Russian air defence systems, and began to induct them in December 2021. Since the signing, the threat of sanctions under the US Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) had hung over India. On 14 July 2022, however, the House of Representatives passed a legislative amendment, authored by Indian-American Congressman Ro Khanna, urging the Biden administration to waive any possible CAATSA sanctions on India. As Khanna explicitly stated, the waiver was intended to help India deter aggressors like China [Torri 2023, p. 362]. Although the amendment was not confirmed by the Senate or signed by President Biden, CAATSA sanctions were not applied to India.

The cordiality of India-US relations was again visible during a meeting between Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar and Secretary of State Antony Blinken in New York on 27 September 2022. At a joint press conference, Jaishankar described the India-US alliance as «a very positive experience […] with a lot of promise», offering the potential for the two countries to jointly «shape the direction of the world» [De Silva and Jones 2022].

3.3.3. The reasons behind India's de facto pro-Russia standing

The reasons for India's de facto pro-Russia stance on the Ukraine crisis are not mysterious; they were immediately identified and widely discussed by analysts and media worldwide. The primary driver was the Indian armed forces' heavy and ongoing dependence on Russian military hardware. As explained, despite a massive inflow of high-tech weapons from the US, Israel, and France since 2005,

Indian armed forces remained predominantly equipped with Russian weapons [Jaffrelot and Sud 2022; Dolbaia et al. 2025]. A sudden and drastic reduction not just in new arms supplies, but more critically in the spare parts needed to maintain existing Russian-origin hardware, would dramatically diminish the operational capabilities of the Indian armed forces. In turn, any such reduction would negatively affect India's ability to militarily counter China. Another constraint was India's (possibly unrealistic) objective of preventing Moscow from being isolated and pushed into a dangerous embrace with China. Finally, a role was also played by the fact that Russia, both during and after the Soviet period, had consistently supported India at the diplomatic level and never clashed with it.

Why India's pro-Russia policy was readily understood, Western analysts appeared to have some difficulty explaining why the US and its allies did not pressure India to align with their anti-Russian position. In a way, India's ability to distance itself from the US and its allies was not a proof of strength, as claimed by Jaishankar and Modi's apologists, but was paradoxically made possible by its weakness. Had New Delhi cut its relationship with Moscow, the entire Indian military apparatus would have been drastically weakened, possibly to the brink of collapse. This would have squarely contradicted Washington's interests, as the US had assiduously strengthened the Indian armed forces to serve as a counterpoise to its main global competitor, China. An Indian anti-Russia alignment would have been of limited, mainly rhetorical, value, but it would have risked dramatically weakening the US-sponsored anti-China arc of containment in the Indo-Pacific.

Analogously, the seemingly baffling acceptance of India's decision to buy Russian oil and triangulate a sizeable share of it to Western markets has a clear explanation in American interests. The exclusion of Russian oil from Western markets through sanctions was a double-edged sword that harmed the West as well as Russia. With India's help, Russian oil continued to flow to Western markets, preventing hydrocarbon prices from skyrocketing and potentially causing a major economic crisis. Finally, maintaining a geopolitical space that allowed Russia some freedom of manoeuvre, thereby preventing its complete subordination to China, was a goal that, while perhaps unrealistic, did not in itself go against Washington’s interests.

3.3.4. The Quad question

While the Biden administration's attention was overwhelmingly focused on the war in Ukraine—and, from late 2023, on the Gaza crisis—US interest in Asia remained a key concern. Even before the Russian invasion, the new administration had made clear that, like its predecessor, it viewed the Quad as a primary instrument for wielding US influence over the oceans surrounding Asia and, by extension, projecting that influence onto the continent itself. The administration also appeared aware that a Quad in which India was a «wild card», to use former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's term, would have little vitality. Without India's contribution, controlling the Indian Ocean—from the east coast of Africa to the strategically decisive Malacca Straits—would be extremely difficult, if not impossible.

As above noted, given India's exposed strategic position as the only Quad country with a long and unsettled border with China, New Delhi had distanced itself from the Trump-era strategy of transforming the Quad into an Asian NATO. Accordingly, to keep India as a willing member, the Biden administration implemented a radical change of emphasis in the Quad's objectives.

This change became visible during the first Quad leaders' summit of the Biden era, held virtually on 12 March 2021. The meeting concluded with a joint statement, *The Spirit of the Quad*, which, after the customary rhetoric about «promoting a free, open, rules-based order», clearly defined the entente's objectives. These included managing the economic and health crises caused by COVID-19, addressing climate change, controlling cyberspace and critical technologies, counterterrorism, quality infrastructure investment, and humanitarian and disaster relief [The White House 2021].

This program, reiterated in the joint statement of 24 May 2022 [The White House, 2022], was characterized by two elements. First was the absence of any explicit reference to a present or future military dimension. Second, most of the objectives outlined had an unmistakable anti-China subtext. The control of cyberspace and critical technologies aimed to compete with Chinese firms like Huawei; quality infrastructure investment was a direct competitor to China's BRI; and even the response to the COVID-19 crisis was in competition with China's «vaccine diplomacy».

Indian analysts and political figures have often claimed – as a rule implicitly – that this metamorphosis of the Quad from a potential Asian NATO into an organization focused on non-military containment of China was the result of India's influence. While available documentation does not allow for a definitive conclusion on this claim, there is no doubt that the Biden administration's revised Quad policy satisfied India's sensitivities and served its interests.

3.4. Testing the limits of the strategic autonomy: the crisis of 2023

There is reason to believe that the work of Indian narrative-shapers, portraying India as a major world power able to follow its own course without being conditioned by external pressures, had become so successful as to induce the Indian government itself to believe its own propaganda. Accordingly, taking a leaf from a state that Modi-ruled India greatly admired—one indeed able to deploy its chosen politics, however murderous, without being conditioned by external pressures—New Delhi began a policy of assassinating its enemies abroad [Hall 2024, pp. 301-2; 310-312].

In 2022 and 2023, a series of killings of persons allegedly involved in anti-Indian violent activities were carried out in Pakistan. By 2023, this policy of targeted assassinations was extended to the UK and Canada. In the case of Canada, the assassination of Sikh pro-Khalistan activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar outside a temple in Surrey, British Columbia, attracted wide attention worldwide. While political assassinations in non-Western countries usually pass with little notice in the West, an assassination openly carried out in a Western country, targeting one of its own citizens, was something entirely different. Hence the relevance acquired by the killing of a Canadian citizen, albeit of Indian extraction.

From the beginning, Canadian police suspected Indian involvement, a suspicion strengthened by intelligence supplied by another country. The Canadian government initiated a series of diplomatic démarches to obtain explanations from India, but without success. Eventually, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau went public with his government's suspicions before parliament (18 September 2023). At the same time, Pavan Kumar Rai, purportedly the Ottawa station chief of India's main intelligence service, RAW, was expelled [Hall 2024, pp. 310-312].

As befitting a country that by then considered itself a major world power challenged by a middle power like Canada, India reacted «with fury», starting a diplomatic confrontation that resulted in a «deep freeze» of the bilateral relationship, «with neither side willing to break the ice» [Hall 2024, p. 311]. India could, of course, overlook Canada's sensibilities, but there is reason to believe its activities on North American soil were not limited to Canada. On 22 November 2023, news became public that US authorities had foiled an alleged plot to murder the prominent Khalistani activist and joint US-Canadian citizen Gurpatwant Singh Pannun. A week later, the US Department of Justice made public its findings against an Indian citizen, Nikhil Gupta, as the supposed hitman, and an unnamed Indian official in New Delhi who had allegedly masterminded the attempt.

If New Delhi could dismiss Ottawa's reaction and engage in a diplomatic war with Canada, Washington's indictment could not be dismissed in the same cavalier way. Consequently, India's reaction «was markedly different to its visceral response to the earlier Canadian allegations». While no official admission of involvement was made, «no angry statements were issued, no diplomats were expelled, and no visa processes suspended» [Hall 2024, p. 312].

The targeted killings affair festered during 2024, exacerbated by new revelations from Canada. In October 2024, Trudeau went public with his government's conviction that Indian diplomats had been involved in both the killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar and in intimidating other Sikh separatists. Even more relevant was the news that Canadian authorities suspected India's Home Minister, Amit Shah, of directing the operation in North America. This brought about a new round of mutual expulsions of diplomats [Hall 2024, p. 311].

The affair had another relevant result, this time internal to India but with potential foreign policy implications. While the official government position had been restrained, that of many Indian commentators and, more relevantly, politicians from the Hindu right—the core of Modi's political base—had not. An aggressive campaign was launched in traditional and new media against the US. The Biden administration was accused of being «disrespectful» towards India, and the US State Department of promoting a campaign against the BJP. As proof, critics cited the Pannun case, Biden's inability to travel to New Delhi for Republic Day or a Quad summit, dismal reports on democracy and human rights in India, alleged US involvement in the change of government in Bangladesh, and the US indictment for fraud of Gujarati billionaire Gautam Adani, a personal friend of Modi [Hall 2025, p. 324].

By mid-2024, it had become clear that the Hindu right was spoiling for Donald Trump's victory in the upcoming US presidential election. This unabashed pro-Trump position was based on both concrete and delusional reasons. The concrete reasons included ideological affinity, the belief that Trump would be tough on China and «Islamic terrorism», the certainty that he would overlook democratic backsliding in India, and the hope he would bring Putin «back from the cold» and make the targeted killings affair go away. The delusional reasons included the conviction – which went squarely against what had actually happened during Trump's first term in power – that he would create new economic opportunities for India. While the India-US connection remained strong at the official level, India's policymakers were marking time, hoping for Trump's return. But as the old proverb says: «Be careful what you wish for, lest it comes true».

3.5. The growth of the economic India-US connection at the end of the Biden presidency

Although the military connection came to supersede the economic one in strategic importance, and despite the fact that its growth remained below the initial hopes of both Narendra Modi and American CEOs, the India-US economic relationship was by no means insignificant. In fact, notwithstanding the bureaucratic barriers that continued to hamper foreign entrepreneurs in India and the difficulties created by Donald Trump's first presidency, the bilateral economic connection continued to grow.

This growth was not primarily the result of any fundamental change in India's domestic economic policy, but rather of a series of international factors that induced US manufacturers to shift their operations away from China. A confluence of factors—including rising labour costs in China, the US-China trade war and its associated tariff hikes, and the vulnerabilities in centralized supply chains exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic—all played a role in this shift. India, alongside Vietnam, emerged as its principal beneficiary.

As a result, by 2023, the US had become India's largest trading partner, with overall bilateral trade in goods and services reaching US$ 190.1 billion for the calendar year.

Also, during FY 2023-24, the US had become the third largest source of FDI into India with inflows of US$ 4.99 billion accounting for almost 9% of total FDI equity inflows. Many Indian companies were investing in the US and adding value [India-US bilateral relations 2025]. According to a CII study released in April 2023,163 Indian companies invested over US$ 40billion in the US and created over 425,000 direct jobs [CII Report 2023].

India-US Bilateral Trade (Millions of US$)						
	2018	**2019**	**2020**	**2021**	**2022**	**2023**
India's Exports to US						
Merchandise	54,282	57,694	51,190	73,260	85,671	83,768
Services	28,874	29,738	25,841	28,989	32,862	36,329
Total	83,156	87,432	77,031	102,249	118,533	120,097
Change	8.3%	5.1%	-11.9%	32.74%	15.93%	1.31%
US Exports to India						
Merchandise	33,191	34,288	27,395	40,130	47,332	40,117
Services	25,200	24,333	17,420	16,720	25,571	29,863
Total	58,391	58,621	44,815	56,850	72,903	69,980
Change	18.5%	0.4%	-23.6%	26.85%	28.24%	-4.00%
Total Bilateral trade between India and the US						
Merchandise & Services	141,547	146,053	121,846	159,099	191,436	190,077
Change	12.3%	3.2%	-16.6%	30.57%	20.33%	-0.71%
Source: India-US bilateral relations 2025						

4. The India-China relationship under Modi

4.1. Engaging China, containing China

In the early years of his premiership, Modi pursued his goal of engaging China through high-profile diplomatic events, such as receiving President Xi Jinping in Gujarat in 2014 amidst much fanfare, holding a series of bilateral summits, and seeking to expand economic cooperation. Modi particularly tried, without much success, to convince China to invest in Indian infrastructure and contribute to his «Make in India» project. At the same time, however, Modi launched a proactive policy in the Indian Ocean, East and Central Asia, and the Pacific, whose main aim appeared to be the building of an Indian arc of containment around China. This strategy was pursued through official visits by the Indian Prime Minister to states in the area, the signing of bilateral agreements, and a series of bilateral naval exercises. The attempt to position India as a rival to China also found expression in the launch of a «Cotton Route» policy, in clear competition with China's «Silk Road» policy [Torri & Maiorano 2015].

While Modi had initially sought to increase Chinese investment, in 2017 he took a different position by refusing China's invitation to join the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Not only was India one of the very few countries to boycott the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing (14-15 May 2017), but just a

few days later, at the 52nd annual meeting of the African Development Bank in Gandhinagar (22-26 May 2017), India and Japan announced the launch of an Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) [Torri & Maiorano 2018, p. 285].

This initiative, in the making since 2015, was technically similar to the BRI and focused on a geographical area overlapping with the BRI's intended sphere of influence, placing it in direct competition with it. Although the India-Japan initiative soon appeared to lack substance, its anti-China dimension could not go unnoticed. India also proactively competed with China within the SCO and BRICS [Cecchi 2025, pp. 425-426, 432]. But it was along the undefined Himalayan border that India's challenge to China became most strident and dangerous.

4.2. The peculiarities of the India-China border

Before dealing with the India-China border confrontation, some preliminary information is in order. The dominant narrative in India and the West on the border tensions is as follows: after the 1962 war, the militaries of both countries took positions along a provisional border, the Line of Actual Control (LAC). However, with increasing frequency, the Chinese have pushed beyond the LAC, occupying slices of Indian territory in a «salami slicing» strategy that has steadily extended China's control. This view, crafted by an Indian analyst [Chellaney 2013], has been accepted by most Western experts, particularly as China has come to be seen as a threat to the US-dominated world order. This vision, nonetheless, is based on two logical fallacies.

The first concerns the nature of the LAC. The LAC is often viewed as a continuous line controlled on opposite sides by the two militaries, similar to the Line of Control (LOC) in Kashmir. In reality, the situation is completely different. A continuous LAC exists only on maps. Along the Himalayas, China and India occupy a number of permanent and seasonal bases separated by huge stretches of territory. Some of these are patrolled by one or both countries at different times of the year, while other areas have been abandoned by both. Additional territories have never been patrolled by either party [Torri 2021, pp. 384-386].

Once this is understood, a second, counterintuitive but exceedingly important problem must be highlighted. There is not just one LAC; there are two: the one on Chinese military maps and the one on Indian maps. These two LACs are widely divergent, as shown by the fact that the Indian LAC is 3,488 kilometres long, whereas the Chinese LAC is only around 2,000 kilometres long [Torri 2021, p. 385]. It is important to emphasize that, according to international law, there is no reason to evaluate one LAC as more legitimate than the other. They are equally legitimate (or illegitimate) and simply represent the claims of New Delhi and Beijing on territories they control only partially.

All this means that the brilliantly argued and generally accepted theory of «salami slicing», while widely accepted, has no connection with the situation on the ground and only obscures it. In reality, any move by either side to extend control over deserted territory or reclaim vacated bases is usually seen by the other as a threat. It is no surprise that incidents are bound to happen and have continued to happen [Saint-Mézard 2013; Bhonsale 2018]. The policymakers of both nations are aware of these dangers and have discussed solutions since at least 2003. However, these discussions have yielded limited results. Maps showing the LAC have been exchanged only for the central sector, leaving the western and eastern sectors unresolved. Behavioural protocols have been finalized to prevent escalation, and as a result, incidents have generally been resolved quickly and without loss of life. While many incidents may be due to local initiatives, the political leadership of either nation can easily trigger a major incident whenever it is deemed convenient.

4.3. From Doklam to the Galwan Valley

The Doklam plateau is at the tri-junction of India, China, and Bhutan, on land long under China's de facto control but claimed by Bhutan. On 16 June 2017, a People's Liberation Army (PLA) construction party entered the area to build a road. Allegedly in consultation with Bhutan, Indian troops crossed the border on 18 June and prevented the PLA from continuing its work. This triggered a standoff that caused a storm of jingoist threats in both Indian and Chinese media. However, confidential diplomatic contacts continued, and after more than two months, the confrontation ended on 28 August 2017, with both sides vacating the plateau. The road was left unfinished, but the Chinese reiterated their right to patrol the area and restart work in the future [Torri & Maiorano 2018, pp. 285-288].

What made the Doklam incident unique was that it occurred in the central sector, the only part of the border where the LAC is mutually accepted and demarcated. Indian troops had crossed what their own government recognized as the provisional international border into a territory not even claimed by India. India asserted to be acting on behalf of Bhutan, following a request by Thimphu, but Bhutan appeared unenthusiastic and never confirmed that it had ever made any request of intervention from India. New Delhi also claimed the road posed a danger to the strategically crucial Siliguri corridor (the «Chicken's Neck»). However, to access Doklam, the PLA would have to cross the Chumbi Valley, which is closed by mountain ridges controlled by the Indian army even along the Bhutanese side. This means the sector is more of an ideal place for India to ambush an advancing Chinese army than a dagger aimed at the «Chicken Neck» [Torri & Maiorano 2018, p. 287].

What, then, were the real reasons for the intervention? The standoff occurred just before the BRICS summit in Xiamen and the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. China had an overriding interest in the success of the BRICS summit, and President Xi Jinping could ill afford a military confrontation that could escalate. It is legitimate to suspect that India's action was intended to embarrass the Chinese leadership, counting on the fact that the Sikkim sector was one of the few places along the Himalaya where the Indian armed forces enjoyed superiority. The goal, then, was less about blocking a road than projecting India and its prime minister as capable of successfully facing down China [Torri & Maiorano 2018, p. 288].

Encouraged by the Doklam success, India continued its China containment strategy, strengthening its relationship with Japan and taking an active part in the resurrection of the Quad in November 2017. China reacted by attempting to defuse tensions through diplomatic contacts, leading to a series of high-level meetings in 2018, including the informal Modi-Xi summit in Wuhan. These meetings were facilitated by the uncertainty caused by the Trump presidency and his «America First» policy.

Nevertheless, India never completely abandoned its anti-China strategy. This became apparent again in 2019 when Modi dismantled the state of Jammu and Kashmir, a move seen by Beijing as aimed at tightening New Delhi's control over the western sector of the border. This preoccupation was strengthened by two declarations made in the Indian Parliament by Home Minister Amit Shah – namely the number two in the Modi government. Shah stated (on 19 November and 3 December 2019) that the whole of previous princely state of Kashmir was «an inseparable part of India». Accordingly, both the Pakistani part of Kashmir and Aksai Chin, the latter the Himalayan territory under Chinese control at least from the early 1960s, were Indian and, in Shah's words, worth dying for [Amit Shah 2019, 22 November; Amit Shah 2019, 5 December].

The Doklam incident, the dismantling of Jammu & Kashmir, and Amit Shah's bluster might explain the major incident that took place in Ladakh in 2020. A series of coordinated Chinese troop movements sparked tense face-offs, culminating in a deadly clash in the Galwan Valley in June 2020,

involving the first loss of life on the border in 45 years, although no firearms were employed.[4] The incident was followed by a prolonged military buildup, repeated skirmishes, and economic retaliations by India, bringing the two nations closer to open conflict than at any time since 1987 [Torri 2021, pp. 379-384; Hall 2025; CRS 2022].

4.4. India's post-Galwan Valley de-escalation and the return to engagement with China

Modi's initial response to the Galwan crisis was characterized by hardline rhetoric, including visits to forward military areas, public statements emphasizing India's determination, the banning of Chinese apps, and restrictions on Chinese investment. However, as in the Doklam crisis, Indian and Chinese officials silently resumed military and diplomatic talks. Both sides were aware of the risks of uncontrolled escalation, but a full-scale war represented an existential danger for India, given the massive disparity in economic and military capabilities. Potential military support from India's de facto allies, particularly the Quad, would have been of limited import.

Not surprisingly, the Modi government quietly returned to a more cautious, crisis-management posture. This de-escalation had two main aspects: the silent negotiation of limited disengagements at friction points and the continuous growth in bilateral trade, despite high-profile Indian restrictions. As for the border, there was progress in easing tensions, notably the October 2024 agreement to restore patrolling rights in some sectors. Both sides, however, left large forces massed in the rear. Mutual trust remained basically absent, and as repeatedly noted by Foreign Minister Jaishankar, the situation continued to be «abnormal» [Hall 2024, p. 303; Hall 2025, pp. 317-319].

5. Trump redux

5.1. The crisis of the India-US relationship

Donald Trump won for the second time the US presidential election on 5 November 2024. The following day, Narendra Modi phoned the US President elect and had a «warm conversation» with him [Gupta 2024]. In the following days, Indian media explained to their readers how Trump's election would strengthen American-Indian relations, given the strong personal bond between the newly elected US president and the Indian premier, based on the fact that both were « strongman leaders with shared perceptions of China and radical Islam as existential threats, a mutual animosity of the liberal media and civil society, well-entrenched economic nationalism and a value-neutral foreign policy dictated by self-interest» [Bajpaee 2025]. The same media noted how Indians were among those most positive about a second Trump term.

This optimistic mood persisted during Modi's trip to Washington on 12-15 February 2025 (his first during Trump's second term). While the danger of higher tariffs rate for India's exports to the US was present on the background, bilateral relations appeared to be moving along an increasingly positive path, destined to lead to an expansion of the military and economic connections. A new US$ 500bn trade goal was set for bilateral trade, which aimed to more than double the dimension which it had reached in 2023 (US$ 190bn). This was an objective that would be made possible by the conclusion of a bilateral trade agreement – as noted, a goal search by the US in the previous 20 years without any success. Now Modi and Trump committed to negotiating the first phase of the trade agreement by autumn 2025; it was aimed to deal with market access, tariff reductions and supply chain integration across goods and services. Also, Trump announced that the US would increase military

[4] The brutal hand-to-hand fighting resulted in the deaths of at least 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese casualties.

equipment sales to India already in 2025 «by many billions of dollars» and adumbrated that the US would ultimately provide the top-notch F-35 stealth warplanes to India [Biswas and Inamdar 2025].

While it was clear that much hard work was necessary to give concrete substance to the stated goals, the general atmosphere was a quite positive one [Travelli 2025]. Unfortunately, this mutual warmth turned to frost rather suddenly in May. Following a serious terrorist attack in the Kashmir Valley, India accused Pakistan of being complicit, launching a series of air strikes against alleged terrorist hideouts in Pakistan in retaliation. Pakistan's response resulted in a major air battle, raising the possibility that this was only the prelude to open warfare between two nations equipped with nuclear weapons. The confrontation, which started on the 7th of May, arrived at an abrupt end on the 10th. Soon after the cessation of hostilities, Trump claimed «at least 30 times» that he had mediated the ceasefire between India and Pakistan using trade as leverage [The Wire Staff 2025].

It was a claim that Islamabad immediately acknowledged, while New Delhi denied, insisting that the ceasefire had been arrived through bilateral negotiations, not including any third party. Of course, New Delhi policy as far as the Kashmiri question and the conflict with Pakistan are concerned is traditionally aimed at preventing the involvement of any third party or international organization in order to keep the matter strictly bilateral. Anyway, completely apart from the truthfulness or otherwise of Trump's claim, denying it was an extremely unwise move on the part of the Indian government from the viewpoint of international relations, even if an almost compulsory one, from the viewpoint of internal politics.[5]

The resentment on the part of a US President who, out of personal vanity, was relentlessly seeking successes that could earn him the Nobel Peace Prize [Mashal *et al.* 2025] was compounded by another possibly more relevant political question. The negotiation which was supposed to conclude with the signing of the first phase of the eagerly sought (on the part of Washington) trade agreement by autumn 2025, once again was going nowhere. Washington's requests to open the Indian market to US agricultural and dairy products frontally clashed with the interests of the Indian farmers. Here the problem was less that farmers still accounted for some 45% of the Indian labour force than their proven capacity, particularly in Northern India, to self-organize and act in order to defend their interests. In 2020, soon after Modi had successfully crashed the extensive pro-democracy movement, he had failed to do the same with the farmer movement against a legislation that would potentially reduce farmers' earnings. In the end the legislation had had to be repealed. On the top of that, farmers' discontent had played a role in the general election, determining a conspicuous diminution of the popular vote going to the BJP, Modi's party. As correctly noted by Joshua Yang of 'The Washington Post', India's country's agriculture and dairy industries are «the third rail of Indian politics» and, as such, a politically very dangerous subject to touch [Yang 2025].

Trump's hurt vanity and the difficulty to break open the Indian agricultural and dairy market to the penetration of the US capital explain Trump's decision to launch a veritable economic war against India. On 30 July, Trump announced a 25% tariff, plus a penalty, to be imposed on India starting on 1 August. The US President justified his decision both on the ground that India was a «friend» whose tariffs were «far too high, among the highest in the world» and a country which was purchasing Russian military equipment and energy «when everyone wants Russia to STOP THE KILLING IN UKRAINE». [Yadav 2025; The Wire Staff 2025, 30 July]. What made Trump's decision additionally offensive for New Delhi was that, a few hours after hitting India the US President announced a 19% tariff rate for Pakistan [Yang 2025]. But that was not the end of it; on 6 August Trump threatened to add a 25% punitive tariff, motivated by India's purchases on Russian oil, on top of the 25% tariff he had announced the previous week [Travelli 2025]. A threat that became effective on 27 August, when

[5] To accept Trump's claim would have exposed the Modi government to the accusation that, under US pressure, it had given up one foreign policy objective shared by all Indian political forces.

«just after midnight» the 50% tariff rate on most Indian imports became effective [Jones and MacRae 2025].

Trump's decision, if maintained, was bound to be catastrophic for India, even if some 30% of India's exports to the US «including pharmaceuticals, electronics, raw drug materials and refined fuels – worth $27.6bn» remained duty-free, at least for the time being. In fact, India, had become one of the countries facing the highest US duties, together with left-leaning Brazil. This damaged India both directly and indirectly, as rival exporters from other countries – such as Turkey, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, the Philippines and other south and south-east countries – which faced lower US tariffs were now advantaged. According to Indian economist Santanu Sengupta of Goldman Sachs, «sustained 50% levies could push gross domestic product (GDP) growth below 6%, from a forecast level of around 6.5%» [Jones and MacRae 2025].

5.2. The renewal of the India-China relationship

At the beginning of 2025, in an apparently sudden development, India-China relations took a visible turn for the better, as a series of negotiations which had taken place the previous year, without reaching any agreed result, concluded successfully, following a meeting between India's Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri and China's Vice Foreign Minister of China Sun Weidong on 27 January 2025. Among the results reached at the meeting there were the resumption of both direct air services between the two countries, starting immediately, and the Kailash Manasarovar Yatra[6] in the summer of 2025 [People's Republic of China 2025; *QUESTION NO- 1041*; Lau 2025]. Both direct flights and the Yatra had been suspended because of the COVID and hitherto not resumed because of the border clashes of 2020.

This positive evolution in the India-China relationship took place before the crisis of India-US connection brought about by Donald Trump's imposition of devastating customs duties on most Indian goods. As convincingly argued by Christophe Jaffrelot, a possible key explanation of the improvement in the bilateral India-China relations was the increasing economic dependency of India on China, which New Delhi's failed attempt to sanction China economically after the 2020 Himalayan border clashes had only made more evident. In fact, as noted by Jaffrelot:

> In 2024, with $118 billion in trade in goods, China regained its position as India’s largest trading partner, supplanting the United States, which had overtaken it shortly before, for two fiscal years. At the same time, India’s trade deficit with China has widened steadily, jumping from $46 billion in 2019-20 to $85 billion in 2023-24 and $99.2 billion in 2024-25. Indian exports – worth just $15 billion in 2024-25, less than in 2018-19 – consist mainly of raw materials (including iron ore) and refined oil, while Chinese exports to India, worth more than $124 billion (compared to $70.3 billion in 2019), consist mainly of manufactured goods, including machine tools, computers, organic chemicals, integrated circuits and plastics [Jaffrelot 2025].

[6] Kailash Mansarovar Yatra is a sacred pilgrimage to Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar, which are located in the Tibet Autonomous Region and, therefore, are an integral part of China. The Yatra is a highly significant spiritual journey for Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Bonpos (namely the followers of Bon, a Tibetan variant of Buddhism). The Yatra, which attracts thousands of devotees despite the difficult journey, is organized annually by the Ministry of External Affairs of India in collaboration with the Government of China. Tensions between the two countries have sometimes resulted in the suspension of the Yatra.

But, of course, it is also possible – and the two explanations are not mutually exclusive – that Modi, in spite of the enthusiasm of the Indian media for the bright future of India-US relations under Trump's dispensation, was hedging his bets, knowing the unpredictably and whimsical behaviour of his supposed friend in the White House. Certainly, after the sudden worsening of the US-India relation, following New Delhi's refusal to acknowledge Trump's supposed mediation role in putting an end to the May confrontation with Pakistan, India's demarche towards China accelerated. In June, on the sidelines of the SCO (Qingdao, China) and just two days after India and China had firmed up a disengagement pact for Depsang and Demchok, along the Himalayan undefined border, Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, interacting with his Chinese counterpart Dong Jun, called for a permanent solution to the border dispute with China by going beyond the enacting of Confidence Building Measures along the LAC to the demarcation of a mutually acknowledged border [Upadhyaya and Dutta 2025; Reuters 2025]. In July, Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar went to Beijing, and, addressing China's Vice President Han Zheng, pointed to the opportunity of an open exchange of views and perspectives between India and China, made necessary by an international situation that was becoming increasingly complex. He also conveyed India's support for China's SCO leadership and noted improvements in bilateral relations [Sobhan 2025].

At the time when this article is closed (beginning of September 2025) India's rapprochement with China reached its peak at the annual SCO summit, which took place from 31 August to 1 September in Tianjin, a northern Chinese city on the Bohai Sea. Modi, who, only the year before, had not even attended the previous SCO meeting in Astana (Kazakhstan), now, for the first time after seven years, went to China. In the pithy report of a well-known Indian journalist, the Indian Premier «guffawed for the cameras with Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, remained cosseted with the Russian President in the latter's limousine for nearly an hour», and, in his bilateral with Xi, «Modi described India and China as 'partners, not rivals' and 'underlined' that both countries 'pursue strategic autonomy, and their relations should not be seen through a third country lens'» [Varadarajan 2025]. Photos taken at the event, and widely circulated on the traditional and social media, showed Modi in apparently very cordial conversation with either Xi or Putin or with both, and the Indian Premier and the Russian President walking together hand in hand. As noted, by Devirupa Mitri, «The images were aimed at more than one audience: the White House and television channels back home» [Mitra 2025].

6. Conclusion: where Narendra Modi's foreign policy has led India

Most international analysts and commentators have seen Trump's India policy as the catastrophic ending of a strategy, started in 2005, aimed at including India in the US-sponsored network of treaty and non-treaty allies, intended to surround and constrain Washington's main world competitor, namely China. But, while analyses on this side of the problem abound, the same is not true as far as its other side is concerned: what Modi's trip to Tianjin demonstrates?

The first conclusion prompted by Modi's journey to Tianjin is that Modi's policy aimed at challenging China had been shelved, at least for the time being. Modi has abandoned his signature policy of challenge to China and reverted to the more prudent strategy followed by his predecessors. Namely, he has reverted to a policy of patient diplomatic engagement with a major power from which India is divided by conflicting interests, particularly as far as the border problem is concerned, but united by many others [Cecchi 2025].

This reassessment of India's China policy has been conceived and implemented before the catastrophic overturn of the India-US relations, determined by the vagaries of a US President whose foreign policy has an uncanny resemblance with Macbeth's definition of life (Act 5, Scene 5).[7] However – and this is the second conclusion prompted by Modi's journey to Tianjin, Trump's vagaries

[7] «Life […] is a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/Signifying nothing».

have made the readjustment of India's China policy a necessity. This, in turn, is the demonstration, as clear as any, that India's famed «strategic autonomy», which, according to Jaishankar and the many admirers of Modi, has characterised India's foreign policy under the latter's dispensation, has deployed itself inside the limits imposed by Washington's interests. The radical redefinition and contraction of these limits – decided by Donald Trump, possibly because of a less than rational decision – has trapped India in a very uncertain position. New Delhi's claim to be able to act without any constraint on the part of any of the major world powers has been exposed. Quite simply, it has become apparent – once again, as in the pre-Modi past – that New Delhi cannot guarantee its security and the pursuit of its national interests without the support of a major world power and preferably, the non-hostility of other world powers. This is a state of affairs which had been clearly understood and acted upon by all Indian leaders since the time when Indira Gandhi had signed the twenty-year mutual protection pact with the Soviet Union in 1971. It is also a state of affairs that Modi seemed to have either forgotten or overlooked, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine appeared to have created unforeseen possibilities and opportunities for India. Modi, while prompt and skilful in seizing these possibilities and opportunities, seems to have ended up believing the propaganda crafted by his own Foreign Minister, namely that India could follow a certain path because she was capable to do it, not because it was allowed to do it by her hugely more powerful key ally.

Trump's decision, radically redefining Washington foreign policy and, as a consequence, radically contracting the political space allowed to India's «strategic autonomy», has left India in a very exposed position, as she cannot count on Washington's support anymore. This makes imperative for her either to hope in a change of heart on the part of Trump – which, given the way of functioning of the man, is always possible – or a rapid solution of the many problems which still divide India from China. Accordingly, in this moment the only important ally on which India can count remains Russia. Nonetheless, the relationship with Russia is not as strong as in the past and, much more important, Russia is not a major world power anymore, by any stretch of imagination. In the final analysis, then, the supposedly all-powerful demiurge who, supposedly, has radically modified Indian foreign policy and, supposedly, has made an acknowledged major world power of his country, able to choose its independent path without any foreign constriction, has led India to its more exposed and weakest international position since the period between the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rapprochement to the US in the early 1990s.

As far as India's foreign policy under Modi is concerned, the gap between story-telling and reality is, indeed, huge.

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Variety of Authoritarian-Hegemonic Capitalism

Elisabetta Basile and Claudio Cecchi

In this paper, we explore the variety of capitalism that has emerged in India under Narendra Modi's rule. Adopting a broad and critical understanding of the Varieties of Capitalism (VoC) approach, we use it primarily as an analytical lens to emphasize that capitalist development assumes different institutional and political forms across national contexts. Departing from the firm-centred and coordination-focused model developed by Hall and Soskice (2001) – which classifies capitalist economies into liberal and coordinated types based on production regimes – our analysis focuses on the broader political and ideological dimensions that shape India's capitalist trajectory under Modi. Specifically, it examines the emergent configuration of Indian capitalism through three interlocking dimensions: the central ideological role of Hindutva in legitimizing state and market power;[8] the intensification of authoritarianism and centralization of political authority; and the restructuring of capital-labour relations through neoliberal reforms.

This approach draws from and extends critical and comparative political economy perspectives that recognize the importance of ideology, state coercion, and social domination in shaping capitalist institutions and accumulation processes (Bardhan, 1998 and 2015; Bruff, 2014). We assume that the variety of capitalism in Modi's India is defined by a fusion of neoliberal economic restructuring with authoritarian statecraft and exclusionary cultural nationalism. This theoretical framework enables a more grounded and historically sensitive understanding of capitalist transformation acknowledging the role of ideology and coercion in stabilizing capitalist rule as conceptualised by Gramsci's concept of hegemony (Gramsci, 1975).

Assuming that capitalist development in Modi's India is shaped not only by market and state institutions, but also by the intersections of culture and ideology, we analyse how Hindutva functions as a mechanism of social control and political legitimacy that supports the neoliberal restructuring of capital-labour relations. Accordingly, we treat Modi not merely as a political figure, but as the architect of a new regime in which autocratic governance coexists with formal electoralism, identity-based exclusion is institutionalized in state policy, and pro-market reforms exacerbate inequality, while religion-based ideologies ensure the consent of subaltern classes.

Adopting a critical institutionalist perspective (Hodgson 1988) that rejects the mainstream economic assumption of rational and optimizing agents, we assume that ideologies and institutions shape human behaviour and social interaction. This approach is particularly well-suited to examining the nature and functioning of Modi's India, where religion is not merely a personal belief but a foundation of national identity, while religion-based ideologies are restructuring both individual behaviour and public life. The tools of critical institutionalism thus allow for a deeper exploration of the merging of Hindutva-inspired nationalism with economic policy, and of the accompanying ideological shift that has eroded India's constitutional commitments to pluralism and secularism, so prompting a

[8] "Hindutva", or "Hinduness", is an ideological project that defines Indian culture in terms of Hindu values with the aim of establishing the hegemony of Hindu nationalism. The term was first articulated by V.D. Savarkar in 1923 as a cultural and political identity rooted in Hindu civilization, distinct from the pluralistic ethos of Indian nationalism. The ideology was then adopted and developed by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the right-wing Hindu nationalist paramilitary volunteer organization founded in 1925, which is the ideological parent of Modi's political Party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The RSS is the ideological and strategic centre of the Sangh Parivar, the network of affiliated organizations that operate in various fields with the aim of propagating the Hindu nationalist agenda through a vast network of schools, NGOs, religious groups, paramilitary groups, and welfare associations that embed Hindutva in the social fabric (Jaffrelot, Introduction, 2007: p. 5 *et seq*.; see also Jaffrelot ed., 2005, and Jaffrelot and Therwath, 2012).

redefinition of national identity, reinforcing cultural nationalism, and deepening socio-political divisions.

The central argument of the paper is that Modi's political economy fuses authoritarian governance with a neoliberal economic agenda and a majoritarian social vision employing political, economic, and ideological tools to consolidate power and promote a growth model aimed at reshaping capital-labour relations (Chatterji *et al*., 2019; Basile, 2013).[9] The outcome is the centralization of power, the deepening of economic inequality, and the institutionalization of religion-based discrimination. A key consequence is the departure of Modi's India from the postcolonial democratic-socialist experiment, reorienting the state towards an exclusionary, corporate-aligned, and ideologically homogenous future.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 1 introduces Narendra Modi as a political leader, examining his historical and ideological roots through the development model pursued during his tenure as Chief Minister of Gujarat, and explaining why this experience is widely regarded as a template for India. A special attention is paid to the use of Hindutva as a tool to support capital hegemony over labour. Section 2 analyses India's political economy following Modi's rise to power as Prime Minister. The focus is on the key features of Modi's governance, particularly on the efforts to expand the role of the market while diminishing the role of the state. Section 3 reviews the defining characteristics of Modi's authoritarian neoliberalism, marked by the fusion of neoliberal restructuring and the right-wing Hindu nationalist ideology. This Section includes also a detailed assessment of the hegemonic role of Hindutva as a tool to enhance **capital accumulation.** Section 4 explores the contradictions of Modi's regime, highlighting the anomalies of India's structural transformation and the failure of Modi's trickle-down strategy. Section 5 concludes the paper pointing out the authoritarian and hegemonic nature of India's variety of capitalism in the Modi era.

1. The Historical and Ideological Background of Modi's Political Economy

This Section has three major aims. First, it summarises the debate on Gujarat's economy and society under Modi's rule focusing on three crucial issues: i) Gujarat's performance compared to other states in the same period and compared to its own performance in other periods; ii) the tools employed by Gujarat's government to support the development process; and iii) the nature of Gujarat development model and the role played by the state. Second, it introduces Hindutva as a form of ideological and institutional mechanism for securing popular consent to a regime that disempowers labour while empowering capital in the service of capital accumulation. Finally, it points out the structural challenges facing India's economy and society at the time of Modi's first election as Prime Minister.

1.1. The Gujarat Development Model

Narendra Modi served as Gujarat's Chief Minister from 2001 to 2014. His tenure has been extensively studied for two main reasons. First, Gujarat was presented by Modi himself as a "laboratory" where a combination of economic development and Hindutva rhetoric and politics was tested. Second, despite being marked by impressive growth, unequal outcomes, and political controversy (Jaffrelot,

[9] Majoritarianism refers to a political logic that privileges the will, identity, or interests of a numerical majority – typically defined in ethnic, religious, or national terms – over the rights and representation of minorities. While it may operate within formally democratic systems, majoritarianism often undermines liberal-democratic principles such as pluralism, minority protections, and institutional checks and balances. In the Indian context, Hindu majoritarianism redefines national identity in terms of the Hindu majority, marginalizing religious and cultural minorities in both discourse and policy (see Chatterji *et al*., 2019; Jaffrelot, 2021).

2024; Akhtar, 2024; Ghosh, 2017), the so-called Gujarat Model, often lauded as a success, was portrayed as a template for India's economic future.

The Gujarat Model was defined by aggressive state support for private enterprises, enabled through infrastructural development, Special Economic Zones (SEZs), Special Investment Regions (SIRs), and generous financial incentives. The state actively facilitated capital accumulation by offering subsidies, tax breaks, and favourable land acquisition policies. Major infrastructure projects, such as the Mundra SEZ, the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor, and the Dholera SIR, attracted significant private investment, especially from large corporations like the Tata Group and the Adani Group. The government often financed these ventures, sometimes at the expense of public resources (Basile, 2015).

Three key issues dominate the literature on the Gujarat Model: i) Gujarat's performance under Modi compared to previous periods and to other Indian states; ii) the model's impact on living standards; and iii) the socio-political structure it fostered.

Studies comparing Gujarat's growth during Modi's tenure with earlier periods and other states suggest that its performance was not markedly superior. Ghatak and Roy (2014a and 2014b) note that Gujarat's growth accelerated in the 1990s, before Modi's leadership, and find no evidence of further acceleration in the 2000s relative to other major states or to the national average. In a comparative study of Gujarat and Bihar, they conclude that Gujarat maintained a steady lead, much like other industrialized states such as Maharashtra, but did not experience a distinct growth surge under Modi (Ghatak and Roy, 2015). Similarly, Nagaraj and Shruti (2013) argue that Gujarat's growth was capital-intensive and driven by private investment, with limited inclusivity, especially compared to more inclusive patterns in states like Bihar, while development indicators, particularly in rural areas, remained weak. These studies conclude that i) Gujarat's growth under Modi continued existing trends, rather than significantly accelerating them, and ii) this growth did not translate into substantial improvements in living standards.

Further analysis from a human development perspective reinforces this conclusion. Drèze and Sen (2013) highlight the broader contradictions in India's development, noting that high GDP growth has not led to equitable social progress in the majority of Indian states (including Gujarat). Hirway, Shah, and Shah (eds) (2014), focusing specifically on Gujarat, critically examine whether the state's impressive economic performance translated into genuine social development. Their findings suggest that, while Gujarat achieved high growth, indicators related to poverty, health, education, and equity remained disappointing. Economic gains were unevenly distributed across regions and social groups. Finally, the Authors argue for a shift from growth-centric policy to one focused on human development.

Critics have also highlighted the limited trickle-down benefits of the Gujarat Model (Jaffrelot, 2015). Despite industrial expansion, employment generation lagged. Many new jobs were low-wage and insecure, with minimal impact on poverty reduction. Public investment in health and education remained insufficient, leading to weak human development indicators. Marginalized communities – including Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslims – benefited little from the state's economic growth (Jaffrelot, 2015; Viswanathan and Bahinipati, 2021; Nussbaum, 2014; Kannan, 2016).

A major area of debate concerns the socio-political organization that emerged in Gujarat under Modi. Two contrasting interpretations dominate. One sees Gujarat as an example of ***crony capitalism***, where business success is tied to close connections with political power, rather than with market competition (Rubin, 2016). The other interprets Modi's governance as a form of ***state activism***, where the state plays a proactive role in guiding economic development. According to Jaffrelot (2019) and Sud (2022), being characterized by state favouritism towards large corporations, growing inequality, and weakened institutions, Gujarat under Modi exemplified crony capitalism. Key features included also preferential treatment for big business, a close state-business nexus, neglect of social sectors, and

suppression of dissent. In contrast, Chatterjee (2022) and Chandra and Chatterjee (2022) argue that Modi's Gujarat featured a strong state activism associated to assertive economic planning and regulatory interventions, with the aim of achieving developmental goals while supporting private enterprise.

Finally, Hindutva has had a major and problematic impact on working conditions in Gujarat due to its significant intersections with economic policies, labour relations, and social structures. While economic factors such as industrialization and neoliberal policies played a direct role in determining wages, job security, and labour rights, Hindutva created an ideological and political framework that influenced the treatment and organization of labour by dividing workers along religious and caste lines, weakening labour movements (Breman, 2004). Furthermore, it justified pro-business policies that favoured corporations over worker rights, marginalizing Muslims and Dalits by reducing their access to better jobs (Jaffrelot, 2019). Labour unions were politically controlled, limiting protests and resistance, while workplace discipline and hierarchy were enforced, making exploitation seem "natural". This combination of economic neoliberalism and Hindutva nationalism ensured that Gujarat's industrial growth came at the cost of worker protections and labour rights, reinforcing inequalities in the workplace (Breman, 2019).

1.2. The Role of Hindutva

The ideological framework of Hindutva has come to play a central role in shaping the socio-political landscape under the leadership of Narendra Modi and the BJP, first in Gujarat and then in India at large. Unlike Hinduism, which is a diverse and plural religious tradition, Hindutva is a political ideology that seeks to define Indian identity in narrowly cultural, civilizational, and majoritarian terms (Jaffrelot, 2007; Nussbaum, 2007; Nayak, 2025). It emphasizes India as fundamentally a *Hindu Rashtra* – a Hindu nation – not merely in religious terms but in force of the cultural and civilizational legacy of her majority population.

Hindutva operates through both state institutions and civil society networks, influencing policymaking, public discourse, education, and even the judicial sphere (Chatterji *et al*., 2019). It is implemented not only through explicit legal and administrative reforms but also through a broader cultural project. As we will see in Sections 2 and 3, many of Modi' s measures with a strong social and economic impact are explicitly inspired by Hindutva. One of the most visible manifestations of Hindutva's ideology is the reconfiguration of citizenship. Similarly, in the realm of education and culture, Hindutva's influence is increasingly apparent, promoting ancient Hindu knowledge systems while downplaying India's pluralistic and secular traditions. The state-led promotion of Sanskrit, the rewriting of history textbooks to minimize or erase the contributions of Muslim rulers, and the glorification of mytho-historical narratives signal a concerted effort to Hinduize public memory (Thapar, 2014; Sundar, 2004; Jaffrelot, 2010). These changes reshape how new generations perceive India and her past.

Another key domain where Hindutva ideology operates is law and order, particularly through the criminalization of Muslim personal practices and the increasing use of anti-conversion laws in several states. These laws often target interfaith marriages, especially those between Muslim men and Hindu women, under the pretext of preventing so-called "love jihad" – a conspiracy theory that assumes Muslim men are seducing Hindu women to convert them to Islam (Chatterji *et al.*, 2019). The laws function not only as instruments of control but as signals of the state's suspicion about Muslim agency, portraying Muslims as demographic threats to the Hindu majority (US Department of State, 2022).

Hindutva also influences (and often encourages) the use of violence and intimidation as political tools. There is a discernible pattern of tacit impunity granted to perpetrators when their actions align with the ideological goals of Hindutva, especially in cases involving cow protection, religious

conversions, or expressions of dissent (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Civil society organizations affiliated with the RSS play a crucial role in mobilizing public opinion and action along sectarian lines, often acting as intermediaries between ideology and statecraft (Andersen and Damle, 2018a and 2018b; Jaffrelot, 2021).

At the discursive level, Hindutva has altered the language of nationalism itself. In contemporary India, expressions of patriotism are increasingly conflated with expressions of Hindu pride. The national identity is being subtly but steadily redefined in religious terms, marginalizing those who do not conform to its codes, particularly Muslims, Dalits, and dissenting Hindus (Nayak, 2025). The branding of critics – whether intellectuals, journalists, or activists – as "anti-national" further reinforces the binary logic of inclusion and exclusion that is central to Hindutva's vision of India (Chopra, 2019).

Perhaps most critically, Hindutva's rise has brought about a transformation of secularism as a normative and constitutional ideal. While the Indian Constitution asserts the principle of religious neutrality and equal treatment of all faiths, in practice the state's posture has shifted toward a majoritarian ethos. Secularism is increasingly portrayed as either a colonial imposition or a form of minority appeasement, and therefore incompatible with national development and unity (Bhargava, 2010). This delegitimization of secularism has profound consequences not only for religious minorities but also for the institutional integrity of Indian democracy.

Under Modi's leadership, Hindutva seeks to recast India's democratic and pluralistic foundations into a majoritarian, culturally homogenous vision of the nation. While often couched in the language of development, unity, and cultural pride, the ideological core of Hindutva reveals a project of exclusion, centralization, and identity-based governance. The transformation it envisions is not merely political, but civilizational, making Hindutva one of the defining forces of twenty-first century Indian statecraft (Jaffrelot, 2021; Chatterji *et al*., 2019).

1.2.1. Hindutva as a Mechanism of Consent and Coercion

The regime built by Modi – both in Gujarat and, since 2014, across India – is the result of a sharp intensification of neoliberalism, supported by a new form of ideological and institutional mediation through Hindutva. Functioning as the dominant mechanism for securing popular consent to a regime that disempowers labour while empowering capital, Hindutva operates as an ideology that reorganizes the relationship between consent and coercion in support of capital accumulation, relying on a dense network of institutions. This Hindutva-inspired institutional network constructs a cultural and moral framework that naturalizes inequality and legitimizes neoliberal reforms, displacing class-based grievances with cultural pride, religious identity, and nationalist sentiment (Jaffrelot, 2021). This ideological transformation is key to understanding how consent under Modi's rule is maintained.

In this process, inequality is depoliticized. Rather than addressing poverty, unemployment, or labour precarity as political issues requiring redistribution, Hindutva reinterprets them as moral or cultural deficiencies. The poor are expected to demonstrate loyalty to the nation and discipline in the face of hardship, while the state withdraws from its redistributive obligations. This logic mirrors neoliberal discourses of individual responsibility but is filtered through a religious-nationalist idiom. Class antagonisms are obscured by a unifying majoritarian identity. The figure of the Hindu nation flattens internal hierarchies and contradictions, presenting a homogenized Hindu subject that transcends caste, class, and region. Yet, this unity is deeply hierarchical and exclusionary: it selectively incorporates dominant castes and segments of the Backward Castes and Dalits, while stigmatizing Muslims, Christians, and dissenters as internal enemies (Teltumbde, 2018). Modi's populist persona as a self-made, lower-caste Hindu leader reinforces this ideological structure. By presenting himself as a humble servant of the nation, Modi elicits affective identification from subaltern groups (even as

his government pursues policies that benefit corporate capital and erode labour protections). This fusion of neoliberalism from above with cultural populism from below is central to the ideological function of Hindutva (Jaffrelot, 2021).

Hindutva's institutional apparatus – the Sangh Parivar, i.e., the network of organizations around the RSS (see footnote 1) – constitutes the infrastructure that shapes everyday life and mediates the relationship between state, society, and capital. These institutions perform multiple roles: they substitute for the welfare state by offering basic services, education, and community support, building loyalty and dependence on Hindutva-linked networks; and they act as mechanisms of discipline and surveillance, policing morality, gender roles, and communal boundaries (Narayan, 2021). More crucially for this analysis, they also mediate access to informal labour markets: employment, welfare, and state services are often filtered through RSS-linked organizations or local leaders affiliated with the Sangh. This resembles the role played by caste associations in post-Green Revolution South India, where informal institutions regulated labour to facilitate capital accumulation (Basile, 2013). In the present case, saturated with Hindutva ideology, the associations affiliated with the Sangh Parivar become active agents of a new hegemonic order (Narayan, 2021). Violence, too, is institutionalized within this framework. The threat or use of communal violence – often sanctioned or ignored by the state – serves to discipline minority communities and deter dissent. Anti-Muslim pogroms, lynchings, and police brutality are not isolated aberrations but expressions of a broader strategy to enforce order and suppress resistance. This coercive dimension of Hindutva complements its ideological and institutional functions, creating a regime in which consent and coercion are fused (Jaffrelot, 2021).

Hindutva's ideological and institutional structures profoundly reshape capital-labour relations. The informal sector remains defined by low wages, insecurity, and a lack of legal protections (Harriss-White, 2020). Yet, rather than fostering collective resistance, labour is increasingly fragmented along communal lines. Hindutva promotes a division of labour that reinforces hierarchies within the working class.[10] Hindu workers are granted symbolic superiority over Muslim or Dalit workers, fostering resentment and rivalry instead of solidarity. This fragmentation weakens the potential for labour organization and class-based mobilization: inequality is internalized within the working class, and frustration is redirected away from capital and toward minorities. Moreover, Hindutva's moral economy valorises hard work, obedience, and sacrifice – qualities aligned with capitalist discipline. The glorification of physical labour, patriotic service, and Hindu virtues merges with the neoliberal ideal of the disciplined, self-reliant worker (Narayan, 2021). This ideological framing helps normalize precarity and informal employment conditions. Caste continues to structure labour relations, but under Modi, caste-based hierarchies are increasingly subsumed within a broader Hindutva identity (Teltumbde, 2018). Dominant Backward Castes and Dalit groups are selectively co-opted into the Hindutva fold through symbolic inclusion and targeted welfare schemes. This incorporation defuses the radical potential of caste-based resistance, aligning lower-caste aspirations with the Hindutva-nationalist project.[11]

[10] It must be also added that Hindutva ideology emphasizes Hindu cultural nationalism and often reshapes labour markets through identity politics. Moreover, it may polarize employment opportunities: privileging workers and entrepreneurs aligned with majority-community networks while marginalizing minorities. Therefore, labour mobilization may shift away from class-based solidarity (wages, rights, unions) toward religious identity, weakening collective bargaining power. This can create fragmentation in the labour market, reinforce informalization, and reduce the strength of labour movements (Basole *et al*., 2023).

[11] While caste is foundational – rather than peripheral – to Hindutva ideology, a central contradiction persists. Hindutva projects a unified, homogenized Hindu identity to build a cohesive majority for political mobilization and nation-building, while caste undermines that unity through deep-rooted hierarchies, discrimination, and conflict, and organizing Hindu society into unequal, endogamous, and antagonistic groups. Yet, as Lee (2023) observes, Hindutva mitigates these caste tensions through cultural nationalism and the rhetoric of a shared Hindu civilization. Additionally, by selectively including lower castes through symbolic gestures and limited political representation, it sustains upper-caste dominance while curbing caste-based mobilization, thus advancing its majoritarian and authoritarian objectives.

As the preceding analysis shows, Hindutva provides a powerful mechanism for reproducing the hegemony of capital over labour in Modi's India. Operating simultaneously as ideology and as institutional infrastructure, it reorganizes consent and coercion to support capital accumulation, underpinning an increasingly authoritarian and neoliberal regime. By depoliticizing inequality, fragmenting labour, and disciplining dissent, Hindutva enables a form of capitalist development that is extractive, exclusionary, and resilient: an intensified neoliberalism rooted in a new ideological order that fuses market fundamentalism with majoritarian nationalism. As the cultural and institutional scaffolding of India's economy and polity, Hindutva enables Modi to consolidate political power, maintain electoral dominance, attract capital investment, and shape urban development. It also contributes to the progressive marginalization of minorities, who face increasing social, economic, and political exclusion. Ultimately, Hindutva supports the transformation of Indian democracy into a majoritarian regime, in which the identity and will of the Hindu majority dominate the political landscape (Narayan, 2021; Jaffrelot, 2017; Chatterji *et al*., 2019).

Gramsci's concept of hegemony provides the theoretical tools to conceptualize the complex role of Hindutva in Modi's India. According to Gramsci (1975, pp. 58-59; see also p. 1638), the leadership of one class over others may be secured in two ways: through coercion – when dominant classes enforce rule by force – and through consent – when the ruling class secures the voluntary agreement of subordinate classes by presenting its own values, norms, and interests as universal. Hegemony thus manifests both as domination and as moral and intellectual leadership. These dual modalities correspond to two spheres of the state: political society – the realm of coercion (the military, police, legal system); and civil society – the realm of consent (education, religion, culture, media, unions). As a mechanism of consent and coercion, Hindutva supports established power in both realms.

1.3. 2014 India: Growth and Structural Challenges

When Narendra Modi assumed office as Prime Minister in 2014, India was already firmly on the path of economic liberalization. The process began with the pro-business and technology-driven policies introduced by Rajiv Gandhi in the 1980s (Ahluwalia, 2002; Kohli, 2004; Bhagwati and Panagariya, 2012) and accelerated with the 1991 liberalization reforms. These reforms – spanning industrial policy, trade, financial regulation, foreign investment, and taxation – were enacted in response to a severe balance of payments crisis and the structural adjustment negotiated with programs imposed the International Monetary Fund.[12]

The shift from protectionism to a market-based economy marked a significant transformation in India's economic policy, effectively ending the import-substitution strategy in place since Independence. The reforms rested on three pillars: i) reducing state intervention by cutting public investment, abolishing industrial and import licenses, and privatizing state-owned enterprises; ii) fostering a business-friendly environment through lower taxes and increased infrastructure investment; and iii) opening India's economy to global competition through trade liberalization, foreign investment reforms, and capital market deregulation (Torri, 2024; Rodrik and Subramanian, 2004a and 2004b; Basu and Maertens, 2007). These measures laid the foundation for liberalization, privatization, and globalization, which drove economic growth in the following decades.

By 2014, India was among the world's fastest-growing economies, with GDP annual growth averaging 6/7%.[13] The economy was supported by a robust services sector, expanding manufacturing base, and rising foreign investment. Ongoing reforms aimed to reduce government intervention,

[12] A rich literature documents the nature of reforms and analyses the changes the reforms generated. See, among others, Bhagwati and Panagariya (eds) (2012), Bhagwati and Panagariya (2012), Panagariya (2008).

[13] Unless otherwise specified, throughout in this paper the source of data on India's poverty and inequality is the World Bank website Poverty and Inequality Platform (pip.worldbank.org), while the source of data on growth and rate of growth is *data.worldbank.org.*

promote private-sector participation, and further open markets to foreign direct investments (FDI). Key sectors such as telecommunications, retail, and finance had experienced significant deregulation. However, economic growth remained uneven. Rural areas and certain industries stagnated, while bureaucratic inefficiencies, regulatory barriers, and infrastructure deficits persisted. Despite overall progress, poverty remained widespread, and inequality was rising – highlighting deep structural challenges.[14] Although poverty reduction accelerated after the 1991 reforms, it remained a pressing concern. According to World Bank estimates, in 2004, 77.46% of India's population lived below the lower middle-income poverty line ($3.65 per day). The figure had declined to 60.97% by 2015.[15]

Economic growth was accompanied by growing inequality (Himanshu, 2019). As Sen and Himanshu (2004a and 2004b: 4370–4372) argue, rising inequality limited reductions in the absolute number of poor. Income inequality widened particularly between urban and rural areas, social groups, and economic classes (Gini coefficient for 2015: 34.69). While urban centres like Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru experienced rapid growth, rural regions and smaller towns struggled with stagnation. Millions in rural and peripheral areas lacked access to clean water, sanitation, healthcare, and education (Basile, 2013).

Indian society remained deeply stratified, shaped by caste, religion, gender, ethnicity, and regional diversity. Despite legal measures promoting social equality, caste-based discrimination persisted in employment, education, and social mobility (Basile, 2013; Harriss-White, 2003). Religious tensions occasionally escalated, affecting political and social stability. Regional disparities in development led to migration patterns that influenced urbanization and labour markets. Internal migrants often faced significant barriers to exercising full citizenship rights and were often treated as second-class citizens (Bhagat and Kumar, 2022).

India's economic growth also created significant employment challenges. Although liberalization was expected to create jobs, the post-reform period saw a trend of jobless growth (World Bank, 2018; Kannan and Raveendran, 2009). India's increasing integration into global markets and the shift from labour-intensive to capital-intensive industries contributed to this. In manufacturing, global competition led to restructuring and job losses in inefficient units, while capital-intensive industries generated fewer jobs per unit of investment (Alessandrini, 2022).

Moreover, the quality of jobs created after 1991 remained poor. A large share of new employment was in the informal sector, which grew alongside the expansion of the tertiary sector. Informal employment dominated the labour market, with around 90% of workers in rural areas and slightly fewer in urban centres experiencing low job security and wages (Basile, 2013; Basile and Harriss-White, 2010; Harriss-White, 2020). Informal workers often faced precarious conditions, lacked social protections, and had little access to benefits such as pensions, health insurance, or paid leave. Many were self-employed in agriculture, construction, domestic work, or small-scale manufacturing. Jobs were often characterized by long hours, low pay, and hazardous working conditions. The prevalence of cash transactions further complicated taxation and record-keeping.

In conclusion, India's economic liberalization led to high growth rates and structural transformation, but also contributed to growing inequality, persistent poverty, and labour market challenges. While the transition to a more open economy created new opportunities, it also exacerbated existing

[14] Extensive literature is available on India in the period just before Modi's election. See in particular: OECD (2014), Corbridge *et al*. (eds) (2013), Mody (2023), Drèze and Sen (2013), Datt and Ravallion (2002).

[15] The World Bank uses different poverty lines based on the level of per capita income of individual countries. India was considered a developing country until 2007 and, as such, the poverty line at $ 2,25 (per person per day) should be used for the years leading up to that date. In the years following 2007, with the transition of the country to the category of lower middle-income countries, the eligible poverty line is that of $3.65 (per person per day) (World Bank, 2008).

disparities, underlining the need for inclusive and sustainable development policies. It was within this context that Modi was elected Prime Minister in 2014.

2. Modi's "New India"

After a decade of coalition governments led by the Indian National Congress under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, India's economic liberalization continued under the leadership of Narendra Modi. Since taking office in 2014, Modi's government has pursued a broad and often controversial reform agenda, aimed at expanding the role of the market. Key priorities have included attracting investment, accelerating privatization, and driving digital transformation as part of an effort to modernize the Indian economy.

A central symbolic and institutional shift came early in Modi's first term with the replacement of the Planning Commission by the *NITI Aayog* (National Institution for Transforming India). This move was officially justified as a decentralizing measure, intended to reduce the concentration of federal power and give individual states a more active role in shaping their economic development strategies.[16]

This institutional reform has drawn sustained criticism. Patnaik (2015) views the creation of *NITI Aayog* as a move toward greater centralization, rather than decentralization, enabled by the central government's discretionary control over financial transfers to the states. Sharma and Sweden (2018) echo this critique, pointing to the organization's limited transparency, centralized decision-making, and alignment with central government strategy. More recently, Das (2024) and Mukherjee (2024) have emphasized how these discretionary transfers – issued on the recommendation of *NITI Aayog* – have deepened the concentration of power in the central government and reinforced a neoliberal economic model.

This section examines the major reforms and policy measures adopted under Modi's leadership that have reshaped India's economy, society, and international positioning. We begin by analysing the extent and implications of privatizing public sector undertakings, followed by an overview of broader economic reforms, agricultural policy changes, and selected non-economic measures. The section concludes by evaluating the cumulative impact of these reforms on economic growth and human development.[17]

2.1. Privatization, ***Disinvestment*** *and the* ***Establishment of New Public Sector Enterprises***

With the advent of liberalization, privatization, and globalization in 1991, the role of the Indian state in the economy has been progressively reduced. From the outset, the privatization of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) has played a key role in this transformation, though initially it was primarily characterized by partial disinvestments aimed at retaining state control. While during the first decade of the 21st century, successive governments pursued privatization in intermittent phases, under the Modi government the process has been vigorously resumed, driven by a clear ideological commitment to market-oriented reform (Srinivasa, 2018; Srivastava, 2021). The privatization agenda under Modi is multifaceted and includes several distinct strategies.

[16] Already in his first speech on the Independence Day in 2014, Modi announced his intention to eliminate the Planning Commission and to create a new institution "based on creative thinking, public-private partnership, optimum utilization of resources, utilization of youth power of the nation, to promote the aspirations of state governments seeking development, to empower the state governments and to empower the federal structure" (Modi, 2014).

[17] A comprehensive assessment of the economic policies adopted by the Indian government under different policy regimes is found in Ghosh (2022), who provides a political economy analysis of economic growth in the country from 1950 to 2020, examining also the inclusiveness of the process in recent decades.

The first and most direct form is disinvestment, where the state transfers full ownership and control of public enterprises to private actors: an approach which is largely intended to generate financial resources for the government. A second form involves market-based financing, whereby the state seeks new investment without relinquishing control. This model allows private capital to support production in sectors identified as having strong growth potential, while the state retains a controlling stake. A third approach entails the creation of new enterprises, particularly in strategic sectors, often with private sector participation. These new ventures reflect a hybrid model of public-private collaboration aimed at expanding state presence in key industries.

Despite these efforts, the state remains a significant actor in India's economy. SOEs continue to dominate critical sectors, such as energy, infrastructure, and banking. Moreover, the government has expressed its intent to maintain a "bare minimum presence" in strategic areas like defence and transport (Chandra and Chatterjee, 2022; Agarwal *et al*., 2022). It is important to note that this evolving privatization process – often encompassing the mobilization of vast financial assets – has frequently drawn criticism for fostering a form of crony capitalism because of the huge benefits in favour of a select group of business elites closely aligned with the state (NDTV, 2018; Kamble, 2023; *The Hindu*, 2021).

2.2. Economic Reforms

The economic reforms implemented during the decade 2014-2024 address multiple aspects of India's economy, ranging from interventions directly targeting the enterprise system and labour market, to changes in the mechanisms governing domestic and international financial transactions.

The most well-known intervention – even among the public – is the ambitious ***Make in India*** campaign launched in September 2014. Its primary objective is to encourage Indian companies to manufacture their products domestically and to invest in the manufacturing sector, thereby transforming India into a global production hub. In doing so, the initiative aims both to attract FDI and to stimulate employment while reducing dependence on imports (Kumar N., 2024).

The ***Make in India*** campaign has unfolded in two phases. The first phase, from 2014 to 2018, focused on **building competitiveness**, while the second phase – launched in 2019 and still ongoing – emphasizes **concrete actions and policy implementation**. From 2020 onwards, ***Make in India*** has been complemented by a parallel initiative: the ***Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyan*** (Self-Reliant India Campaign) (Tripathy and Dastrala, 2023; Nagarjuna, 2022).

The first phase of ***Make in India*** involved the creation of an organizational system capable of effectively implementing the campaign and engaging private sector organizations to pursue its defined objectives. At the core of the initiative there was the principle of **"flexibility through regulations",** particularly through **labour reforms to promote flexibility in working arrangements.** The **Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade** was entrusted with developing and operationalizing the regulatory provisions necessary to translate the campaign's strategy into practice (Tripathy and Dastrala, 2023). The second phase has introduced measures aimed at making domestic production more competitive, both internally and in relation to global competitors. These measures focus on **reducing corporate taxes** for newly established production units, **strengthening manufacturing and service sectors**, enhancing **entrepreneurial competencies**, and improving India's position in global trade and commerce (Thambi *et al.*, 2024). The reforms encompass enterprises across **15 manufacturing sub-sectors** and **12 service sub-sectors** (Tripathy and Dastrala, 2023).

Starting in 2020, *Make in India* was complemented by a new initiative targeting the manufacturing sector: the *Production Linked Incentive* scheme. Launched by the Indian government, the scheme aims to boost domestic manufacturing and reduce reliance on imports. It offers conditional incentives

to increase sales of domestically produced goods, restricts the import of selected products, decentralizes and deregulates port infrastructure, and seeks to attract foreign investment to strengthen domestic production. The scheme spans 14 industrial sub-sectors and is partially supported by *Make in India*.

In 2015, the Indian government launched the *Digital India* campaign to promote the use of digital communication for the delivery of government services to improve online infrastructure and to broaden internet connectivity. A key aim of the campaign was to connect rural areas to high-speed internet (Neyazi *et al*., 2016).

To accompany the envisioned development path, additional reforms were introduced throughout the decade. In 2016, the Modi government implemented the controversial demonetization of the Indian economy.[18] According to the Prime Minister, this move aimed to fight corruption, bring undeclared wealth into the formal economy, and eliminate counterfeit currency (Modi, 2016). On the 8th of November, it was abruptly announced that ₹500 and ₹1000 notes would cease to be legal tender. These could be exchanged for new ₹500 and ₹2000 notes until the 30th of December. Despite acknowledging corruption in the public sector, the measure failed to uncover significant amounts of hidden assets: according to the Reserve Bank of India, the value of banknotes in circulation before and after demonetization remained largely unchanged (Chowdhury and Hosain, 2018; Lahiri, 2020).[19]

In 2017, the *Goods and Services Tax* (GST) was introduced to unify the country's fragmented indirect tax system. It replaced the *Value Added Tax*, which varied across states, thereby complicating interstate trade. According to Modi, the GST also aimed to foster national unity (Modi, 2017).

In 2019, the government initiated an extensive reform of labour laws. The complex web of post-Independence regulations was consolidated into four codes: the *Code on Wages* (2019), the *Industrial Relations Code*, the *Code on Social Security*, and the *Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code* (all three codes were published in 2020).[20] Each code serves specific objectives: the *Code on Wages* seeks to standardize wage-related regulation across sectors and payment modes, while allowing states to define minimum wages (MLE, 2019). The *Industrial Relations Code* simplifies compliance for businesses while defining workplace conditions, including for fixed-term contracts (MLJ, 2020a). The Code on Social Security expands protections against health and employment-related contingencies (MLJ, 2020b). The *Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code* extends workplace safety rules to small enterprises with under 10 employees (MLJ, 2020c).

2.3. The Reforms for Agriculture and Rural Areas

The reforms introduced under Modi's leadership aimed to increase agricultural production primarily through structural changes without reducing employment.[21] One of the earliest measures proposed

[18] The Specified Bank Notes (Cessation of Liabilities) Ordinance was issued in December 2016, ending the liability of the government for the demonetised banknotes.

[19] Through the Digital India strategy, with demonetization as a major catalyst, the use of digital payments spread into the countryside and among farmers. However, the impact on agriculture has been ambiguous: while digital transactions were intended to simplify payments and reduce corruption, in practice they often harmed large sections of the rural population because of their limited familiarity with digital systems (Reserve Bank of India, 2018).

[20] In Modi's words: "Labour Reforms will enhance Ease of Doing Business. Employment creation and output of workers will also get enhanced... The benefits of these four Labour Codes will be available to workers of both organized and unorganized sector" (MIBGI, 2020: p. 8).

[21] The first speech in which Modi expressed his concern about the low productivity of Indian agriculture was on July 30, 2014. Speaking to scientists gathered at the Indian Council of Agricultural Research, he urged them to provide farmers

by the Modi government was the *Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act*, which amended the 2013 *Land Acquisition Act*. This revision sought to encourage cooperation between those seeking to acquire agricultural land and landowners, while clarifying mutual rights and obligations, and simplifying bureaucratic procedures. However, the positive impact of this Act has been reduced by the amendments favouring private companies and expanding state powers in land acquisition proposed by the Parliament six months later (Dhar, 2024).

The process of demonetization heavily affected farmers working in small farms in which informal relationships largely dominate, and payments are mainly cash-based. The complex procedure of replacing the banknotes circulating before the measure with new ones often forced farmers to borrow from money lenders and from buyers of their goods (Sudarsana Murthy *et al.*, 2019). The GST tax reform also affected the sector: while being exempted from paying this tax, agriculture saw the cost of production increase due to the increase in expenses for the purchase of inputs and services subject to GST (Ramakumar, 2024: pp. 33-34).

In 2020, the Modi government introduced three laws aimed at reforming agricultural markets: *The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce Act*, *The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act*, and *The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act* – collectively known as the *Three Farm Laws*. These reforms deregulated agricultural trade, expanded the scope of contract farming, and weakened the bargaining power of farmers. The measures provoked widespread protest across India, especially from peasant organizations, ultimately compelling the government to repeal the laws in 2021 (Dhar, 2024: p. 35).

2.4. Non-economic Reforms

Throughout its two terms, the Modi government has implemented a series of far-reaching non-economic reforms that have significantly reshaped Indian society. These initiatives span national security, social justice, education, governance, and legal modernization. Additionally, during the government's second term, measures were introduced to redefine citizenship acquisition.

In 2019, the government revoked the special constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir, bifurcating it into two *union territories* – Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh – thereby bringing them under greater federal control. This move was widely interpreted as an attempt to isolate Jammu, home to a Muslim-majority population. However, the separation was short-lived: in 2023, the Supreme Court struck down the provision, restoring the identity of Jammu and Kashmir as a single entity, albeit still under direct central administration (Kumar, 2020; Hussain, 2024).

That same year, the government criminalized the practice of instant triple talaq (*talaq-e-bid'ah*) through *The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act*.[22] While the move was presented as a step towards gender justice and community integration into modern India, critics viewed it as a politically motivated assertion of Hindu dominance. The law sparked significant debate, drawing criticism both from secular intellectuals and within the Muslim community itself (Parveen, 2024).

Also in 2019, the government passed *The Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA)*, which amended *The Citizenship Act* (1955). The new provisions stated: "any person belonging to Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist,

with new technologies for increasing land productivity. On this occasion, he coined a new mantra: "Per drop, more crop" referring to an improvement in the use of water (Mohan, 2014).

[22] Instant triple talaq is a controversial form of Islamic divorce that was practiced in some Muslim communities. In this practice, a Muslim husband could instantly divorce his wife by pronouncing the word "talaq" (divorce) three times in succession (e.g., *"talaq, talaq, talaq"*). The effect was that the marriage ended immediately, without any waiting period or opportunity for reconciliation, and leaving the wife without recourse and often vulnerable. In India, where it was practiced among some Muslims, the Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional in 2017, and Parliament passed a law in 2019 making it a criminal offense.

Jain, Parsi or Christian community from Afghanistan, Bangladesh or Pakistan (…) shall not be treated as illegal migrant for the purposes of this Act" (MLJ, 2019: p. 2). The explicit exclusion of Muslim migrants triggered widespread criticism, both domestically and internationally, for undermining India's secular constitutional principles.

The CAA was introduced in parallel with efforts to revise the *National Register of Citizens*, a policy tool used to determine eligibility for access to public services and voting rights. The combined effect of a selective citizenship law and an exclusionary registration process was perceived as an attempt to marginalize Muslim minorities politically and socially (Subramanian, 2021). The backlash was swift and widespread. Massive protests erupted across India: the most extensive and sustained civil unrest in over four decades (Roy, 2021). While Muslim communities were at the forefront, they were joined by feminist groups, student movements, and a broad coalition of progressive intellectuals (Jayal, 2019; Ananda, 2024).

In 2020, the government launched the *New Education Policy* (NEP), which aimed to overhaul the Indian education system. The policy reorganized schooling into four stages, including the addition of pre-primary education, and extended the endpoint of formal education to age 18.[23] A major aim was to raise public education expenditure to 6% of GDP, up from 4.43% in 2020 (MHRD, 2020: p. 61). However, beyond structural reforms, the NEP has been criticized for its ideological orientation. It emphasizes a revival of "traditional Indian culture" through the promotion of Sanskrit knowledge systems and other ancient Indian traditions, to be integrated at all levels of education (MHRD, 2020: p. 14). Critics argue that this represents a project of cultural re-engineering. The NEP, they contend, advances a narrative that seeks to glorify a mytho-historic Hindu past while marginalizing alternative epistemologies (Joshee, 2024: p. 252). In this regard, it reflects an ideological project first articulated by the BJP's Education Minister in 1999, focused on the "Indianisation, Nationalisation, and Spiritualisation" of Indian education (Gupta, 2025).

Two additional reforms remain subjects of ongoing national debate: the *Uniform Civil Code* (UCC) and the reform of criminal laws. The UCC aims to replace the personal laws of individual religious communities with a single, uniform code governing personal matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance (Agarwal and Singhal, 2023). Advocates argue it promotes equality and national integration, while critics warn of its implications for religious freedom and federalism (Shewale, 2025: p. 10). In 2023, also three major criminal law reform bills were passed, overhauling India's penal and procedural codes. While officially described as a "decolonization effort", replacing British-era laws with Indian-authored legislation, concerns have been raised about the potential for increased surveillance and erosion of civil liberties. In particular, the expanded responsibilities given to the police in gathering information related to cognizable offences have raised alarms over privacy violations and the normalization of state monitoring (Joseph, 2024).

2.5. A "New India"?

The policies introduced by the Modi's governments and their related interventions fall within the broader category of pro-market reforms, which include incentives for private enterprises – particularly large corporations – alongside the promotion of digital transformation across the economy and public services, and the reduction of state involvement through various forms of privatization. So, the interventions supporting the *Make in India* campaign aimed at strengthening the Indian manufacturing sector and helping reduce the share of agricultural employment (without

[23] In the previous system, schooling included 10 years from 6 to 16 years of basic school and two years from 16 to 18 of secondary school. NEP involves 3 years of pre-school (ages 3-6), two years of Foundational school (ages 6-8), three years of Preparatory school (ages 8-11), 3 years of Middle school (ages 11-14), and four years of Secondary school (ages 14-18) (MHRD, 2020: p. 6)

diminishing the rural sector's contribution to overall economic growth), while the 2016 demonetization and the introduction of the GST were intended to enhance commercial efficiency and reduce corruption.

While the Prime Minister explicitly declared that the economic campaigns and reforms implemented since 2014 were intended to significantly transform the country, their impact seem to confirm the pre-Modi economic policy approach. The demonetisation was not able to make commercial transactions easier, safer and fairer and to eliminate (at least partially) the corruption in the public sector. By contrast, these measures impacted informal economy hindering the formalization of labour relations and trade (Nagaraj, 2025). Moreover, the structural transformation of the economy has been limited: while both agriculture and industry saw slight decline in employment, the modest increase in jobs occurred predominantly in the service sector. In this sense, the decade of the Modi governments represents the continuation of the path observed in the previous three decades, when the driving force of the structural transformation was the service sector which only attracted a limited number of highly skilled workers. The failure to transfer workers from agriculture to industry reveals the inability to develop an adequate manufacturing sector, also due to the low level of professional skills in rural areas generated by the fragile system of vocational training for the younger generations (Alonso and MacDonald, 2024; Atolia *et al.,* 2018; Amirapu and Subramanian, 2015).[24]

Within industry, only a few sectors – automotive, IT, and pharmaceuticals – generated employment; however, being capital-intensive, these sectors only require highly skilled labour. Likewise, in the service sector only finance and IT services have attracted workers, further reinforcing a pattern of growth driven by skill-intensive, capital-heavy industries. This structural transformation suggests a path of economic growth engendered mainly by information technologies, in which the enrolment of workers at the low end of the skill ladder (coming mainly from rural areas) is rather limited (Panagariya, 2025: p. 9; Kumar R., 2024).

Parallel to the reforms that impact the economy, Modi governments also undertook a pattern of institutional reforms to simplify the relations between workers, the state and businesses. Yet, these reforms were introduced in an authoritarian manner, without the participation of workers' organizations (Ford and Gillan, 2024). Nor has the reform of the education system contributed to improving the chances of access to the labour market for young people from rural areas and urban suburbs. Indeed, the reform does not effectively address the main issues facing India's industrial landscape which are the scarcity of facilities for vocational education and training (Kumar R., 2024).

The decade of the two Modi governments is celebrated for the rapid growth of the GDP and for some questionable measures that have provoked street movements in Delhi and in many rural areas, which have surprised the Western media for their vehemence (Chakraborty, 2024; Dhar, 2024). However, economic growth in the period did not exceed that observed after the starting of the process of economic liberalization. The transition from "low-income country" to "lower-middle income country" status took place in 2007 (World Bank, 2008), while GDP growth rates were almost the same throughout the first twenty years of the century, more stable in the first decade and more volatile in the second, with the falls of 2008 and 2019, respectively due to the international financial crisis and to the pandemic known as COVID 2019 (World Bank, 2024: Figure 1, p. 3). It is then difficult to ascribe the merit of growth to Modi governments. By contrast, the merit should be imputed to the socio-economic conditions of the country, which are characterized by: i) informality of the economy that entrusts micro and small enterprises which generate income for millions citizens, on the one hand, and larger agricultural and industrial enterprises generating profits thanks to the weakness of workers' unionization, on the other (Gupta and Varma, 2024; Meher *et al*., 2025); ii) public spending both on capital account for the construction of infrastructures (roads, railways and ports), on defence

[24] On this aspect, in India, like in other developing countries, workers move from industry to services, rather than from agriculture to industry, as it occurs in advanced capitalist countries (Kochhar *et al*., 2006; Rodrik, 2016; Nagaraj, 2025).

and security, and on welfare and social schemes expansion (Bou-Habib *et al.*, 2024); and iii) the domestic demand for consumer goods generated by the growth in the spending power of the middle classes (Sinha, 2024: p. 17).

Yet, the growth of the economy was not accompanied by an increase in employment and in the income of the poorest sections of the population. By contrast, it was accompanied by the growth of capital-intensive and low-employment sectors, such as the digital economy and finance. To understand how this process unfolded, we need to consider the role of the agricultural sector in the process of industrialization. While in theoretical terms, agriculture should be the source of labour for the other sectors of the economy, in the Indian case the sector has been penalized by weak investment incentives and a slow rise in prices, with the consequence of the decline of investment profitability and of the fall of real incomes. This has been compounded by repeated failures to deliver on promises of tax reform and the weakening of land acquisition laws. These conditions have sparked widespread discontent among farmers and revived the unity of rural organizations (Ramakumar, 2024). In the absence of adequate support, and in a context where the manufacturing sector is not generating sufficient employment, the deteriorating conditions in agriculture and rural areas were contributing to broader societal impoverishment (Kumar R., 2024).

The path of economic growth designed by Modi is then a path towards the "modernization" of the country rather than towards sustainable development. The campaign that best reveals this path is *Make in India*, which has the explicit objective of promoting the growth of the manufacturing industry and does so by a series of measures consistent with the main objective. But the ability of this campaign to really influence the results achieved by the economy and society is strongly questioned (Kumar R., 2025; Tripathy and Dastrala, 2023).

3. Modi's Authoritarian Neoliberalism

As pointed out in Sections 1 and 2, the political economic trajectory of Narendra Modi's India is not a radical break from the past, but rather a continuation – and indeed an intensification – of India's long-standing neoliberal shift that began in the late 1980s and was formalized through the 1991 economic liberalization reforms (Patnaik, 2024). Yet, what makes Modi's regime distinct is its synthesis of deepened market-oriented reforms, majoritarian nationalism, and authoritarian political centralization. This combination constitutes a nationally specific form of what Ian Bruff (2014) identifies as "authoritarian neoliberalism": a system where market liberalization is combined with political illiberalism, and state power is exploited not to democratize the economy, but to discipline labour, dispossess the poor, and secure the conditions for capital accumulation.

This Section explores the main features of Modi's authoritarian neoliberalism which is defined by the fusion of neoliberal restructuring with Hindutva. We point out how this ideological fusion has enabled the forceful reorganization of capital-labour relations in India's informalized economy while masking social inequalities through the spectacle of cultural nationalism (Patnaik, 2024). We also show how the measures in favour of businesses and the regulation of labour relations have been completed by an authoritarian turn that has profoundly changed the functioning of the State through the centralization of decisions in the hands of the Prime Minister and the reduction of the checks and balances on which democratic systems rest, with a specific reference to the judiciary. Yet, before going into this analysis, an introduction is necessary on the reasons why a neoliberal regime needs accentuated forms of authoritarianism. Harvey's seminal analysis of neoliberalism (2005) provides the main theoretical reference for this exercise.

3.1. On the Interplay between Neoliberalism and Authoritarianism

Harvey's core argument is that neoliberalism, far from being a neutral economic framework, is a deeply political and coercive system designed to reinforce elite power. While it claims to promote liberty, in practice it deepens inequality and undermines democracy. Let's see how this happens.

While neoliberalism and authoritarianism may appear contradictory – one emphasizing market freedom, the other centralized control – they often reinforce each other in practice. Neoliberalism is based on deregulation, privatization, fiscal austerity, and the reduction of the state's role in providing social welfare. While claiming to enhance individual freedom through market mechanisms, it often undermines collective democratic institutions by disempowering labour through informalization and flexibilization, and undermining social protections, so leading to precarity and inequality. In this sense, it is a *class project*. As the discontent generated by rising inequality and insecurity grows, neoliberal regimes often turn to authoritarian governance to suppress dissent and manage crises, while these policies intensify inequality and social discontent, and authoritarian governance emerges as a necessary mechanism to suppress resistance and legitimize elite rule. The rise of authoritarianism then can be understood as a political response to the contradictions and social unrest generated by neoliberal policies, such as labour code changes, agricultural market deregulation, criminalising protest and dissent, particularly by workers, farmers, students, and marginalized communities (Harvey, 2005: pp. 70 *et seq*.).

Rather than being oppositional, neoliberalism and authoritarianism co-produce a regime of governance characterized by economic liberalization without political liberalism (where capital is free, but people are not). Moreover, while neoliberalism ideologically favours a "minimal state", in practice it depends on a strong "interventionist state" to enforce property rights and investor protections, facilitate capital accumulation through land acquisition, labour discipline, and infrastructure development and suppress or co-opt political resistance (Harvey, 2005: Chapter 2, pp. 39 *et seq*.).

In India, Hindutva ideology plays a key role in legitimizing the fusion of neoliberalism and authoritarianism. It redirects social grievances away from class inequality toward communal and nationalistic narratives, constructing "internal enemies" – Muslims and dissenters – who are blamed for economic or social problems. Thus, Hindutva acts as an ideological glue that holds together the authoritarian neoliberal state, enabling Modi's regime to pursue pro-corporate reforms while maintaining mass support. The interplay between neoliberalism and authoritarianism is not incidental but structural and mutually constitutive. As neoliberalism deepens inequality and disempowers democratic institutions, authoritarianism stabilizes the political order by repressing dissent and manufacturing consent. In regimes like Modi's India, where economic liberalization is enforced through cultural nationalism and state repression, this dynamic is particularly evident and creates a hybrid regime of authoritarian capitalism.

One of Harvey's most significant theoretical innovations is the concept of "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey, 2005: pp. 159 *et seq*.), a process whereby public or communal resources are expropriated and commodified for private gains. These processes are often resisted by subaltern groups, compelling the state to deploy repressive tools to enforce neoliberal reforms, such as surveillance, policing, legal persecution, and censorship. In such contexts, authoritarianism is not an aberration but a structural feature of neoliberal governance.

India's recent trajectory under Modi exemplifies Harvey's argument. Modi's regime has aggressively pursued pro-corporate policies – ranging from sweeping labour code reforms and land acquisition amendments to large-scale privatization and tax concessions for big business. These reforms are deeply neoliberal in character, aimed at disciplining labour, enhancing "ease of doing business," and integrating India more fully into global capital flows. But their implementation has relied on increasingly authoritarian state practices. The protests of the farmers against the 2020 farm laws, for

instance, were met with state surveillance, arrests, internet blackouts, and violent suppression – hallmarks of a state enforcing *accumulation by dispossession*.

The use of nationalism and majoritarian ideology – central to the Hindutva project – also aligns with Harvey's broader argument about neoliberalism's ideological strategies. In moments of crisis or resistance, neoliberal regimes often invoke cultural or identity-based narratives to deflect attention from economic grievances and consolidate hegemony. In India, Hindutva plays this role: it manufactures internal enemies and fosters a politics of resentment that masks the failures and inequalities of neoliberal development. In Harvey's terms, this is the "construction of consent" under neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005: Chapter 2: pp. 39 *et seq*.), not through liberal-democratic inclusion, but through authoritarian-populist exclusion.

In sum, Harvey's contribution helps reveal the underlying unity between neoliberal restructuring and authoritarian statecraft. The Modi regime, far from representing a rupture with the past, exemplifies the intensification of neoliberalism under authoritarian conditions. Hindutva nationalism, state repression, and economic liberalization are not contradictory; they are interlocking mechanisms of rule that reproduce a highly unequal and exclusionary form of capitalist development. Through Harvey's lens, it becomes clear that authoritarianism in India today is not an anomaly, but the political face of a deepening neoliberal order. Harvey's framework elucidates the mutually reinforcing logics of neoliberalism and authoritarianism. Modi's India does not represent a break from neoliberalism but an intensification of it, enabled and stabilized through authoritarian governance, communal polarization, and institutional erosion. The Indian state under Modi has become a paradigmatic case of Harvey's authoritarian neoliberalism.

3.2. The Neoliberal Agenda: pro-Market, pro-Business, and the Erosion of Workers' Rights

The Modi regime has implemented a sweeping and aggressive neoliberal agenda that is overtly pro-market and pro-business. While neoliberal policies were initiated by earlier governments, Modi's administration has significantly expanded their scope, deepened their intensity, and narrowed the space for dissent.

One of the most emblematic features of this neoliberal turn has been the overhaul of India's labour laws. As seen in Section 2, in 2020, the government consolidated 29 existing labour laws into four labour codes – the *Code on Wages*, the Industrial Relations Code, the *Social Security Code*, and the *Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code*. Framed as a simplification and rationalization effort to reduce regulatory burdens on employers, these reforms have in fact diluted worker protections and trade union rights. So, the *Industrial Relations Code* raises the threshold for mandatory government approval of layoffs from 100 to 300 workers, effectively making it easier for companies to reduce labour (Roy and Dubey, 2022). Moreover, the *Social Security Code* broadens the scope for fixed-term employment, reducing job security and enabling employers to hire and fire at will. These reforms disproportionately affect India's informal workforce, which constitutes over 90% of total employment (ILO, 2018), further eroding any residual labour protections in the economy.

Modi's tenure has also undertaken an aggressive privatization drive. Since 2014, strategic sectors, such as aviation, defence, railways, insurance, and energy, have been opened to private capital. The sale of Air India to the Tata Group in 2021, the Initial Public Offer in India Stock Markets of the Life Insurance Corporation in 2022, and the gradual corporatization of railway operations, all signal a retreat from the postcolonial developmental state model toward a corporate-led accumulation strategy (Naib, 2022).

These privatization measures are justified in the language of efficiency and fiscal prudence; yet they often result in the monopolization of national assets by a handful of conglomerates, notably the Adani and Ambani groups. By 2022, Gautam Adani had become Asia's richest man, largely due to his

proximity to state-led projects in energy, infrastructure, and logistics (Venkatesh and Palanivel, 2021). This points to a crony capitalist logic that is integral to Modi's neoliberalism.

Modi's administration has also pursued a vigorous FDI agenda. FDI inflows into India reached an all-time high of $83.6 billion in 2021–22, supported by liberalized sectoral caps,[25] tax concessions, and regulatory reforms (MCI, 2022). The government has promoted India as a global manufacturing hub under the *Make in India* and *Atmanirbhar Bharat* (Self-reliant India) initiatives, although empirical studies suggest that these campaigns have generated few jobs and limited structural transformation (Mehrotra and Parida, 2021).

The state's reorientation toward capital is also evident in the "Ease of Doing Business" campaign. Legal reforms – such as the *Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code* (2016), streamlined business registration procedures, and digitized compliance systems – have reduced regulatory friction for investors, but have simultaneously undermined the rights of workers, small producers, and the cooperative sector (Goel, 2017). While formalization of the economy is desirable in principle, it has increasingly functioned as a mechanism of discipline rather than inclusion.

Digitalization has been another central pillar of Modi's neoliberalism. Schemes such as *Aadhaar* (biometric ID), Digital India, and UPI-based financial inclusion have been presented as steps toward modernization. Yet, these technologies also serve as tools of surveillance, control, and exclusion, particularly for informal and precarious workers (Sarma, 2025). Scholars have shown that Aadhaar-based exclusions from welfare – such as pensions, food rations, and MGNREGA wages – have disproportionately affected the rural poor (Drèze and Khera, 2017). Moreover, digital labour platforms such as Ola, Swiggy, and Urban Company represent new forms of algorithmic management and informal exploitation, where workers lack bargaining power, legal protections, or minimum wages (ILO, 2024b)

Under Modi's leadership, the introduction of the three farm laws marked a significant shift in India's agricultural policy. These reforms aimed to dismantle government-regulated markets, promote contract farming with minimal state oversight, and reduce state intervention overall. Structurally neoliberal in orientation, the laws emphasized market freedom, reduced public sector involvement, and encouraged private capital in the agricultural sector.

The intended goals were to attract agribusinesses and large corporations into procurement, reduce subsidies, and gradually phase out reliance on minimum support prices. By doing so, the government sought to transition Indian agriculture toward a market-driven pricing regime. However, the reforms triggered massive farmer protests (2020–2021), which revealed deep-rooted tensions between neoliberal policy and India's historically state-supported agricultural system. Farmers strongly opposed what they saw as corporate encroachment into an unregulated market, the potential elimination of minimum support prices, and the broader erosion of state support that had long provided them with economic stability (Ramakumar, 2024; Dhar, 2024).

3.3. The Authoritarian Turn

The consolidation of power in the hands of Prime Minister Narendra Modi represents a profound transformation in India's political governance. Although formally democratic, the structure of the Indian state under Modi has inclined sharply towards authoritarian centralism. This centralization of power is not merely administrative, but ideological and political, reshaping India's federal framework and weakening institutional controls designed to balance executive authority, particularly the judiciary.

[25] Sectoral caps are the upper limit that Foreign Portfolio Investments can invest in an Indian Company.

Since 2014, Modi has exercised an increasingly presidential style of government, with decision-making heavily concentrated in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). The PMO has emerged as the nerve centre of decision-making, often bypassing cabinet ministries, parliamentary committees, and public deliberations (Manor, 2025; Ruparelia, 2015; Maiorano and Sen, 2021). This centralized mode of government reflects a broader trend toward executive dominance, marked by the marginalization of bureaucratic institutions and federal actors. A key institutional change was the replacement of the Planning Commission with the *NITI Aayog* in 2015. Unlike its predecessor, the *NITI Aayog* does not have the authority to allocate funds and functions primarily as an advisory body under the direct influence of the central government (Kapur *et al.*, eds, 2017). This change weakened the state's participation in national development planning, further strengthening New Delhi's dominance.

The Modi government has also made strategic use of central investigative agencies – such as the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), the Enforcement Directorate (ED) and the National Investigation Agency (NIA) – to put pressure on opposition parties and regional governments. These agencies have often targeted political opponents with investigations and raids, often coinciding with key election contests or legislative battles (Mehra, 2022). This trend reflects a broader erosion of federal regulation, and a militarization of institutions intended to remain independent.

Legislative processes under Modi's regime have increasingly bypassed democratic deliberation. The government has often passed important laws with little debate, including using fast-track ordinances and procedures. The controversial agricultural laws passed in 2020 were introduced and enacted with minimal consultation with farmers' organizations or state governments, sparking one of the largest protest movements in India's history since independence. A similar legislative haste characterized the enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act in 2019, which amended Indian citizenship laws in a way that was widely considered discriminatory against Muslims (Khan and Abbas, 2024).

This centralisation of power is exacerbated by the erosion of the independence of the judiciary. The judicial system, traditionally considered a safeguard against the excess of the executive power, has been subjected to increasing pressure, both through procedural manipulation and through implicit ideological alignment. The government's attempt to replace the *Collegium System* of judicial appointments with the National Commission for Judicial Appointments (NJAC) in 2014 was rejected by the Supreme Court in 2015. However, tensions between the executive and the judiciary persisted. The Modi government has delayed or acted selectively based on the recommendations of the Supreme Court panel, particularly in politically sensitive cases (Dhanani, 2023a and 2023b; Sundar, 2023).

More broadly, the judiciary under Modi has shown a pattern of deference to the executive, particularly in cases involving constitutional rights and state repression. The Supreme Court's verdict in the Ayodhya land dispute in 2019, although legally framed around property rights, effectively endorsed a central ideological goal of the BJP (Rajagopal, 2021).[26] In addition, the judiciary has often remained silent or slow to act in cases involving civil liberties and dissent. Prolonged detentions of activists, academics and journalists under anti-terrorism continued with little judicial intervention, while Courts have failed to hold the executive responsible for serious rights violations (Roy Chowdhury and Keane, 2021). As Roy Chowdhury and Keane (2021) point out, in 2021 nearly 38 million cases were pending in Indian courts, 3.7 million of them for more than a decade, while a High Court judge once estimated

[26] The **Ayodhya dispute** centred on a site in Uttar Pradesh claimed by both Hindus and Muslims. Hindus regard it as the birthplace of Lord Ram, while the site was also home to the **Babri Masjid**, a 16th-century mosque. The conflict escalated in the late 20th century, especially after campaigns by Hindu nationalist groups demanded a temple at the site. Tensions culminated in **1992**, when the Babri Masjid was **demolished by Hindu mobs**, triggering widespread communal riots that left thousands dead and deepened religious polarization across India. In **2019,** the **Supreme Court** resolved the long-running legal battle: it awarded the disputed land to Hindus for the construction of a **Ram temple**, while ordering that Muslims be given an alternative plot for a mosque. The dispute's **consequences** were profound: it reshaped Indian politics by boosting Hindu nationalist mobilization, strained intercommunal relations, and set a precedent for how religious identity can intersect with law, property, and state legitimacy (Kapur, 2024).

that it would take 320 years to clear the backlog of cases. In general, cases are pending for an average of 3.5 years and nearly 70% of Indian prisoners are undertrials, more than twice the number of convicted prisoners (p. 226).

The Indian judiciary system infringes the spirit and substance of the rule of law: the principle that legal institutions and written laws should hinder the ambitions of those seeking power. In principle, the rule of law is the cure for despotism. Yet, in India, the principle is rarely applied: the government enacts and arranges the enforcement of laws: the political contamination of India's judicial system has undermined the social foundations of Indian democracy (Roy Chowdhury and Keane, 2021).

4. Contradictions and Failures of Modi's Regime

Modi's neoliberal governance marks a decisive departure from the post-independence model of state-led development, replacing it with an assertive embrace of market liberalization, deregulation, and corporate capital. This paradigm shift – framed in the language of modernization, efficiency, and global competitiveness – has systematically eroded labour rights, weakened the public sector, and destabilized agrarian structures. As noted earlier, the consolidation of labour laws has curtailed collective bargaining and reduced job security (Roy and Dubey, 2022). Privatization initiatives, particularly in strategic sectors, have facilitated the concentration of national assets in the hands of a few corporate conglomerates, most notably the Adani and Ambani groups (Naib, 2022). Digital governance schemes have introduced new modalities of surveillance and exclusion, disproportionately affecting informal and precarious workers (Drèze and Khera, 2017; Sarma, 2025). Agricultural reforms – though aimed at enhancing investment and market efficiency – sparked mass mobilizations by farmers, revealing deep-seated anxieties about the erosion of state support and the increasing dominance of corporate interests in rural economy (Venkatesh and Palanivel, 2021).

Despite the transformative nature of these policy interventions, the regime's economic promises remain largely unfulfilled. The anticipated trickle-down effects of growth have failed to materialize, the pattern of growth has been largely jobless, poverty levels remain unacceptably high for a middle-income country and inequality is widening.

This section explores these contradictions and structural failures of Modi's development model.

4.1. The Anomalies of India's Structural Transformation and Jobless Growth

Modi's political-economic project envisions a modern, internationally competitive India driven by rapid economic growth. The primary strategy for achieving this outcome has been the implementation of a neoliberal model of development, modelled on the trajectories of capitalist economies – first in the West and recently in other parts of the world. However, when compared to the conventional liberal model, India's economic growth has exhibited certain anomalies. The most striking deviation over the past decade concerns the evolution of employment, which reflects the underlying structural transformation of the economy.

Between 1991 and 2019 – the year before COVID-19 pandemic – the distribution of employment across sectors followed (in broad terms) the "traditional" trajectory: a steady decline in agricultural employment, accompanied by a corresponding rise in industrial and service employment. Yet, even during this period, the share of employment in services has been consistently higher than in industry. Specifically, the sectoral employment distribution shifted from 63.3% in agriculture, 14.7% in industry, and 22.0% in services in 1991, to 40.7% in agriculture, 25.3% in industry, and 34.1% in services by 2019 (see Table 1).

Table 1. India: Employment by Sectors – Various Years – (% of total employment)

	Agriculture	Industry	Services
1991	63.4	14.7	22.0
1996	61.9	15.3	22.8
2001	58.8	16.8	24.4
2006	54.3	19.5	26.2
2011	49.1	23.5	27.4
2019	40.7	25.3	34.1
2021	44.1	24.5	31.5
2022	42.9	26.1	31.0
2023	43.5	25.0	31.5

Source: databank.worldbank.org

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 marked not just a temporary halt, but a turning point in the structural transformation of India's economy. Over the subsequent four years, the sectoral distribution of employment remained largely unchanged, with a significant increase in agricultural employment – reaching 43.5% in 2023 – primarily at the expense of industrial employment, while the share in services remained stable.

Modi's neoliberalism is not simply an economic strategy but a broader restructuring of the Indian state's relationship with its citizens – one that privileges capital over labour, private profit over public welfare, and control over democratic deliberation. The social costs of this transformation are disproportionately borne by India's working classes, informal sector, and the rural poor. The resistance from farmers, labour unions, and civil society organizations signals a persistent demand for a developmental state that is not only pro-growth but also pro-people (Ghatak and Kumar, 2024).

Between 2014 and 2024, India experienced strong economic growth, with the GDP expanding at an average annual rate of approximately 6–7%. However, this period has also been widely characterized as one of jobless growth, wherein economic expansion did not translate into a proportional increase in employment opportunities.

This era has been marked by several concerning trends. First, there was a slightly growing Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR), particularly among youth and women. Second, unemployment rates persisted (see Table 2). Third, economic growth demonstrated a sectoral shift towards industries that are not labour-intensive, while traditional job-creating sectors like manufacturing stagnated, and agriculture offered few new employment prospects. Finally, over 90% of workers remain in the informal sector, facing low wages and poor working conditions. Compounding these issues, real wage growth was stagnant, indicating that even when employment saw marginal gains, the quality of income did not improve significantly (ILO, 2024a: p. 28; ILO 2024b).

Table 2. Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR), Worker Population Ratio (WPR), Unemployment Rate (UR) – Various Years – (% of total adults)

	2012	2019	2022
LFPR	55.9	50.2	55.2
WPR	54.7	47.3	52.9
UR	2.1	5.8	4.1

Source. ILO (2024b)

India's jobless growth during this decade reveals a structural disconnect between economic policies and effective employment generation. While government initiatives during this period were intended to stimulate job creation, their impact has been limited. Factors such as increasing automation, low private investment in labour-intensive industries, and inadequate vocational training have further exacerbated the problem. Ultimately, economic growth without corresponding job creation is unsustainable, especially for a nation with a young and rapidly growing population.

4.2. Poverty and Inequality

While the economic reforms introduced by Modi governments have led to notable infrastructure improvements and positioned India as a significant global economy, their impact on poverty and inequality is uncertain and controversial. This situation stems partly from political biases and partly from real analytical difficulties in assessing poverty in a country as large and complex as India.

The major difficulty is found in the lack of recent and reliable data. The most recent available official consumption expenditure survey, which provides the basic information for poverty estimates, was published by National Statistical Organization in 2011-12. The results of the following survey, due to be published in 2017/18, were withheld by India's government, leaving a gap in official poverty statistics.[27] In the absence of direct data, economists have been obliged to rely on proxy indicators or private data sets (such as the Consumer Pyramids Household Surveys by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy - CMIE), leading to widely varying conclusions (Pais and Rawal, 2021). The second major difficulty is rooted in methodological disputes over the measurement of poverty. The "great poverty debate" over the definition of a suitable poverty line for India has been going on for many years and has been very fierce (Sandefur, 2022; Ghatak and Kumar, 2024): several Commissions have been nominated and have produced poverty estimates that vary according to the selected poverty line. Finally, the last difficulty is to be found in the complexity of the country that makes it difficult to assess long-term poverty impact, the main causes being the urban-rural divide and the large size of the informal sector.

Faced with the reliability issues recently reported, the literature analysing poverty and inequality in India employs estimates derived from data collected by official national sources. The extent of data processing varies depending on the user. For instance, the Indian government has been using and disseminating poverty statistics based on poverty lines that have been revised multiple times. The **Tendulkar Committee**, established in 2009, proposed a poverty line based on daily expenditures of

[27] The Indian government justified the withdrawal of the 2017-18 consumption data because of their "low quality". This government action has been criticized from many quarters (Subramanian, 2019) and attributed instead to the need to hide results that, presenting a sharp reduction in consumption, especially in rural areas, suggested a strong growth in poverty from 2011-12 to 2017-18. This was confirmed by the elaborations by Subramanian (2019 and 2024), who imputed the poverty increase to the demonetization and GST.

₹33 ($2.16 PPP 2009) in urban areas and ₹27 ($1.77 PPP 2009) in rural areas. In 2014, the **Rangarajan Committee** revised these thresholds to ₹47 ($2.75 PPP 2014) and ₹30 ($1.76 PPP 2014) per day, respectively. Currently, the government reports poverty data using a new methodology developed by **NITI Aayog**, which incorporates multiple dimensions and non-income factors through the **Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI)**. This index is based on data from the **National Family Health Survey** (Next IAS, 2024: p. 3).

Since 2015, the World Bank has been using data from the Consumer Pyramid Household Survey for India, without specifying how they are processed. Yet, the World Bank's data are widely considered the most reliable, especially in international comparisons. According to the World Bank data, poverty declined from 60.97% in 2015 to 44.05% in 2021 – a level reached after spiking to 48.25% during the 2020 pandemic (see Table 3).

Table 3. Share of the population, population living in poverty at $3.65 and at $2.25 per day (2017 PPP) (1977-2021)*

Years	Poverty rate (%) Poverty line $ 3.65	Poverty rate (%) Poverty line $ 2.25	Population living in poverty (Million) Poverty line $ 3.65	Population living in poverty (Million) Poverty line $ 2.25
1977	89.12	66.69	587.30	439.49
1983	86.63	60.15	646.07	448.64
1987	84.16	54.63	694.11	450.51
1993	82.58	51.75	772.76	484.24
2004	77.46	44.36	887.27	508.17
2009	72.50	37.14	893.25	457.55
2011	62.97	25.96	797.19	328.63
2015	60.97	21.74	808.98	288.45
2016	59.88	21.04	803.93	282.48
2017	54.44	15.92	739.18	216.22
2018	46.94	13.14	644.30	180.30
2019	43.97	15.36	609.61	212.98
2020	48.25	17.49	675.05	244.76
2021	44.05	14.67	621.02	206.78

** To provide inter-temporal comparisons, Table 3 presents the estimate of poverty based on two different lines: the absolute poverty line – $2.25 per person per day – and the poverty line for lower middle-income countries – $3.65 per person per day. In India the transition from "low-income country" to "lower-middle income country" status took place in 2007 (World Bank, 2008). See also footnote 7.*

Source: pip.worldbank.org

Inequality in India is socially embedded and shaped by historical and cultural structures (Bardhan, 1998, see also Bardhan, 2022a). The caste system remains the most embedded form, dividing society into hierarchical groups legitimized by Hindu religion (Ambedkar, 1936). Religious diversity – particularly the Hindu-Muslim divide – adds another layer of inequality, despite the constitutional commitment to secularism. This has intensified under Modi's government, where Hindutva blends religious and ethnic nationalism (Jaffrelot, 2007). Gender inequality, also rooted in cultural and religious norms, further compounds exclusion (Nussbaum, 2007; UNDP, 2020). Together, these forms of structural inequality limit access to education, healthcare, credit, and jobs, embedding poverty and obstructing social mobility (Drèze and Sen, 2013; World Bank, 2006).

The World Bank regularly estimates the size of inequality by means of the Gini index. In the last decade, the Gini index for India shows a modest drop from 34.7 (2015) to 32.8 (2021), suggesting stable inequality (see Table 4). However, the reliability of these estimates is debated due to questionable data quality and methodologies.[28]

Table 4. Inequality trend and GDP Growth rate (2011-2021)

Years	2011	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
GINI Index	35.40	34.69	34.75	35.90	34.55	33.81	33.78	32.78
GDP Growth rate (%)	5.2	8.0	8.3	6.8	6.5	3.9	-5.8	9.7

Source: pip.worldbank.org, data.worldbank.org, accessed 22 April 2025.[29]

For the analysis of inequality, in addition to the data from the WB Poverty and Inequality Platform, the most accredited research centre is the World Inequality Lab of the Paris School of Economics which declares that they employ "data from a wide variety of sources to shed light on long run income and wealth inequality in India" (Bharti *et al*., 2024: p. 8).

The metrics from the World Inequality Lab present a starker picture: in 2022–23, the top 1% of adult Indians held 22.6% of income and 40.1% of wealth, while the bottom 50% held just 15% of income and 6.4% of wealth (Bharti *et al.*, 2024).[30] The richest 1% earn, on average, over 22 times more than the bottom 50%, and possess wealth 40 times greater. The top 0.001% (approximately 9,223 adults) own assets 16,000 times larger than the average of the poorest (see Table 5).

These disparities align with previous poverty data: in 2022–2023, half of the population (approximately 461 million adults) lived on an average of **$2.30 per day** (2022 USD), while 40%

[28] The reliability of information on inequality anywhere in the world is widely debated. In India, the main problem discussed in the literature concerns the source of data. Starting from the studies carried out by Thomas Piketty and the World Inequality Lab, both the data from the National Research Survey (NRSS) published by the **Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation,** and the more recent NITY Aayog data for the construction of the National Multidimensional Poverty Index have been widely criticized for the inadequate size of the sample and for the impossibility of obtaining reliable information on few variables. Piketty's studies combine official data sets that allow for a more accurate estimate. These are household surveys that capture income distribution, tax data that identify incomes of top 1–5%, national accounts for distributional estimates of macroeconomic aggregates, and wealth surveys and rich lists, that estimate wealth concentration and trends (Chancel and Piketty, 2019; Kulkarni and Gaiha, 2021; Bharti *et al*., 2024).

[29] The values presented here are based on data available online as of 22 April 2025 on the cited World Bank websites. At present, different data appear on the same web pages. In particular, the tables now available display several discrepancies: the removal of annual data for the period of interest (2011–2021), and the introduction of new values for 2011 (Gini Index 28.78 instead of 35.40) and for 2022 (25.51), with no figures provided for the intervening years.

[30] The World Inequality Lab processes data collected and classified by the World Inequality Database funded and directed by Thomas Piketty.

(around 369 million adults) earned about **$5.30 per day**. By contrast, the wealthiest 1% had an average daily income of **$170**. From 1982 to 2022, the share of income held by the poorest 50% fell from 22% to 15%, and by the middle class from 35% to 27%, while the top 10% increased their share from 43% to 58% (Bharti *et al*., 2024: p. 46).

Table 5. Income inequality in India, 2022-23[31]

Income Group	Adults	Income Share (%)	Average Income (INR)	Ratio to average
Total	922.344.832	100,0	234.551	1,0
Bottom 50%	461.172.416	15,0	71.163	0,3
Middle 40%	368.937.933	27,3	165.273	0,7
Top 10%	92.234.483	57,7	1.352.985	5,8
Top 1%	9.223.448	22,6	5.300.549	22,6
incl. Top 0,1%	922.345	9,6	22.458.442	95,8
incl. Top 0,01%	92.234	4,3	101.814.669	434,1
incl. Top 0,001%	9.223	2,1	485.196.875	2.068,6

Source: Bharti et al., 2024: 40

Parallel to the disparity in the distribution of income, the distribution of wealth creates a similarly strong inequality in wealth distribution. The information in Table 6 confirms that the growing concentration of wealth in India over the last decade is primarily driven by inequality in income distribution, but it is also influenced by several structural, policy, and financial factors beyond income alone.

Table 6. *Wealth inequality in India*, 2022-23[32]

Wealth Group	Adults	Wealth Share (%)	Average Wealth (INR)	Ratio to average
Total	922,344,832	100.0	1,349,029	1.0
Bottom 50%	461,172,416	6.4	173,184	0.1
Middle 40%	368,937,933	28.6	963,560	0.7
Top 10%	92,234,483	65.0	8,770,132	6.5
incl. Top 1%	9,223,448	40.1	54,141,525	40.1
incl. Top 0.1%	922,345	29.7	400,454,807	296.8

[31] "The table presents a summary of income inequality in India in 2022-23. All INR values in current 2022 prices. Adult population estimates for 2022 from UN World Population Prospects. Average income scaled to match national income accounts totals as per World Inequality Database data (differs marginally from official sources)" (Bharti *et al.*, 2024: 40).
[32] "The table presents a summary of wealth inequality in India in 2022-23. All INR values in current (2022) prices. Adult population estimates for 2022 from UN World Population Prospects. Average wealth scaled to match aggregate national wealth as per WID data" (Bharti *et al.*, 2024: p. 40).

incl. Top 0.01%	92,234	22.2	2,996,773,491	2,221.4
incl. Top 0.001%	9,223	16.8	22,613,354,928	16,762.7

Source: Bharti et al., 2024: p. 40.

As the Poverty and Inequality Lab points out, among the factors that explain the link between income inequality and wealth inequality are: the sharp rise in top incomes relative to those of the poorest segments of the population; the persistent dominance of informal employment over jobs in the formal sector; and the impact of technological change, which has primarily benefited sectors requiring a highly skilled workforce. Financial dynamics also play a significant role. Individuals with substantial assets have earned large returns from stock markets, and wealth is often transferred within families through inheritance, which is subject to low or negligible taxation. The introduction of the GST has also disproportionately affected lower-income groups, partly due to the formalization of previously unregistered transactions and the regressive nature of the tax structure. Finally, two structural circumstances further disadvantage the poor relative to the rich: the privatization of public sector enterprises, which have largely been acquired by the wealthy; and the close ties between major wealth holders and the state, which reinforce the rise of **crony capitalism**. All these factors contribute to reinforcing and amplifying the transmission of income inequality into wealth inequality.

These findings suggest that India's post-liberalization capitalist development has deepened inequality, concentrating the gains of growth in ever-smaller segments of the population. As Bardhan warns, such a trajectory risks undermining "the institutional basis of mutual trust and normative coordination that capitalism ultimately depends upon" (2022b: p. 26).

4.3. The Illusion of Inclusion: The Failure of Modi's Trickle-Down Strategy

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi first came to power in 2014, he promised a new era of economic growth that would benefit all Indians. His slogan "*Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas*" ("Together with all, development for all") captured a vision of inclusive growth that would lift millions out of poverty. Infrastructure investment, digitization, the formalization of the economy, and business-friendly reforms were all presented as tools to stimulate the economy in ways that would eventually benefit even the poorest (Business Standard, 2019). The promise of inclusive growth reveals trust in the controversial doctrine of *trickle-down economics*, a theory that shows internal flaws and disappointing real-world outcomes (Ghatak and Mukherjee, 2019).

As trickle-down economics suggests, if the government creates favourable conditions for the wealthy and businesses – through lower taxes, deregulation, and investment incentives – economic growth will eventually "trickle down" to the broader population. In Modi's case, this logic has underpinned a series of economic policies: from the reduction of corporate tax rates and the *Make in India* initiative to demonetization and the implementation of the GST, all intended to formalize and energize the economy. Direct benefit transfer schemes and expanded welfare programmes have been used to complement this strategy, reinforcing the message that growth would bring prosperity to all (Aghion and Bolton,1997).

The theory of trickle-down economics has long been criticized for both its assumptions and its empirical record. It assumes that markets operate efficiently and that the gains of the rich will be reinvested in ways that promote job creation and economic inclusion. Yet, as Stiglitz (2012) and Sen (1999) have argued, such assumptions ignore market failures, elite capture, and deep structural inequalities that prevent the widespread distribution of economic benefits. [33] Moreover, in the case of

[33] For a critical analysis of trickle-down economics, see Stiglitz (2012) and Ha-Joon Chang (2010).

India, these assumptions overlook the vast informal economy and the limited ability of high-growth sectors to absorb low-skilled labour (Breman 2019).

Several economists have raised doubts about both the theory and its working in India. Drèze and Sen (2013) have pointed out that while headline indicators like GDP growth or digital infrastructure may seem impressive, they obscure stagnation in human development indicators. Others argue that Modi's reforms lay the groundwork for long-term gains for the poor, particularly through infrastructure and formalization. Finally, even sympathetic voices acknowledge that benefits have been slow to reach the bottom, and that inequality continues to rise (Panagariya, 2020; Jain and Ganesh, 2018).

In practice, the outcomes of Modi's growth strategy have been underwhelming. Despite years of high growth before the COVID-19 pandemic, poverty reduction has stalled. Moreover, Himanshu (2019) confirms that the pandemic pushed millions back into poverty, and recovery since has been highly unequal. Meanwhile, job creation has not kept pace with labour force growth, and wage stagnation remains a pressing concern.

Ultimately, India's most urgent development challenge is not only to raise incomes, but also to address persistent inequality. Trickle-down policies fail to achieve this because they rely on indirect mechanisms instead of direct structural change. What is needed is a more inclusive growth model, one that prioritizes public investment in health, education, and rural infrastructure, expands social protection, and strengthens labour rights. Redistribution must be at the heart of development, not treated as an afterthought (Drèze and Sen, 2013; Nussbaum, 2014). Modi's development vision offered hope to millions, but its reliance on trickle-down economics has delivered far less than promised. As India continues to pursue high growth rates, the measures that are truly needed should focus on improving the conditions of the most vulnerable, rather than further enriching those who are already well-off.

5. Authoritarian-Hegemonic Capitalism in Modi's India

In this paper, we have analysed the nature and functioning of Narendra Modi's economic-political regime since his rise to power as Prime Minister of India in 2014. After reviewing the historical and ideological roots of Modi's rule, particularly his tenure as Chief Minister of Gujarat and the foundational role of Hindutva as an ideological project, we examined key aspects of his government. We discussed the construction of "New India" through economic reforms and policy interventions, such as *Make in India*, the introduction of the *Goods and Services Tax*, and reforms for the agricultural sector, as well as controversial non-economic measures like the *Citizenship (Amendment) Act*.

Despite the rhetoric of transformation, we conclude that the India shaped by Modi after two terms in power is not fundamentally "new." Many structural challenges of the pre-Modi era are re-produced. Economic growth remains insufficiently inclusive: employment generation lags, informality dominates the labour market, and poverty persists at levels inconsistent with India's income category. Social hierarchies continue to shape opportunity, and inequality is rising sharply, with increasing marginalization of lower castes and Muslims and the concentration of wealth in the top 1%. The promised trickle-down effects of growth have apparently failed.

Modi's regime rests on an "idealized" conception of popular sovereignty, wherein democratic legitimacy is derived solely from electoral success. As Chatterjee (2019) observes, in many post-colonial democracies such as India, the people are treated as passive recipients of state control, and sovereignty is effectively transferred to elected leaders by virtue of the vote. While elections continue, democratic institutions coexist with authoritarian practices and deep social inequalities. States that claim to act in the name of the people often deploy bureaucratic and disciplinary mechanisms that reduce citizens to regulated subjects. A disjuncture thus emerges between the *form* of democracy –

marked by regular elections – and the *substance* of governance, which marginalizes vulnerable groups and curtails participatory democracy.

In this context, populist politics thrives on direct identification between leader and people. The charismatic leader is seen as the embodiment of popular will, legitimized through electoral mandates. Modi's India exemplifies this pattern. While it is true that Modi continues to enjoy mass electoral support, the key question is how this consent is constructed and sustained. Here, Hindutva plays a central role, providing the ideological underpinning of Modi's authoritarian populism. Anti-democratic practices are thus legitimized by a majoritarian will, itself constructed through a religious and exclusionary ideology (Piketty, 2020). Under the guise of democratic legitimacy, Modi has advanced neoliberal reforms explicitly aimed at supporting capital accumulation (Patnaik, 2024).

Hindutva functions both as ideology and institutional apparatus. It reshapes the mechanisms of consent and coercion, enabling an exclusionary and extractive neoliberalism. By depoliticizing inequality, fragmenting labour, disciplining dissent, and marginalizing minorities, Hindutva sustains a mode of capitalist development marked by dispossession and social stratification. The fusion of market fundamentalism with majoritarian nationalism underpins Modi's centralized and authoritarian rule, facilitating capital investment and urban development while disenfranchising significant segments of the population. Drawing on Gramsci's concept of hegemony, we may conclude that Hindutva operates through both political society (coercion) and civil society (consent), presenting elite interests as universal. As a result, Indian democracy is transformed into a majoritarian regime, where Hindu identity defines the nation and the terms of political participation.

The result is a system of *authoritarian capitalism* that generates high GDP growth alongside growing inequality, cronyism, and limited poverty reduction. This model excludes and marginalizes entire sections of the population. Its outcomes – structural transformation without employment, persistent agrarian distress, and a jobless growth model – reflect the systemic biases of India's current variety of capitalism.

From 1991 to 2014, India's political economy can be described as *state-permeated capitalism*, a hybrid model where liberalization coexisted with substantial state intervention, informal coordination, and selective rule enforcement (Nölke *et al*., 2020). Even as liberal reforms advanced, the state retained influence through public-sector finance, segmented labour systems, and a domestic-market orientation. Institutional weaknesses and clientelism persisted. Successive governments, both Congress- and BJP-led, pursued similar neoliberal strategies: market liberalization, deregulation, privatization, promotion of FDI, financial liberalization, and reductions in labour protections (Chandra and Chatterjee, 2022; Sinha, 2022). Modi has largely continued this policy trajectory, albeit rebranded through nationalist rhetoric and slogans such as *Atmanirbhar Bharat* ("Self-Reliant India"). Yet, where Modi's regime departs sharply from its predecessors is in the realm of governance.

Prior to 2014, coalition governments fostered institutional autonomy and consensus-building. Civil society played a more significant role, and executive power was less concentrated. Under Modi, governance has become increasingly centralized in the Prime Minister's Office, which frequently bypasses parliamentary procedures and cabinet deliberation. Key democratic institutions, such as judiciary, the Election Commission, and the media, have been undermined or co-opted to align with the ideological priorities of Hindutva. Federalism has eroded, particularly in opposition-ruled states, and Modi's personal charisma has displaced party structures, turning India's democracy into a personalized and authoritarian regime.

This political transformation has significantly altered capital-labour relations. Capital has been empowered through deregulation, tax incentives, and pro-business land acquisition policies, while labour has been disempowered by weakening legal protections, the growth of informal employment, and suppression of protest. A new hegemonic alliance between the state and capital has emerged, in

which labour is rendered politically irrelevant: an arrangement characteristic of authoritarian capitalist regimes.

In summary, Modi's regime is defined by economic neoliberalism and political authoritarianism. While economic policy reflects continuity with India's post-1991 trajectory, political governance represents a profound rupture. This dual configuration gives rise to a distinct *variety of capitalism* – one that no longer aligns with liberal democracy but with *hegemonic state capitalism*. In this configuration, neoliberalism remains the dominant economic logic; authoritarianism shapes the structure of governance; and Hindutva provides ideological legitimacy, redefining the boundaries of inclusion, citizenship, and entitlement. Together, this triad – **neoliberalism, authoritarianism, and Hindutva** – constitutes the emergent model of ***Authoritarian-Hegemonic Capitalism*** in contemporary India.

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Architecture and Urban Planning as Pivotal Tools in Narendra Modi's Political Agenda

Pilar Guerrieri

The contribution aims to analyse how Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has used architecture and the city in his political strategies to redesign the image, icons and symbols of Indian identity. Notable initiatives in this regard include the Smart Cities Mission, Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana's «housing for all» project, 12,000 crore invested in projects for Varanasi and many more for redevelopment of Indian historic heritage under the Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana Project, the inauguration of countless infrastructures under the ***Sagarmala and*** *Bharatmala Pariyojana Projects****,*** *the 182 metres «tallest» Statue of Unity and the world «biggest» Narendra Modi cricket arena in Gujarat and many more. In particular, this study will present the case study of the capital of India, where many of Modi's projects are under construction, such as the bold redevelopment of New Delhi's* iconic *Central Vista. Through the most significant architectural-urban initiatives undertaken during the Modi era, this analysis aims to provide an overall critical understanding of the Prime Minister's political-strategic vision.*

1. Introduction to architecture and power relationships in India

Architecture has always been a powerful tool for expressing and consolidating power, adapting to every era's political, social and economic contexts. Throughout history, it has acted as a visible symbol of direct domination, as in the case of fascism or colonial regimes and as a means of conveying more subtle and pervasive forms of power, such as those associated with global capitalism. Through buildings and urban spaces, architectures not only manifest the authority and cultural identity of the dominators but also become tools for legitimising imperialism and cultural control strategies. For example, architecture has been used to assert imperialist ideologies or to simulate attitudes of respect towards minorities and local cultures. In many cases, these forms of architectural hybridisation, combining elements of dominant styles and local traditions, have had a dual purpose: on the one hand, to consolidate the domination of central power; on the other, to mitigate opposition and gain consensus.

India represents a significant example of this relationship between architecture and power. During the Mughal era, emperors built a rich heritage of iconic buildings that today represent an essential part of the country's cultural and historical image. The Taj Mahal, built by Emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his wife Mumtaz Mahal, is not just a mausoleum but an architectural masterpiece that expresses the grandeur and wealth of the Empire through its perfect symmetry and marble details inlaid with precious stones. Contradictorily became the symbol of India despite being a «foreign» imported element and a product of a dominant power architecture. The Red Fort in Delhi, also the work of Shah Jahan, represents an administrative and political centre, with its imposing red sandstone walls symbolising the military power and stability of the Empire. Akbar, known for his inclusive vision, commissioned the construction of Fatehpur Sikri. This planned city combined Persian, Indian and Islamic architectural elements to reflect a universal idea of power and tolerance. Other examples include the Jama Masjid, one of the largest mosques in India, a religious and political symbol and Humayun's Tomb, which, with its double-structure dome and symmetrical gardens, represents one of the earliest examples of Mughal architecture.

With the arrival of British colonialism, architecture became a tool to assert the cultural and economic dominance of the Empire. At this early stage, the Palladian style was widely adopted to represent British power and modernity. The Governor General Lord Wellesley promoted this style through iconic

buildings such as the Governor House in Calcutta, built in the early 19th century. As Guerrieri [Guerrieri, 2021] points out, the adoption of the Palladian style in the Indian context served to transfer the classical European aesthetic, evoking stability and order while at the same time marking the territory with the cultural imprint of England. These buildings, with their classical columns and strict symmetries, represented colonial power as heir to a superior cultural and political tradition. During late colonialism, however, there was a strategic shift in using architecture as a political tool. The Indo-Saracenic style, which fused Indian and British Gothic architectural elements, was used in the administrative buildings and infrastructure of the new capital, New Delhi. This style had a precise function: on the one hand, to express an apparent respect for local culture at a time when the Indian independence movement was growing; on the other hand, to represent a synthesis of tradition and modernity that legitimised the British presence as the supposed «cultural arbiter». Significant examples include the Rashtrapati Bhavan (the Viceroy's residence and the Secretariats), designed by Edwin Lutyens and Herbert Baker and the Parliament House, both featuring domes, arches and decorative motifs inspired by traditional Indian architecture. These buildings served as symbols of political authority and sought to mediate tensions between local aspirations and colonial rule.

The use of architecture and town planning as instruments of power is not relegated to the past; it continues in the contemporary context with the government of Narendra Modi, where these elements have been employed to assert a political and cultural vision. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, elected on May 26 2014, has, during his terms in office, focused on architecture, infrastructure and the city, «Modi has been using the built environment to affirm his political conquest, a practice seen even before he entered national politics» [Bajaj, 2024]. Modi has promoted ambitious programmes that use urban and architectural space transformation to consolidate his political project. Among the most emblematic examples is the Central Vista project, a large-scale redevelopment of the administrative heart of New Delhi. The intention is to represent a strong and independent India, but the choice to demolish colonial and postcolonial structures and build new architecture can be read as a statement of rupture with the past and an attempt to rewrite collective memory centred on the current leadership. Another major initiative is the Smart Cities Mission programme, launched in 2015, which aims to transform a hundred selected cities into technologically advanced and sustainable urban centres. The programme promotes an image of progress and innovation. However, criticism has been raised for its impact, particularly on the actual effectiveness of solving deeper structural challenges of Indian cities. Equally symbolic is the Statue of Unity, the world's tallest statue dedicated to Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, while intended as a tribute to national unity the project has been contested for the substantial financial investment required – raising concerns about social justice. Finally, urban redevelopments, such as the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor in Varanasi exemplifies the intersection of religious symbolism and urban development. Supposedly aimed at facilitating access for pilgrims and enhance religious tourism; the project also serves to strengthen the link between state power and Hindu religious identity. The aforementioned initiatives illustrate how architecture and town planning are used to create «functional» infrastructure while consolidating a particular political power narrative.

Ultimately, architecture has always been more than just an artistic or functional expression: it has been and continues to be a language through which power asserts, adapts and seeks to control. India, with its rich history of empires and colonial influences, offers an emblematic example of how architecture has been used to shape the image and control of a country, leaving a legacy that still defines its identity today. This contribution highlights how Modi has been widely using architecture and planning these days – by implementing infrastructure, services, buildings, architecture and urban planning – to reshape a new image of India.

2. Bibliographical references and methodology

The bibliographical references on the topic are contradictory; there is an official «top-down» government version of facts and a people's «bottom-up» perception that can be read from the newspapers, where the magnificent projects presented by the government are explained with some doubts and criticism.

The government of Narendra Modi introduces its urban and architectural policies as symbols of progress, innovation and national strength. Official narratives, out of which key sources include the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs' websites, emphasise modernisation, sustainability and the enhancement of India's global image through flagship programs. On the government's site is possible to find detailed explanations of the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation Programme (AMRUT) that focuses on urban renewal to improve water supply, sewerage systems and open spaces (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs. 2025. Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation - AMRUT. Retrieved from https://amrut.gov.in), The Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Housing for All) which is a significant housing initiative aimed at providing affordable homes to urban and rural populations (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs. 2025. Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Housing for All. Retrieved from https://pmaymis.gov.in), The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission) that addresses sanitation and cleanliness across India (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs. 2025. Clean India Mission. Retrieved from https://swachhbharatmission.gov.in), the Heritage Development and Augmentation Yojana (HRIDAY) that focuses on preserving and revitalising heritage cities (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs. 2025. Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana - HRIDAY. Retrieved from https://mohua.gov.in), The Smart Cities Mission that aspires to modernise urban infrastructure with sustainable and technologically advanced solutions (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs. 2025. Smart Cities Mission. Retrieved from https://smartcities.gov.in), the Central Vista redevelopment project which reshapes New Delhi's administrative core, aiming to create a monumental architectural identity reflective of India's new aspirations under Modi's leadership (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs. 2025. Central Vista Project. Retrieved from https://centralvista.gov.in) or, related to transport infrastructure, such as the Metro Rail Project which enhances urban mobility and connectivity, presenting modernised cities as efficient hubs of progress (Ministry of Railways. 2025. Metro Rail Project. Retrieved from https://indianrailways.gov.in) and more. These programs, documented in government reports and official platforms, frame the narrative of an India innovating while preserving its heritage. These resources construct a vision of Modi's urban policies as transformative, sustainable and inclusive.

While official narratives portray these projects as unequivocally positive, newspapers often offer a more complex and critical perspective, highlighting the contradictions inherent in Modi's urban and architectural initiatives. Shubham Bajaj, in *Narendra Modi's Conquest of Delhi Through Architecture* [*Bajaj, 2024a*], examines how architecture is used to consolidate political power and craft a lasting legacy, with the Central Vista project serving as a symbol of authoritarian control over public spaces. Similarly, in *How Modi is Using Architecture to Build His «New India» Political Legacy* [*Bajaj, 2024b*], the author explores how monumental projects contribute to Modi's vision of nation-building and political branding. Daniel Brook, in *Narendra Modi's New New Delhi* [*Brook, 2023*], contextualises the redevelopment of New Delhi within Modi's broader political ambitions, linking it to the erasure of colonial and democratic histories in favour of a narrative aligned with contemporary political ideologies. Parul Chandavarkar, in *Monumental Mistakes: The Undemocratic Vision Behind the Redevelopment of Delhi's Central Vista* [*Chandavarkar, 2020*], critiques the lack of public consultation in the Central Vista project and highlights how it prioritises monumental aesthetics over public needs. Deepika Ray, in *Is Modi Out to Destroy New Delhi?* (*Ray, 2021*) and D. Sayad, in *India's New Parliament Building: A Story of Corruption* [*Sayad, 2023*], examines controversies surrounding Modi's architectural initiatives, including allegations of corruption, displacement of communities and environmental degradation. Ayona Datta, in *Postcolonial Urban Futures: Imagining and Governing India's Smart Urban Age* (*Datta, 2018*), critiques the Smart Cities Mission as a governance model that

privileges global investment over the needs of local populations. Similarly, Shalu Yadav's BBC documentary *Building Power: India's New Parliament* [*Yadav, 2023*] explores the socio-political implications of Modi's architectural projects, particularly the new Parliament building. Articles by Srivastava and Pandya in *Bloomberg*, *Modi's Sprawling Delhi Makeover Fuels Anger in Virus-Hit India* [*Srivastava & Pandya, 2021*], highlight the economic strain some of these government projects impose, especially during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. These critical perspectives collectively counterbalance the government's narrative of progress and modernisation, offering insights into the social, environmental and political costs of Modi's urban transformation initiatives.

The study adopts a comprehensive literature review methodology incorporating official and critical sources. By analysing government reports, press releases and official websites, it examines how the state constructs a narrative of progress and innovation. Simultaneously, it integrates critical journalism, academic studies and documentaries to uncover these projects' socio-political, economic and environmental complexities. This dual approach ensures a balanced understanding of Modi's urban and architectural policies, highlighting their achievements while interrogating the broader implications of their implementation.

3. A Multi-level Architectural and Urban Strategy

The urban and architectural policies under Narendra Modi's leadership have introduced a complex range of initiatives designed to transform Indian cities into more «sustainable» and «citizen-friendly» environments. These include the previously mentioned projects, along with several others that will be analysed in greater detail. Even before his role as Prime Minister though, Modi demonstrated a commitment to urban transformation during his tenure as Chief Minister of Gujarat. His leadership saw large-scale projects such as the Sabarmati Riverfront Project, which revitalised urban areas around the Sabarmati River and the more recent Sabarmati Ashram Project, showcasing his inclination toward architecture and urban development, blending modernisation with heritage conservation [Bajaj, 2024].

3.1. Smart Cities Mission

The concept of «smart cities» emerged as a global response to challenges such as rapid urbanisation, climate change, traffic congestion and inefficient resource management. Rooted in earlier concepts like digital and wired cities, smart cities integrate advanced technologies, including Big Data and the Internet of Things (IoT), to improve urban living standards. The Indian Smart Cities Mission was launched in 2015, by Narendra Modi, with the bold commitment to develop 100 smart cities across the country.

«It aims to enhance the quality of life in 100 selected cities by providing efficient services, robust infrastructure and a sustainable environment» [UN-Habitat, 2023, p. 17]. The mission incorporates innovative solutions for energy management, waste disposal, traffic control and public safety while citizen engagement remains central. Among the key interventions: «enhancing water supply, expanding the provision of sewage collection, revitalising natural water bodies, construction of water toilets, construction of public toilets, enhancing avenues for clean and sustainable energy, reducing reliance on the grid, incorporating wind and solar energy, convert waste to energy» [UN-Habitat 2023, p. 38-49]. «The 'challenge' introduced by the Mission—Streets for People, Cycles for Change, Place Making and Nurturing Neighbourhoods—encouraged people-led design interventions to transform streetscapes and neighbourhoods in selected cities» [UN-Habitat, 2023, p. 19]. Cities like Pune, Bhubaneswar and Surat have implemented solar power generation, intelligent traffic systems and efficient waste management projects. However, «some cities like Chennai and Bengaluru faced delays due to regulatory bottlenecks, hindering the rapid deployment of planned initiatives» [UN-Habitat, 2023, p.

38]. Over the past eight years, the mission has mobilised 7.32 billion USD, significantly transforming urban areas, yet challenges in scaling these innovations persist.

3.2. Housing for all?

The Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), launched in 2015, represents one of India's most ambitious efforts to address the housing crisis, aiming to provide affordable housing to economically weaker sections (EWS) and lower-income groups (LIG) in both urban and rural areas. With the overarching goal of ensuring «Housing for All» by 2022, the program set out to construct millions of housing units across the country.

By 2024, the government reported the completion of over 8.5 million housing units; however, this represents only 65% of the 12.3 million sanctioned homes [Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, 2022]. Additional efforts, such as the Scheme of Shelter for Urban Homeless (SUH), have established nearly 2,000 shelters, providing temporary accommodation for over 140,000 individuals. Despite these initiatives, the available infrastructure remains insufficient to meet the overall demand. The estimated housing shortage in urban areas ranges between 3.18 crore and five crore units. Even if all pending units are completed by the revised deadline of December 2024, the scheme addresses only 37% of the estimated shortfall, leaving millions of households, particularly those in EWS and LIG categories, without adequate housing [Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, 2022].

Several factors have contributed to this shortfall. Delays in obtaining approvals, challenges in land acquisition and inconsistent implementation across states have hindered the program's progress [Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, 2022]. Official acknowledgements of these delays suggest that the program's goals require further extensions and systemic improvements to become a reality [Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, 2022].

In this context, PMAY represents a landmark initiative addressing India's housing needs and a case study of the challenges of executing large-scale welfare programs in a diverse and populous country. Its successes and shortcomings highlight the complexities of bridging policy ambitions with on-the-ground implementation.

3.3. Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT)

This mission also started in 2015; it includes 500 hundred cities and 12 billion dollars investment «The purpose of Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) is to (i) ensure that every household has access to a tap with assured supply of water and a sewerage connection; (ii) increase the amenity value of cities by developing greenery and well maintained open spaces (parks); and (iii) reduce pollution by switching to public transport or constructing facilities for non-motorised transport (e.g. walking and cycling). You can find detailed information about the mission's objectives, planning, funding, etc. » [India Government Portal, accessed January 3 2025: https://www.india.gov.in/atal-mission-rejuvenation-and-urban-transformation-amrut].

While AMRUT has made notable progress in addressing urban challenges, its implementation has faced mixed outcomes. According to recent reports, the mission has succeeded in improving water supply and sewerage systems in several cities and enhancing urban greenery through park development. However, challenges remain, particularly in smaller towns where infrastructure gaps persist. Critics have pointed out delays in project execution, uneven distribution of benefits across regions and limited citizen participation in decision-making. Furthermore, while efforts to reduce pollution through non-motorised and public transport initiatives have been launched, the scale of

impact has been less transformative than anticipated. Thus, while AMRUT has laid a foundation for urban rejuvenation, significant work is still needed to realise its ambitious goals fully [Agarwal, 2024].

3.4. India's Transportation Networks Project

The Bharatmala Pariyojana, launched in 2017, is a landmark infrastructure initiative under the Modi government. With a budget of approx. 83 billion USD for its first phase, the program is designed to optimise freight and passenger movement by developing economic corridors, feeder routes and green-field expressways [India Government Portal, 2025]. It also integrates components like the National Highways Development Project (NHDP), National Corridors of India (NC) and the National Corridor Efficiency Program (NCEP). These efforts aim to bridge critical infrastructure gaps, improve connectivity and ensure the seamless movement of goods and people across the country.

As part of this initiative, six high-volume corridors and additional interventions, such as border and international connectivity roads, coastal and port connectivity roads and industrial corridors, are being developed. These efforts reflect a broader strategy to enhance India's logistics and transportation networks. According to official sources, «The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) has announced that the Bharatmala Pariyojana Phase-I is expected to be completed by 2027» (Economic Times, 2025). The project is anticipated to carry most of India's road freight traffic, contributing significantly to economic efficiency and regional development (India Government Portal, 2025).[34]

Complementing Bharatmala is the Sagarmala Programme, an ambitious initiative launched in 2015 to promote port-led development. This program leverages India's extensive 7,500 km coastline and 14,500 km of potentially navigable waterways to boost maritime trade and economic activities. The initiative includes port modernisation and new port development, coastal and inland waterway connectivity, port-linked industrialisation and community development for coastal regions [India Government Portal, 2025]. Bharatmala and Sagarmala represent a cohesive approach to transforming India's transportation infrastructure and positioning the country as a global leader in logistics and trade.

Adding to this landscape of transformative infrastructure projects is the Metro Rail Project, launched in 2015. This initiative seeks to enhance urban mobility by developing metro rail systems in major cities across India. The metro rail expansion aims to reduce urban congestion, promote sustainable transportation and provide citizens with efficient and affordable transit options. By incorporating cutting-edge technology and prioritising seamless integration with other modes of transport, the project underscores the government's commitment to modernising urban infrastructure.

These infrastructure projects are critical to Modi's broader urban and economic vision, aligning with key initiatives like the Smart Cities Mission and AMRUT. Collectively, they aim to create an interconnected and efficient network of urban and regional transportation systems, fostering economic growth and improving the quality of life for millions of citizens.

These ambitious infrastructure projects have not been without criticism. Regarding Bharatmala Pariyojana, an article in the Deccan Herald titled «Is Everything Alright with Bharatmala Pariyojana? » highlights significant delays and cost overruns, questioning the project's effective implementation [Shah, 2024]. Similarly, Moneycontrol reports in «Government's Ambitious Bharatmala Project

[34] Delhi’s infrastructure has undergone a significant transformation under Modi’s leadership, focusing on metro expansion, expressways and railway modernisation. The Delhi Metro network now exceeds 1,000 km, enhancing urban mobility and reducing congestion, with new corridors like Namo Bharat improving connectivity. The Delhi-Mumbai Expressway, a 1,350 km project under Bharatmala Pariyojana, is set to cut travel time between the two cities from 24 to 12 hours, boosting economic integration. Additionally, the redevelopment of major railway stations, including New Delhi and Anand Vihar, aims to upgrade facilities, ensuring seamless multi-modal transportation. With an investment of billions, these projects modernise Delhi’s transport infrastructure while promoting sustainable urban development.

Appears to Be in Slow Lane» that the initiative has struggled to keep pace, with only a portion of the proposed roads completed, reflecting challenges in timely execution [Punj & Khan, 2024]. The Sagarmala Programme has also faced scrutiny; a detailed analysis by Gateway House, titled «Sagarmala or Sagar? Our Maritime Dilemma» examines the difficulties in modernising India's maritime infrastructure. The report points out challenges in balancing economic ambitions with strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region and notes the limited progress in some port modernisation efforts [Chopra, 2024].

3.5. Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana (HRIDAY)

The Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana (HRIDAY), launched in 2015 [Desai et al., 2017], represents an innovative initiative to preserve India's historic cities' cultural identity and heritage. Rooted in the idea of integrating urban modernisation with heritage conservation, the program seeks to revitalise urban infrastructure tied to heritage assets such as temples, monuments, ghats and other culturally significant sites. The program guidelines state that HRIDAY aims to «preserve and revitalise the soul of the heritage city to reflect the city's unique character by encouraging aesthetically appealing, accessible, informative and secure environment» [Ministry of Urban Development, 2015].

HRIDAY's objectives extend beyond architectural conservation, encompassing the strategic development of heritage cities to improve the overall quality of life. These goals include enhancing sanitation, strengthening security, promoting tourism and supporting livelihoods through heritage-linked economic activities. The program also emphasises the revitalisation of intangible assets, such as cultural practices, traditional crafts and festivals, which are integral to the identity of these cities. By fostering a blend of cultural preservation and urban development, HRIDAY seeks to create spaces that are not only historically significant but also livable and economically sustainable.

The initiative supports the development of core heritage infrastructure projects, such as improving access to monuments, restoring ghats along riverbanks and creating visitor-friendly amenities. It also incorporates environmental measures, such as waste management and water conservation, to ensure the long-term sustainability of heritage sites. As part of its broader vision, HRIDAY emphasises inclusive planning and community engagement, involving local stakeholders in the preservation process to retain the authenticity of intangible cultural practices and traditions. Among the cities selected under HRIDAY are iconic heritage hubs like Varanasi, Amritsar, Ajmer and Jaipur. Each municipality receives tailored interventions based on its unique cultural and historical context. For instance, in Varanasi, the program focuses on restoring ghats along the Ganges River and improving access to spiritual and cultural landmarks. At the same time, in Amritsar, efforts are directed at enhancing the areas around the Golden Temple and other religious sites.

HRIDAY contributes to preserving India's rich cultural heritage and aligns with the government's broader agenda of leveraging cultural tourism as a driver of economic growth.

Despite the well-meaning objectives of the Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana (HRIDAY), the program has faced significant criticism regarding its implementation and effectiveness. Critics argue that while the initiative aims to revitalise heritage cities, it often neglects other practical urban challenges of governance and infrastructure. A significant issue highlighted is the lack of a coherent long-term strategy for the preservation of heritage amidst rapid urbanisation, which may lead to gentrification, displacing local communities in the process. In cities like Varanasi, where heritage conservation efforts are intertwined with religious tourism, the focus on beautification and infrastructure development has sometimes overshadowed the needs of the local population, especially in terms of affordable housing and basic services [Desai, 2018].

Furthermore, the program has been criticised for its top-down approach, where local stakeholders and heritage practitioners are often side-lined in decision-making processes. Scholars have also raised

concerns about the program's reliance on tourism-driven economic models, which, while generating revenue, can exacerbate the strain on local resources and infrastructure, especially in cities like Jaipur and Amritsar, where tourism is already highly concentrated [Raghavan, 2017]. Additionally, issues related to the maintenance and sustainability of newly developed infrastructure have been pointed out, as there are doubts about the long-term viability of some of the projects, particularly regarding environmental impact and resource management [Jain, 2019].

4. New image of power

The urban and architectural transformations led by Narendra Modi's government in Delhi reflect a deliberate effort to reimagine the capital's physical and symbolic landscape, intertwining political power, historical revisionism, national identity narrative and global image. These interventions, often executed rapidly and controversially, have drawn both criticism and acclaim, with their impact extending beyond aesthetics into the realms of governance and memory.

The demolition of Pragati Maidan, including its iconic Hall of Nations designed by Raj Rewal, marked a significant departure from India's post-independence architectural legacy. Built in 1972 to commemorate 25 years of independence, the Hall of Nations symbolised India's technological and cultural achievements, being one of the first significant structures built with reinforced concrete and without steel. As Arun Rewal noted, the building «illustrated Indian craftsmanship» and reflected «India's postcolonial spirit» [Ray, 2024]. However, its demolition in 2017, facilitated by a redefinition of heritage criteria, paved the way for the Bharat Mandapam, a convention centre inaugurated in 2023. Used during the G20 summit, the Bharat Mandapam was framed as a symbol of India's economic growth, presenting what Modi described as the «unstoppable development journey of India» [Bajaj, 2024]. Critics, however, saw this as an erasure of collective memory, replacing a monument of Nehruvian ideals with a structure embodying Modi's vision of a «New India» [Ray, 2024].

The Central Vista redevelopment is perhaps Modi's most ambitious and controversial urban project. Announced in 2019, the approx. $2.7 billion initiative involves constructing a new Parliament building, redeveloping the Kartavya Path promenade (formerly Rajpath) and building a monumental new residence for the Prime Minister. Critics argue that the project was pushed through with «a tearing hurry», fast-tracking public consultations and heritage audits, with Patel's selection as the lead architect finalised within weeks [Chandavarkar, 2020]. «The original Lutyens design ethos, symbolising India's transition from colonial rule to democracy, was side-lined in favour of monumental architecture emphasising nationalism and centralised power» [Ray, 2021]. The new Parliament building, inaugurated in 2024, prominently incorporates symbols significant in Hindu culture, including the peacock, lotus and banyan tree, which critics interpreted as aligning governance with Hindu nationalist ideology [Srivastava, 2021].

Additionally, the Museum of Prime Ministers, located near Central Vista, offers a selective portrayal of India's leaders, culminating in the overt glorification of Modi's tenure. Sameer Bajaj notes that the museum presents a «sanitised and glorified image» of Modi, underscoring his intent to dominate India's historical narrative [Bajaj, 2024]. The proposed Prime Minister's residence, part of the Central Vista redevelopment, has also drawn some criticism. The project involves relocating the Prime Minister from his current residence on Lok Kalyan Marg to a massive complex with underground tunnels and 25 watchtowers. Critics argue that such a move represents «the pursuit of grandeur» rather than practical governance, with many questioning the necessity of replacing the existing facilities, which are already expansive and well-equipped [Pandey, 2021]. The transformation of Rajpath into Kartavya Path, inaugurated in September 2022, encapsulates the ideological thrust of Modi's interventions. Declaring that «Kingsway, or Rajpath, the symbol of slavery, has become a matter of history», Modi framed the project as a break from colonial legacies [Harigovind & Divya, 2022]. Yet, critics argue that the changes, including dynamic LED lighting systems described as «Disneyland-esque», diminish these

spaces' historical and cultural gravitas [Bajaj, 2024]. Beyond the aesthetics, the redevelopment projects have sparked significant opposition on economic, environmental and democratic grounds. Scholars and activists, including Rahul Gandhi, have labelled the Central Vista redevelopment a «criminal waste» of resources, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when public funds were desperately needed elsewhere [Pandey, 2021]. Environmentalists have warned of irreversible damage to Delhi's ecological «lungs» with dense office buildings and increased congestion threatening the city's fragile environment [Ray, 2021]. Architect A.G. Krishna Menon criticised the project as a form of «surgical attack» on public space, asserting that it seeks to «rewrite the history of the country» by overwriting both colonial and Islamic heritage [Ray, 2024]. Similarly, urban planner K.T. Ravindran argued that the redevelopment aligns political power, military presence and Hindu cultural dominance, creating a «new symbolic alignment» reflective of ideological goals [Ray, 2021].

In addition to these projects, Modi's administration has also focused on revitalising parts of Old Delhi (Shahjahanabad), particularly Chandni Chowk, one of the city's most historic marketplaces. The Chandni Chowk Pedestrianization Project was initiated in 2018, spearheaded by the Shahjahanabad Redevelopment Corporation and supported by Pradeep Sachdeva Design Associates, transformed this chaotic yet culturally rich area by limiting vehicular access and prioritising pedestrian-friendly infrastructure. The stretch from Red Fort to Fatehpuri Masjid has been redesigned to restrict motorised traffic during the daytime, allowing residents and visitors to experience the space with improved walkability and reduced pollution. The project aims to preserve the historical character of Chandni Chowk while making it more accessible and livable. Another key development in Old Delhi is the construction of a multi-level parking and commercial complex Omaxe Chowk Mall at Gandhi Maidan, addressing long-standing issues of congestion and space constraints. The eight-story structure, built through a ₹1,000 crore public-private partnership, accommodates over 2,300 vehicles while integrating commercial and retail spaces to support local businesses. These interventions indicate an effort to modernise Old Delhi, but many concerns remain about the potential impacts of mall commercialisation on historical commercial dynamics.

In a broader context, Modi's projects in Delhi have been seen as echoing historical approaches to reshaping collective memory, where leaders reconfigure the monuments of their predecessors to assert new narratives. As Srivastava observed, these interventions aim to «reframe the identity of the nation», turning public spaces into instruments of political messaging [Srivastava, 2021]. Ultimately, Modi's interventions in Delhi epitomise the use of urban spaces as a medium for political expression, blending historical revisionism with an ambition to spatialise his vision of India. While these projects have undoubtedly transformed the city's landscape, their legacy will remain deeply contradictory, reflecting the tensions between political ideology, heritage and collective memory.

5. Struggles of democracy through an architectural lens

The urban and architectural transformations led by Narendra Modi represent a complex paradigm where modernisation and monumentality intertwine with political narratives and democratic tensions. Their rapid and controversial implementation has elicited both praise and criticism, highlighting fundamental issues concerning the role of power, memory and cultural identity in contemporary Indian urbanism.

The case of Central Vista is emblematic. The symbolic redefinition of New Delhi's administrative heart marked a break with the colonial and post-independence past, replacing earlier architectural narratives and heritage with monuments that exalt a centralised vision of power. The city's Central Vista was reshaped to emphasise monumental governance, highlighting a shift from public space life towards controlled spectacles of power [Brook, 2023]. However, the project's urgency suggests an undemocratic process [Chandavarkar, 2020]. The demolition of structures like Pragati Maidan, a symbol of post-independence India, in favour of alternatives emphasising monumentality and

authoritarianism, has been perceived by many as an act of *damnatio memoriae* rather than real functional evolution.

Proponents of the Central Vista project argue that the old structures were no longer adequate for the needs of modern administration and that the changes will ensure greater functionality. Supporters also highlight modifications, such as including prayer spaces, as evidence of responsiveness to public input. However, such arguments overlook a crucial aspect: the lack of a participatory approach that meaningfully incorporates citizens' perspectives and aspirations concerning the preservation of India's cultural heritage.

The centrality of Gujarat in Modi's strategy underscores further imbalance. Iconic projects such as the Statue of Unity, the tallest monument in the world dedicated to Sardar Patel, reflect the desire to construct a legacy celebrating not only national unity but also Gujarat's political and cultural primacy. On October 31, 2018, Modi unveiled the statue on Patel's birth anniversary, a project that cost Rs 2,989 crore and is described as part of a pattern reflecting Modi's ambition to construct monuments to his legacy [Jose, 2018]. Similarly, the redevelopment of Gandhinagar, led by Patel under Modi's tenure as Chief Minister, illustrates this approach. Another prominent example is the Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad, the largest cricket stadium in the world, which further exemplifies the focus on monumental projects within Gujarat. Renamed in 2021, the stadium not only reinforces the state's centrality in Modi's narrative but also serves as a symbolic assertion of his personal legacy.

Statues, monuments and symbols used during Modi's tenure are not neutral. They often represent a specific political narrative that privileges cultural and religious elements associated Hinduism. For instance, the lions of Ashoka were reinterpreted atop the new parliament building with an expression of aggressiveness and prominent fangs, which contrasted with the traditional portrayal of the emblem. Bajaj [Bajaj, 2024] interprets this juxtaposition as connected to an authoritarian narrative, emphasising dominance over inclusivity. Similarly, the installation of a statue of Subhas Chandra Bose near India Gate as part of the Central Vista redevelopment underscores this selective valorisation of historical figures to serve a specific ideology.

Another critical aspect concerns the choice of architects and design models. Figures like Bimal Patel, tasked with the redevelopment of Central Vista, have been criticised for the proposed solutions, leading to the demolition of historically and culturally significant architecture. As Bajaj (2024) notes, Patel's role represents a continuity of Modi's vision of reshaping spaces to reflect centralised power.

Evaluating India's urban and architectural transformation under Modi is far from straightforward. First of all, implementing central government missions is often contingent upon state policies, which may not always align with or effectively execute the broader national vision. This discrepancy is particularly pronounced in urban development, where land is a state subject, granting individual states considerable authority over land-use decisions. Consequently, while national programs outline ambitious urban strategies, their success heavily depends on how state governments choose to realise them. This decentralised approach determines significant variations in urban and architectural development outcomes across different states. Because land is a State subject, the Central government controls urban development by financing a major part of the cost on the condition that the State finances the balance either by raising municipal taxes or arranging commercial loans. It is also contingent on the States improving their systems of municipal governance, all of which impacts their political relationship with their local electorates. Thus, the outcomes are uneven and often remain largely project-oriented, which the Central government pays for. In the end, it reinforces centralisation of governance and weakens federalism, which impacts the culture of democratic politics.

While critics argue that his large-scale projects reinforce a centralised, authoritarian and personal vision of power, it is essential to recognise that Modi has been elected three times, maintaining strong electoral support across diverse demographics. This dynamic suggests that Modi's urban policies are not solely «his» vision but rather a reflection of the desires and aspirations of India's political and economic elite.

The ongoing transformation of Indian cities, therefore, cannot be attributed solely to Modi's leadership but must be understood as part of a broader, complex interplay between governance, capital and the evolving preferences of India's influential classes.

There are visible contradictions in a government that, while promoting a narrative of development and sustainability, leaves many challenges unresolved as images of severe air and river pollution in 2023 demonstrate. The bold goals of Modi's urban policies often clash with ground realities [UN-Habitat, 2023]. Despite the rhetoric of sustainability, which includes programs like the Smart Cities Mission, the realities of air and water pollution contradict claims of progress. Could funds allocated to gigantic monuments and grandiose infrastructure have been invested in more impactful social and environmental actions? UN-Habitat [UN-Habitat, 2023] highlights that while cities may be installing environmental sensors for real-time air quality data, the broader issues of river and air pollution remain inadequately addressed. Such initiatives often reflect imported high-tech models disconnected from local needs. The Smart Cities Mission, heavily influenced by Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), illustrates the reliance on foreign expertise, which limits the potential for bottom-up solutions tailored to India's diverse urban issues [UN-Habitat, 2023].

Ultimately, Modi's urban transformations raise important reflections on the future of democracy in India. While the emphasis on monumental architecture and centralised decision-making reflects ambitious national aspirations, it remains crucial to safeguard that urban development is pursued in harmony with democratic and inclusive principles. The challenge for India lies in balancing these grand visions with a development model that encourages participation and respects the cultural diversity that enriches and continues to shape its identity.

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