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From "Regional Bully" to "Benign Hegemon": Projecting India as an Alternative to China

Introduction

In a speech in February 2021, President Joe Biden declared "America is back," asserting that the U.S. was ready to lead the world again (Biden, 2021a). In the same speech, he mentioned that the U.S. was ready to take on China for its "economic abuses, and attack on human rights, intellectual property and global governance." The aim to compete with China was echoed in another speech, and demonstrated in a meeting of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) (Biden, 2021b; Modi, 2021a). The Quad is an informal group of four countries – the U.S., India, Japan and Australia – that are committed to a "free and open Indo-Pacific," in a bid to check the rise of China (Rasheed, 2020; Jaishankar, 2018; Madan, 2020).

Tensions with China have prompted India to turn to the U.S. (Kalyanaraman, 2021; Singh, 2020). India uses similar narratives as the U.S. when talking about security and stability in the Indo-Pacific (Biden, 2021a; Biden, 2021b; Modi, 2021a; Muraleedharan, 2021). The U.S. views India as a "kingpin" that has the potential to counter China's rise (Singh, 2020; Choudhury, 2021; Bloomberg News, 2020; Ray, 2020). U.S. Secretary of Defense, Mr. Lloyd Austin, stated that India was an "increasingly important partner" and that the U.S.-India bilateral relationship was a "stronghold of a free and open Indo-Pacific region" (ANI, 2021; Choudhury, 2021). Former U.S. Ambassador to India., Mr. Kenneth Juster, highlighted the mutual commitment to democracy, human rights and a rules-based order as the foundation for U.S.-India ties (Juster, 2019a; Juster, 2019b; Juster, 2020a; Juster, 2020b; Juster, 2021).

However, the narratives of mutual commitment to democracy, human rights and a rules-based order are under crisis. Both countries have undergone events that contrast sharply with the values they claim to uphold. In the U.S., human rights crises at the southern border, the travel ban targeted at Muslims, persistent police brutality, the murder of George Floyd, Black Lives Matter protests, the January 6 insurrection, and increasingly visible violence against Asian-Americans challenge American narratives (Chimoy, 2021; Tharoor, 2021; Hill, 2020; Buchanan et al., 2020; Nevius, 2021; Song, 2021). Similarly, in India, the increasing censorship of media, charges of sedition against journalists and activists, the unilateral abrogation of Kashmir's statehood, the consequent shutdown of telecommunication infrastructure, the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act that discriminates against Muslims, and rising Hindu nationalism detract from India's projection as a "benign hegemon" (RSF, 2021; Freedom House, 2021; BBC, 2019a; BBC, 2019b; Hall, 2012; Suri, 2011; Mazumdar, 2020).

With the election of President Biden, the U.S. is starting to repair its narrative (Biden, 2021b). However, this repair will not be successful if the U.S. continues its partnership with India without encouraging India to repair its own narratives. The U.S. cannot successfully project itself as a nation that stands for democracy, human rights and a rules-based order if it partners with nations that only claim to do so. The U.S.' credibility has suffered when it has supported countries at the expense of human rights and democracy. The examples of U.S. supporting Reza Shah's repressive regime in Iran before the 1979 Revolution, encouraging African students in the U.S. to carry positive stories despite widespread racial discrimination during the Cold War, and lack of sanctions for Khashoggi's killing – among others – have weakened the U.S.' ability to live up to its narratives (Shannon, 2017; Higgin, 2017; Sanger, 2021).

Similarly, India's soft power is challenged by perceptions that the rest of the world carries of India: as one succumbing to nationalism, religious intolerance, and censorship (Mazumdar, 2020). These contradictions leave both countries vulnerable to Chinese counter narratives that reject a democratic, rules-based world order. Thus, both countries will need to work together to uphold their narratives. The U.S. can partner with India to facilitate this projection and narrative repair. It can help India project itself as a democratic, human rights-mindful and rules-based alternative to China by tapping into Indian master narratives to renew India's freedom of expression and religious harmony.

First, this paper will explore the dominant Indian master narratives that affect and influence Indian public opinion today. Drawing upon these master narratives as a foundation for public diplomacy messaging, the paper will outline how the U.S. can take advantage of convergences between Indian and American identity and system narratives. The paper will then identify audiences, messengers and programs to advance these narrative contestations, limitations of public diplomacy efforts and opportunities for other narrative contestations.

Master Narratives

Narratives are a "coherent system of interrelated and sequentially organized stories" that countries draw upon to identify their interests, the obstacles to meeting those interests and the solutions for achieving those interests (Halverson et al., 2011). They help countries define problems, causes and solutions. They help countries and people chart their history, present and future (Halverson et al., 2011; Hertner & Miskimmon, 2015; Miskimmon et al., 2013). They can sell policy, influence outcomes, and shape – or counter – perceptions (Hertner & Miskimmon, 2015). Thus, narratives are crucial tools for countries to explain and justify their foreign policies.

Master narratives specifically are "trans historical narratives deeply embedded in a particular culture" (Halverson et al., 2011). While identity, system and issue narratives deal with the state-to-state projection of narratives, master narratives are those that define the shared history of a nation and its people (Halverson et al., 2011; Hertner & Miskimmon, 2015; Miskimmon et al., 2013). India's issues regarding freedom of expression and religious intolerance are influenced by the master narratives of a colonial past. The British Raj (British Rule) and the struggle for independence inform history, culture and public opinion. While the

convergences of identity and system narratives identify opportunities for contesting the narrative, the contestation itself can only be achieved by tapping into the underlying master narratives.

Master Narratives	**Story Form**	**Archetypes**
Mahatma Gandhi	Invasion, resistance, overcoming colonization, non-violent quest for Swaraj, struggle for independence	Wise teacher, pacifist, truth-seeker, colonial masters (the British), the common man
Partition of India (1947)	Resistance, decline of "Akhand Bharat," end of the colonial era	The common man, civilian victims, colonial masters (the British), rebels, patriots
Hindutva	Defining "Hinduness", quest for "Akhand Bharat", invasion, resistance	Invaders (The Mughals and the British), perpetrators, victims, the common man

Mahatma Gandhi

Mahatma Gandhi's approach of non-violent civil disobedience in opposing British colonialism is one of the most instrumental narratives of post-Independence Indian history (Mehta, 2016; Mukherjee, 2017; Singh, 2018; Rubin, 2011). The stories of his leadership in key movements and events are outlined in textbooks and cited frequently by Indian politicians. It is difficult to talk about inter-religious harmony, unity among diversity, abolition of caste-system – narratives that form the master narrative about India – without talking about Gandhi's role in advocating for these tenets (Basu, 2020; Salam, 2018). India's protectionist, rural-based and self-reliant approach to economic development from the 1950s to the 1990s was adopted from Gandhi's ideas on economics and development (Aikant, 2016).

Mahatma Gandhi propagated the idea of Hind Swaraj – Indian self-determination. (Khimta, 2012; Anjaneyulu, 2003; Mishra, 2006). Swaraj refers to self-rule and was used to encapsulate Indian demands for independence from the British. Hind Swaraj takes this concept further. It emphasizes the idea of people governing themselves by decentralizing governance (Khimta, 2012; Anjaneyulu, 2003; Mishra, 2006). It places the onus of governance not on the state or the government, but on the people. Because of his centrality to Indian history, he is referred to as the "Father of the Nation." Indian public diplomacy uses Gandhi and his ideals to project its soft power abroad. He has several statues, monuments, buildings and sites dedicated to and named after him and his birthday is a national holiday (Suri, 2011).

Partition of India (1947)

The Partition of India in 1947 is one of the bloodiest and most traumatic events in Indian history. Once the British decided to grant British India independence, they advocated the "Two

Nations" theory: one for the Hindus and one for the Muslims (Tharoor, 2017). Prominent Muslim leaders argued that Muslims should get their own nation since Muslims would not be able to survive in a Hindu-majority nation (Ayoob, 2018). The Indian National Congress (INC) – the party spearheading India's independence efforts – could not persuade the Muslim leaders to remain in an undivided India ("Akhand Bharat") (Johnson, 2009; Salam, 2018).

Rising anti-Hindu and anti-Muslim sentiments, fluid borders, and steadily increasing cross-border movements ended up displacing up to 20 million people and causing up to 2 million deaths (Salam, 2018; Dalrymple, 2015). Hindu nationalists were – and remain – resentful of the INC's failure in preserving India's unity. This resentment caused Nathuram Godse to assassinate Mahatma Gandhi in 1948 (Basu, 2020). It remains alive today on both sides of the border. India and Pakistan have fought 5 wars in their 70-odd years of independence from British rule. In the 1990s, India and Pakistan rushed to develop nuclear weapons (Pulla, 2019). Both India and Pakistan have competing – and violent – claims over Jammu and Kashmir (Buchanan, 2019).

Indian politicians frequently use anti-Pakistan rhetoric and demonstrate "strong actions" taken against Pakistan to rouse public support (Goel, 2019; Dhume, 2019; Malik, 2019). Any competition between India and Pakistan – political, military, economic or cultural – is fraught with animosity. Expressing support or admiration for the other side is a faux pas (Singh, 2018; Salam, 2018). India is always quick to name Pakistan as the agent behind any attack, such as the 1993 Mumbai blasts, the 2008 Mumbai blasts, the 2016 Uri attack in Jammu and Kashmir and the 2019 Pulwama attack in Jammu and Kashmir, the latter of which Prime Minister Narendra Modi capitalized upon to help him win a second term (Goel, 2019; Dhume, 2019; Malik, 2019).

Hindutva

Hindutva – which can be interpreted as "Hinduness" – is the dominant form of Hindu nationalism. It is a political ideology that advocates the "Hindu way of life" (Johnson, 2009). This includes the vision of "Akhand Bharat" – a united, undivided India that encompasses Pakistan and Bangladesh (Johnson, 2009; Basu, 2020; Britannica, 2021b). It includes the belief that all people of the Subcontinent are Hindus – in the cultural and geographic sense, as the word Hindu originates from "Sindhu," or "people of the Indus" (Basu, 2020; Johnson, 2009). Thus, it seeks to remedy the division of a Hindu-nation and return the nation to its former glory – to a time before the land was invaded and divided. This includes British colonialization and also the Mughal rule over India, which introduced Islam to the Subcontinent (Basu, 2020; Salam, 2018).

Hindutva ideology has impacted contemporary politics by supporting the building of Hindu monuments. In 1990, Hindutva proponents set out to demolish a mosque built by the Mughals that was supposedly constructed on the birthplace of one of Hinduism's most important gods (Tully, 2002; Basu, 2020; Salam, 2009). This demolition caused extensive communal riots. The first ever terrorist attack in India occurred in 1993, which the perpetrators described as retaliation for the demolition of the mosque (IANS, 2011). Since then, India has witnessed several religiously-motivated terrorist attacks.

Hindutva ideology entered into the mainstream with the landslide electoral success of the current Prime Minister, Narendra Modi (Britannica, 2021b). He and his party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have intensified debates regarding unity, secularism and religious conversions (Britannica, 2021b). Any critique against Hindu/Hindutva rhetoric is labelled by its proponents as "sickular" (secular), unpatriotic and anti-national (Singh, 2018; Salam, 2018; Basu, 2020). Individuals who question the government are told to "leave India and go to Pakistan." They may even be called traitors and be arrested on charges of sedition (Singh, 2018; Mehta, 2016).

Identity and System Narratives

Miskimmon, O'Laughlin and Roselle (2013) describe three types of narratives which can shape public diplomacy strategies: Identity, System and Issue narratives. Unlike master narratives, identity and system narratives inform how a state visualizes itself and the world order (Miskimmon et al., 2013). Therefore, identity, system and issue narratives provide insights into how states shape foreign policies, influence outcomes and negotiate with other states. Identity narratives inform how a country views itself: who it is, what it wants and where it is going. They help identify what kind of a role a country is likely to play in the world or what kind of a perception it wishes to live up to (Miskimmon et al., 2013).

System narratives describe how a country views the functioning of the world: how it is ordered and what institutions or values guide its order. Finally, issue narratives are informed by identity and/or system narratives, but are tied to a specific issue (Miskimmon et al., 2013). If U.S. public diplomacy aims to successfully help India renew its commitment to freedom of expression and religious tolerance, it will need to utilize convergences between India and American identity and system narratives. These areas of convergence can help define why it is important for India to renew its commitment to freedom of expression and religious tolerance.

Indian Identity, System and Issue Narratives

India's public diplomacy is driven majorly by the need to combat China's growing influence in the world (Natarajan, 2014; Hall, 2012; Suri, 2011; Mazumdar, 2020). Seeing China's meteoric rise makes the West nervous about the challenge to the liberal order, India has used public diplomacy to reassure the West that its rise is gradual and does not challenge the rules-based order (Natarajan, 2014; Suri, 2011; Mazumdar, 2020). India has demonstrated a willingness to be gradually accommodated into the existing order (Mazumdar, 2020). Seeking to be accepted by the West and uphold the interests of developing countries, India aims to be not a "regional bully," but a "benign hegemon" (Natarajan, 2014; Suri, 2011; Mazumdar, 2020)

In April 2021, Mr. Modi urged the importance of cooperation and the need to take on a "human-centric" approach that placed "humanity at the center of thinking and action" (Modi, 2021b). In another address, Mr. Modi described India's conceptualization of the world order as "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" or the "world is one family" (Modi, 2021a). India identifies itself as a "global player full of possibilities" that has demonstrated visible leadership, discipline, responsibility, capability and a spirit of service (Modi, 2021c; Jaishankar, 2021a). These traits

have driven India's vaccine diplomacy to meet the world's need for vaccines (Muraleedharan, 2021; Modi, 2021b; Modi, 2021c). Mr. Modi claims this sets India apart from other countries. He urged leaders to not compare India's success with that of other countries, due to the size of its population and its work to "save humanity from a big disaster" (Modi, 2021c).

India's response to the second wave of COVID-19 has dented this burgeoning idea of Indian exceptionalism (Singh, 2021). Nevertheless, India is still able to use these values to make its public diplomacy more successful than that of China (Natarajan, 2014). Joseph Nye has noted that China's public diplomacy efforts are not successful because they are driven by the government, rather than the civil society (Johnson, 2013; Natarajan, 2014). In contrast, India has an abundance of civil society actors (Natarajan, 2014). However, it has come under scrutiny for its declining freedoms. An activist was arrested for raising awareness about Indian farmers' protests (Ellis-Peterson, 2021). In February, Rihanna and Greta Thunberg tweeted to raise awareness about the same. The Indian Minister of External Affairs and several Indian celebrities replied that "motivated campaigns targeting India will never succeed" and "only Indians should decide for India" (Jaishankar, 2021b).

In March 2021, Freedom House downgraded India's status from "Free" to "Partly Free" (Freedom House, 2021). The report attributes this to rising Hindu nationalism, discrimination against Muslims, pressure on academics, and arrests of journalists and activists. Further, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended marking India as a "Country of Particular Concern" in 2020 due to the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act that discriminates against Muslims, and violence by Hindu nationalists against Indian Muslims (USCIRF, 2020). Finally, in the second wave of COVID-19, India started censoring social media posts that highlight the bleak situation inside the country (Roy, 2021; Bhattarcharya, 2021).

India Identity Narratives	**India System Narratives**	**India Issue Narratives**
Indian exceptionalism • Largest democracy • Unity in diversity Benign hegemon • Not regional bully • Gradual rise Visible leadership • Social discipline • Shared responsibility • Rapid capability • Spirit of service Global player full of possibilities	Democratic values Rules-based order • Existing vs new order • Gradual accommodation Human rights "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" (the world as one family) • Humanity at center of thinking and action • Human-centric approach External threats/Coordinated conspiracy	COVID-19 • Second wave • Lack of oxygen • Lack of vaccines • Vaccine diplomacy Kashmir Indo-Pacific/Rise of China Citizenship Amendment Act Hindu vs Muslim Censorship, charges of sedition, declining freedoms Climate change NEP 2020

U.S. Identity, System and Issue Narratives

Mr. Biden's narratives have been a complete turn-around from that of Mr. Trump. The latter emphasized "America First" to mark an isolationist approach that disengaged from multilateral engagements. Mr. Biden, however, stated that "America is back," asserting that the U.S. was ready to lead the world again (Biden, 2021a). He also stated that "Diplomacy is back at the center of our foreign policy," indicating that the U.S. would prioritize long-term, multilateral agreements (Biden, 2021a). Saying so, he outlined his plan to uphold freedom, democracy, rule of law and universal rights globally, arguing that they were the U.S.' source of strength. He added that it was this strength that made America a "unique idea" (Biden, 202b).

His plans to help U.S. to compete with the world indicated that his domestic policy would serve as his foreign policy and vice versa (Nicholas, 2021; Heuvel, 2021; Biden, 2021b). It was a signal that the U.S. will live by the narrative it projects and that it will lead by example. Mr. Biden confirmed that the U.S. views itself as part of an interconnected world, where strength abroad translates into strength at home, and vice versa (Biden, 2021a). He also noted that Americans would have to unite. He noted that the world was watching the U.S. and betting on Americans' divisiveness, and that the U.S. cannot win the competition against other countries if all Americans did not come together as one people and one nation (Biden, 2021b).

His acknowledgment that George Floyd "changed the world" and that white supremacy is terrorism is an attempt to repair the narrative (Biden, 2021b). In both speeches, he mentioned that the U.S. would uphold democratic values, champion human rights and promote a rules-based order to secure the Indo-Pacific (Biden, 2021a; Biden, 2021b). However, his initial refusal to export raw materials to India for vaccine production was described as a resubscription to "America First" (Beauchamp, 2021; Shesgreen, 2021). Immigrants' attempts to cross the border were met with a refusal of entry, also evoking memories of Mr. Trump's narratives on immigration (Beauchamp, 2021; Haass 2021). Other countries too remain skeptical of the U.S. reassuming leadership, maintaining that it. should seek to partner than lead (Beinart, 2020).

U.S. Identity Narratives	**U.S. System Narratives**	**U.S. Issue Narratives**

American leadership American exceptionalism • Lead by example • America is a unique idea One united nation • Epluribus unum – out of many, one • One people	Human rights Democracy Rules-based order Multilateralism, diplomacy Interconnected world • Foreign policy is domestic policy • Stronger at home, stronger abroad • Stronger abroad, stronger at home The world is watching	Black Lives Matter Police brutality Insurrection at Capitol Indo-Pacific/Rise of China Russian disinformation COVID-19 Taxation American jobs White supremacy & terrorism Healthcare and education

Areas of Convergence

Except for the narrative of a coordinated conspiracy, India's identity and system narratives do not inform its issue narratives. Further, given the recency of the events of 2020 and lingering resentment against Mr. Trump's narratives, it is yet to be seen whether Mr. Biden can successfully project the U.S. as a leader. The U.S. is continuing the narrative of American exceptionalism, evident in Mr. Biden's projection of the U.S. as a unique idea, and a country that will lead by example (Biden, 2021a; Biden, 2021b). A narrative of Indian exceptionalism is also emerging, with Mr. Modi describing India as a country that cannot be compared (Modi, 2021c).

Both countries identify themselves as leaders, but neither is in a position to lead due to ongoing issue narratives. However, both the U.S. and India take pride in being the world's oldest and largest democracy respectively. Former U.S. Ambassador to India, Mr. Kenneth I. Juster, highlighted this partnership while commenting on U.S.-India relations (Juster, 2019a; Juster, 2019b; Juster, 2020a; Juster, 2020b; Juster, 2021). In one address, he specified that neither the U.S. nor India are perfect democracies, but that both must keep working with one another and fostering tolerance and democratic values (Juster, 2021). Further, both the U.S. and India see themselves as having a responsibility for the world (Biden, 2021a; Modi, 2021c).

The new U.S. system narratives specify the world is watching and betting on the U.S. failing (Biden, 2021b). Similarly, Indian system narratives state a coordinated conspiracy exists to "wage economic, social, cultural and regional war against India" (Ellis-Peterson, 2021; Jaishankar, 2021b) Conversely, U.S. system narratives view the world as interconnected, while Indian system narratives view it as "one family" (Biden, 2021a; Modi, 2021a).

Finally, both countries have a history of resisting imperialism and colonization. During World War II, U.S. President, Mr. Franklin Roosevelt, put pressure on the British Prime Minister, Mr. Winston Churchill, to grant India its independence (Rubin, 2011). Mr. Roosevelt upheld the American support for democracy, self-determination and resistance to imperialism (Rubin 2011). This commitment continues to exist today, with both the U.S. and India trying to

preserve the rules-based world order, and uphold democracy and human rights. While India is interested in reforming this order to meet the interests of other decolonized, developing countries, it is still willing to do so through diplomacy in the existing order (Modi, 2021b).

These convergences provide opportunities for the U.S. to engage Indian publics to explain why freedom of expression and religious tolerance are important and what they can help achieve. These convergences can prime U.S. public diplomacy to approach India as not a wrongdoer, but as a partner who can join the U.S. in leading the world by example. To help renew India's commitment to freedom of expression and religious tolerance, the U.S. can use India's master narratives to redefine India's issue narratives, and graft the resulting contestations to the state's identity and the system narratives using the areas of convergence.

Freedom of Expression: Redefining What is "Anti-Indian"

In 2021, India ranked #142 in the World Press Freedom Index because of the growing repression of journalists critiquing Mr. Modi. These journalists and their critiques are labeled as "anti-national" (RSF, 2021). India has used its sedition act to clamp down on "anti-national" dissent (Singh, 2018; Mehta, 2016; Mukherjee, 2017). The Act was created in 1860, when India was under British rule. The British instituted this Act in the wake of the Revolt of 1857, the first organized, militarized Indian opposition to the British Raj (Singh, 2018l Mehta, 2016). They saw freedom of expression as a catalyst that could jumpstart another, more successful revolt, and thus sought to criminalize any expression of "disaffection" against the government (Singh, 2018).

The term "disaffection" was deliberately left vague by the British to ensure it could be widely applicable. Disaffection could range from expression of contempt or hatred, to simply a feeling of disloyalty (Singh, 2018; Mukherjee, 2017). The British used the Act to denote the state, the government and the nation as interchangeable, with "disaffection" against one being tantamount to "disaffection" against the others (Mehta, 2018; Mukherjee, 2017). The current government uses the Act in a similar capacity. Any criticism against either the state of India, the Modi government, or the Hindu nation is criticism of all of these entities (Singh, 2018).

It was Mahatma Gandhi who first disrupted this analogy in colonial times. He rejected the claim that sedition or disaffection were crimes. Instead, he argued that disaffection was a virtue, and what the British labeled "sedition" was only an act of rightful dissent (Singh, 2018; Mehta, 2016; Mukherjee, 2017). He saw the British as constituting only the government, not the state or nation. He argued that disaffection towards the British Raj did not constitute as disaffection against the state (Singh, 2018). Further, he specified that any disaffection towards the former was prompted by his love for the nation. Freedom of expression and dissent were an expression of patriotism (Singh, 2018). Thus, his ideals provide a starting point for contesting the issue narratives of freedom of expression and redefining what constitutes as "anti-national."

Narrative Contestation

It can be argued that dissent or critique of Mr. Modi is not "anti-national" or unpatriotic. Rather, it is the suppression of dissent that is anti-Indian, since colonizers used the same tool to

suppress demands for independence and Swaraj (Singh, 2018; Mehta, 2016; Mukherjee, 2017; Rubin, 2011; Aikant, 2016; Khimta, 2012). It can be emphasized that what Mahatma Gandhi did was also "anti-national" and unpatriotic for the British Raj, even though his dissent was born out of love for the state and the nation (Singh, 2018; Mukherjee, 2017). Similarly, dissent or critique of Mr. Modi is not anti-national because it is born out of love for the nation and the state.

It can be specified that by suppressing dissent and branding it as sedition, the government is treating Indians not as concerned citizens expressing their patriotism and love of India, but as "revolting subjects" whom the colonizers subjugated and persecuted (Singh, 2018). This analogy can also be disrupted by using other post-colonial issue narratives. In 1975, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency in India, democratic functions (Britannica, 2021a; The Economic Times, 2019). Her power was encapsulated in an adage – India is Indira, and Indira is India – for which Mr. Modi's party recently demanded an apology (ANI, 2018).

Mr. Modi's party, the BJP – then a part of the erstwhile Janata Party – was formed in the wake of the Emergency (Britannica, 2021a; Britannica, 2021b). The Janata Party formed the base of political opposition against Mrs. Gandhi and her party, the INC. This rivalry continues to exist today. Narrative contestations can take advantage of this rivalry by urging Mr. Modi's government to not imitate the INC (ANI, 2018). The contestations can emphasize that by treating criticism of Mr. Modi as criticism of the state and the nation, the government is replacing "India is Indira, and Indira is India," with "India is Modi, and Modi is India" (ANI, 2018).

These contestations can be grafted to India's identity and system narratives by taking advantage of the areas of convergence between American and Indian identity and system narratives. It can be specified that as the world's oldest and largest democracies respectively, the U.S. and India have a shared responsibility to lead the world by example by protecting their freedoms (Biden, 2021a; Modi, 2021b; Modi, 2021c). It can also be specified that freedom of expression is crucial to democracy and commitment to freedom of expression sets the two apart (Biden, 2021b). Finally, it can be highlighted that the world is watching both India and the U.S. If they wanted to prove the world's skepticism wrong, they both need to respond to external threats not by suppressing freedoms, but by through a "human-centric approach" that puts "humanity at the center of thinking and action" (Biden, 2021b; Modi, 2021b; Jaishankar, 2021).

This is possible only if they both celebrate dissent as evidence of a successful democracy. If both countries challenge criticisms of their government through Mahatma Gandhi's ideals – civil discourse and non-violence – than through repression and silencing – the tools of the colonizers – they would be stronger at home (Biden, 2021a; Mehta, 2016; Mukherjee, 2017; Singh, 2018; Rubin, 2011). As a consequence of being stronger at home, they would be stronger abroad, and in a better position to ensure security and stability in the Indo-Pacific, uphold the rules-based order, and counter China (Biden, 2021a; Modi, 2021a; Muraleedharan, 2021).

Hindu vs Muslim: Decompressing History & Redefining the "Us vs Them"

For narratives to define how an entity aims to achieve its goals, they must also define who stands with the entity and who against (Halverson et al., 2011). In other words, they define the in-group and the out-group, the "us" vs. "them." The Revolt of 1857 made the British Raj redefine the "us" vs "them" (Singh, 2018). The Revolt started when Hindu and Muslim soldiers united and refused to use bullets rumored to be made out of cow and pig fat – both animals being blasphemous for consumption for Hindus and Muslims (Gould, 2016; Dash, 2012; Britannica, 2021a). This display of unity encouraged the British to "divide and rule," and make Hindus and Muslims see each other as the "them" (Katju, 2013; Stewart, 1951; Tharoor, 2017).

As part of this strategy, the British introduced separate electorates for Muslims and Hindus, claiming this was the best way for Hindus and Muslims to be represented proportionately. Mahatma Gandhi opposed these separate electorates, believing it would lead to inter-religious disharmony (Ayoob, 2018). His opposition made Muslim leaders warier about living in an independent, Hindu-majority India. These worries were based on other concerns, such as being left behind in education and socioeconomic status (Wani & Kidwai, 2021). The gap in education was driven by Muslims who rejected teaching Western subjects in madrasas to oppose British rule and the "westernization of British India" (Wani & Kidwai, 2021).

This disparity in education persisted after India's Independence. It prevented the creation of shared cultural and intellectual values that could strengthen Hindu-Muslim relationships. Finally, as discussed above, the proposition of the "Two Nations" theory by the British eventually led to the Partition of India (Tharoor, 2017). The British divided British India on the basis of religion (Britannica, 2021a; Ayoob, 2018). Uncertain and fluid borders separating East Pakistan (Bangladesh), India and West Pakistan (Pakistan) fueled the communal violence during the Partition (Britannica, 2021a; Salam, 2018; Basu, 2020; Dalrymple, 2015; Ansari, 2017).

Narrative Contestation

Communal tensions can be eased by "decompressing" Hindu nationalist narratives by outlining history beyond the Partition (Halverson et al., 2011). It can be argued that India's history stretches beyond the struggle for independence and colonial rule, and includes nearly two centuries of Mughal rule that made India one of the most prosperous lands of the era. Mr. Modi's government has been changing the narrative on how Mughal rulers are depicted, decrying them as Muslim invaders (Salam, 2018). A contestation along such lines will need to acknowledge the destruction caused by Islamic invasions. However, it can contextualize the invasions by outlining how the people adapted to the events and blended Islamic and Hindu traditions (Salam, 2018).

The analogy of the "us" vs "them" can be redefined by specifying that this demarcation is not about Hindus vs Muslims. Rather, it is about anyone who would challenge the unity in India's diversity. It was the British in the past and anyone who impedes Hindu-Muslim unity today that is the out-group. Indian Muslims see India as their country by choice. They are committed to the idea of the state and the nation of India (Salam, 2018). An Urdu poem, "Sare Jahan se Accha" (Better Than the Rest of the World), written by a Muslim poet – Muhammad Iqbal – was the anthem of opposition against the British (Salam, 2018). To reject Hindu-Muslim

brotherhood – referenced in a popular Hindi couplet – would be to reject the aspirations of thousands of Muslims and Mahatma Gandhi (Salam, 2018; Ayoob, 2018; Basu, 2020).

Successful narrative contestations will have to engage with the concept of Hindutva. The current iteration of "us" vs "them" envisions Hinduism as the native religion, culture and identity of the Subcontinent, and Islam as the foreign religion, culture and identity of the invaders (Johnson, 2009; Basu, 2020). To disrupt this analogy, a contestation will have to argue that Hinduism as per Hindutva is a colonial export. Hinduism has a pantheon of over 300 million gods (Basu, 2020). Colonial, orientalist conceptualizations, however, viewed the existence of a pantheon as evidence of Hinduism being an inferior religion. Further, the idea that a nation has to be defined on ethnoreligious lines is also a colonial, orientalist (and Nazi) idea (Basu, 2020).

Therefore, Hindutva is based on the premise that for Hinduism to be seen as a "legitimate" religion, the pantheon had to be collapsed into one major god (Basu, 2020). Only when one single god emerged, could an independent India – conceptualized as a Hindu nation and Hindu state – emerge. This is the basis for "Akhand Bharat (Johnson, 2009; Basu, 2020). Therefore, to challenge this key component of Hindutva ideology, a contestation can graft the Hindutva master narrative to India's system narrative. It can specify that for an interconnected world that is "one family," as the U.S. and India envision, Akhand Bharat cannot be defined on geographical or religious lines (Modi, 2021a). Rather, it will have to emerge on a "human-centric" line, with the Indian diaspora connecting India and the world as one family (Modi, 2021a; Mazumdar, 2020; Suri, 2011; Hall, 2012).

Finally, the contestation can engage Indian and American identity narratives. It can argue that while both India and the U.S. prized unity in diversity/epluribus unum, it is diversity that makes sets them apart (Juster, 2021; Modi, 2021c; Biden, 2021a). Similarly, it is not a single god that made Hinduism so rich and beautiful. Rather, its ability to include multiple regional and transnational cultures, mythologies and traditions make it distinctive (Salam, 2018; Basu, 2020). The contestation can argue that it is this spirit of inclusion that defines the Indian nation and state. The love for this inclusion – or the love for the state and the nation, as Mahatma Gandhi put it – is what prompted Indians to stand against the Citizenship Amendment Act that is biased against Muslims (Singh, 2018; Mukherjee, 2017; Mehta, 2016; BBC, 2019b).

Thus, the contestation can argue that protests against the Act and communal violence are not seditious. Rather, it is proof of the Indian people exercising Mahatma Gandhi's Hind Swaraj and deciding for themselves who is included in their country (Singh, 2018; Mukherjee, 2017; Mishra, 2006; Khimta, 2012; Anjaneyulu, 2003). It is proof of them overcoming colonial "divide and rule" policies and rejecting the "us" vs "them" that hindered the struggle for Independence (Tharoor, 2017; Katju, 2013; Stewart, 1951). It is this spirit of Swaraj and commitment to democratic values, human rights and a rules-based order that make the U.S. and India partners who can lead the world by example and counter the rise of China (Biden, 2021a; Modi, 2021a).

Deploying Narrative Contestations

Because of prevalent issue narratives and ongoing attempts to repair its narrative, the U.S. cannot assume a high ground to urge India to repair its own narratives. Additionally, both the U.S. and India see themselves as leaders. Thus, the assumption of a high ground by the U.S. will only persuade India to resist American public diplomacy. Therefore, while communicating with Indian publics and government, the U.S. should not project itself as a leader in democratic values and ideals. Rather, the U.S. should project both India and the U.S. as partners who can lead the world by example. The U.S. can acknowledge that both countries have shared responsibilities, and both will need to uphold freedom of expression and religious tolerance.

The U.S. will need to be cognizant of its limited capability to influence Indian domestic narratives and issues. For any public diplomacy programming, the U.S. will have to walk the tightrope between exercising too much and too little influence. Too much influence may lead to Indian publics questioning U.S. interference in India's internal affairs. Too little influence can lead to negligible success, which can damage the U.S.' efforts to repair its own narrative. The middle road for the U.S. is to facilitate the contestation, but leave the contestation itself to Indian civil society, influencers and diaspora.

Indian public diplomacy extensively engages with the Indian diaspora (Hall, 2012). India taps into this wealthy, highly-educated, technocratic diaspora by using them to engage non-Indian foreign publics (Hall, 2012; Basu, 2020; Mazumdar, 2020; Suri, 2011). This makes the diaspora a powerful messenger to communicate with domestic Indian publics, especially since the U.S. hosts one of the largest concentrations of the diaspora (PTI, 2021; Khadria, 2011). Thus, the U.S. can use the Indian diaspora to serve as messengers for these narrative contestations.

They can engage domestic Indian civil society – NGOs, think tanks, women's rights organizations, LGBT groups, legal experts and academics – through speaker series, educational exchanges and policy collaborations. They can also engage domestic Indian influencers – prominent actors, journalists, activists, artists, writers, sportspersons, business leaders, culinary experts, designers, scientists, environmentalists and community leaders – to disseminate the contestations. The involvement of a transnational Indian diaspora has the added benefit of advancing the American system narrative of an interconnected world, and the Indian system narrative of "the world is one family" (Modi, 2021a; Biden, 2021a). Two major decision-making audiences can be targeted: The Indian judiciary and the Ministry of Education.

There is considerable formal, academic discourse at the apex court about how sedition is defined (Singh, 2018). Supreme Court judges, lawyers and other legal experts are aware of the distinction between the government, the state and the nation, and the discourse surrounding disaffection (Singh, 2018). However, these discussions have not trickled down to wider Indian publics. The executive branch continues to interpret sedition as per its discretion (Singh, 2018). Further, while the independence of the Indian judiciary has been celebrated in the years past, in recent times, this independence is perceived to have eroded (Dev, 2019; Yamunan, 2019; Jain, 2019). Thus, public diplomacy efforts can influence the judiciary to take a stronger and more independent role in protecting the Constitutionally guaranteed freedom of expression.

The Ministry of Education recently proposed India's New Education Policy in 2020 (MHRD, 2020). The NEP 2020 aims to position India as a hub of international education, welcome 200,000 international students by 2023 and "have an education system that is second to none" by 2040 (MHRD, 2020). These goals demonstrate India's acknowledgment of education as a tool for projection of soft power (Mathews, 2020; Saha, 2020). However, this educational transformation will be incomplete until there is educational parity between Hindus and Muslims. Indian Muslims have been left behind in educational outcomes (Wani & Kidwai, 2021).

To address this deficit and promote an inclusive account of Indian history under the NEP 2020, Indian diaspora can engage domestic Indian civil society and influencers. Through lectures, exchanges and inter-religious partnerships, public diplomacy efforts can develop and disseminate textbooks and best practices to modernize education in madrasas and prevent Hindu or Islamic radicalization. This sensitization can be crucial in places that have experienced the brunt of communal violence, such as New Delhi, Godhra, Muzaffarnagar, and Kashmir.

Acting in a more direct capacity, U.S. public diplomacy efforts can ensure the dissemination of speeches, op-eds and social media posts in both Hindi and Urdu. The debate about the Hindustani language is an important part of Hindu-Muslim tensions. Hindus have tried to Sanskritize Hindustani, thus creating Hindi, while Muslims have tried to Persianize Hindustani, thus creating Urdu (Britannica, 2021c). By making all outputs available in both languages, U.S. public diplomacy can demonstrate it treats Hindi and Urdu, Hindus and Muslims equally. Visuals used to demonstrate this equality will need to exercise subtlety. Explicitly identifying individuals as Hindus or Muslims through religious symbols may stoke audiences' biases. On the other hand, visuals that imply religious harmony or partnership can emphasize that Muslims are not the "other" and that Hindu-Muslim brotherhood is the norm.

U.S. public diplomacy can amplify the voices of journalists and activists on social media to present their work to the rest of the world. It can lend its support to "Not in My Name" campaigns, one of which spread in India in 2017 after the killing of a Muslim boy (Sarwar, 2017; Rajamani, 2017; Salam, 2018). Finally, U.S. public diplomacy can engage Indian publics by raising social media literacy. Popular social media platforms – such as Facebook and WhatsApp – are frequently used to spread disinformation. There have been many incidents when this disinformation has led to the lynching of Indian Muslims (BBC, 2018; Madrigal, 2018). Raising social media literacy is thus crucial for addressing the symptom, if not the root of the problem.

In this case, visuals can advance public diplomacy goals and narrative contestations more explicitly. Visuals will need to refrain from displaying the problem on the Indian part (arrests or any instances of public disorder). They will also need to avoid any key symbols, such as any anti-Modi placards. Instead, they can showcase the solution from the American side, by focusing on workshops or the lectures being conducted. They can also focus on the vast numbers of people protesting or debating to showcase the number of people exercising their freedom of expression. Such visuals can be even more powerful if these journalists, activists, protesters or

lecture attendees are photographed next to, in front of, or holding the Indian flag. This imagery can further drive home the centrality of freedom of expression to the idea of India.

Conclusion

This paper identified the importance of India and the U.S. repairing their narratives amid deepening ties and increasing concerns about the rise of China. As both countries aim to secure and stabilize the Indo-Pacific region by upholding a rules-based order, human rights and democratic ideals, both countries will need to live by the narrative they project. Both countries are undergoing issues that contradict these narratives. In India, this has taken the form of increasing censorship, crackdown on dissent and growing communal violence. For India to credibly be seen as a "benign hegemon" and not a "regional bully" like China, India will need to renew its commitment to freedom of expression and religious tolerance.

To facilitate this renewal of commitment, the paper explored Indian master narratives – trans-historical culturally pervasive narratives that inform Indian public opinion. Three master narratives were identified: Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian Struggle for Independence, the 1947 Partition of India, and the Hindutva ideology. The paper outlined Indian identity and system narratives – the former describing how India views itself, the latter describing how it envisions the world order – and the areas where Indian and American identity and system narratives converge. Next, the paper described how the U.S. can tap into master narratives to contest issue narratives, and how it can graft these contestations to Indian identity and system narratives.

Finally, the paper specified how these contestations can be deployed. It was acknowledged that the U.S. has limited influence over domestic Indian narratives and cannot currently assume a higher ground over India due to its own issue narratives. Thus, the paper examined how the U.S. can tap into the Indian diaspora to engage domestic Indian civil society and influencers to shape domestic public opinion. The paper recommended public diplomacy initiatives and identified the Indian judiciary and the Ministry of Education as key decision-makers. It also identified how the U.S. can engage with Indian publics through social media.

Given the sensitivity and historical considerations surrounding these narratives, there are several caveats regarding the proposed contestations. First, U.S. public diplomacy may enjoy limited success and tremendous difficulty in advancing these contestations. Nevertheless, these contestations are important if India truly wishes to be seen as a "benign hegemon." Similarly, these contestations are important for the U.S. if it does not want to impede its efforts to repair its own narrative by partnering with a country seen as suppressing freedom.

Second, these contestations depend upon master narratives. They may take time to bear fruit, as master narratives are deeply ingrained and pervasive in a country's culture. For greatest efficacy, these master narratives will have to be used by domestic Indian publics themselves. Third, these contestations may not sway Hindu or Muslim extremists. Religious radicals are not the intended audience for these counter-narratives. Instead, these contestations have the best chance of success if they are used to educate and sensitize populations at risk of radicalization.

Finally, to fully accomplish its vision of being seen as a “benign hegemon,” India will need to stop the current anti-Chinese rhetoric and ensure its nationalist narratives do not get in the way of competing against China.

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