

**DOI:** 10.30520/tjsosci.974911

**A CONSTRUCTIVIST ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF INDIA'S DOMESTIC IDENTITIES ON ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICIES TOWARDS SOUTH ASIA**

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**Abstract**

Domestic factors especially national identities of a Nation State influence its foreign policy by distinguishing that country's perception of "self" from that of "others". By employing the case study of India, this paper assesses the way India perceives its national identities and the resultant effects on its foreign policies towards South Asia. The paper assesses that in India, its peculiar political construct superimposed by British colonizers and multiple ethno-religious groups stacked together under a Hindutva-inspired political system serve as an aberration from the evolution of indexical "self" of different nationalities in that country. Accordingly, India's national identity formation is premised on "exclusion" and it attempts to overcome this challenge through externalization of its internal problems towards neighbourhood.

**Keywords:** Constructivist Approach; Externalizing Internal Challenges; Hindutva; Transnational Group; National Identity; Domestic Identities; Neighbourhood Policies

**1. INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In recent years, Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) has emerged as an important field of study within the domain of International relations. The significance of this field of study is owing to the fact that it enables a better understanding of the factors including actors that mark their influence on decision making done in pursuit of foreign policy objectives (Ifantis, Triantaphyllou, & Kotelis, 2015). In general, foreign policy is meant to imply a conglomerate of policies and interactions that a country undertakes beyond its borders (Breuning, 2007). As the foreign policy of any particular country is influenced by a number of 'explanans', including domestic and international factors (Ifantis, Triantaphyllou, & Kotelis, 2015), the foreign policy analysis of a particular country, with a view to gaining a more generalizable understanding of the process of foreign policy decision making (Breuning, 2007), becomes critical.

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As one undertakes the foreign policy analysis, it is assumed to be done by the decision makers either at the individual or group level based on the complex interplay of both domestic and international factors (Breuning, 2007). These factors can at times be taken as constraints on the above decision making process and are essentially contingent upon the manner in which the decision maker(s) perceive these factors and their role in terms of the foreign policy decision making (Breuning, 2007). The manner in which an individual or a group makes a foreign policy decision is also dependent upon the manner in which that particular individual or the group perceives the significance or the role of a particular factor, be it domestic or international, in terms of foreign policy actions (Breuning, 2007). In addition to the above aspects, it is also important to note that in recent years, the role of foreign policy analysis on a comparative basis has also gained significance (Alden & Aran, 2017). This is done at three levels including individual, state or system-wide levels (Breuning, 2007) (Wicaksana, 2009). However, at all these levels, the manner in which a certain factor is perceived to have an impact, be it at the state or system-wide level again assumes critical importance (Breuning, 2007). It is with this theoretical background especially premised on the different levels indicated above, that we would be embarking upon a constructivist analysis (Wicaksana, 2009) (Shannon & Kowert, 2012) (KARACASULU & UZGÖREN, 2007) (Hopf, 1998) (Guzzini & Leander, 2006) of the impact of domestic identities of India on its neighbourhood policies towards South Asia.

For the purposes of this paper, it may be pertinent to mention that the constructivist theoretical framework would form the core premise. Accordingly, the foreign policy analysis of India in respect of South Asia with a focus on its domestic identities (Wicaksana, 2009) (Busse, 1999) (Behraves, 2011) (Guzzini & Leander, 2006) would be undertaken on the basis of the assumption that the manner in which the decision making elite of India assumes its domestic identities as well as views the factors influencing these identities, marks an impact on the manner in which the above elite approaches different foreign policy choices and actions towards South Asia. It may be mentioned at this stage that the term “domestic identities” is distinguishable from “International identity” under the constructivist framework. In simple words, while on one side, the factor of domestic identities is inclined towards understanding as to how a state looks at itself, based on its internal or domestic norms and culture; the international identity would be premised on how the state looks at itself in relations to “other” states. On the former side exists therefore, the norm constructivist approach, while on the latter side, the relational approach is under reference (Hagstrom & Gustafsson, 2015). Looking at it in another way, the discussions pertaining to domestic identities constitute more of a meso-level analysis while when looking at international identities in respect of a particular state under reference, it would be a macro-level of analysis. The different domestic identities of India as well as the manner in which they are perceived by the Indian leadership therefore play a defining role in the context of Indian foreign policy decision making. As one advances the pursuit further, one may limit the geographical contours of this study to South Asia in order to better understand in a more coherent manner as to how the neighbourhood policies of India towards South Asia get influenced by the peculiar perceptions of Indian leadership and decision making elite towards India’s domestic identities.

In general, this paper begins with the premise that the foreign policy decision makers create a certain “social world” for themselves and then on the basis of this, they conduct their foreign policy actions (Wicaksana, 2009). This social construction is in itself taken to define as to what

constitutes the national identity of a particular state (Wicaksana, 2009). Furthermore, this national identity also defines the contours of national interest of that particular state (Wicaksana, 2009). This paper would tend to explore as to how the domestic identities of India are perceived by its decision making elite and how this comes into contact with their perception of national identity that is socially constructed by them. The paper then explores as to how this peculiar creation of national identity constructed socially, further shapes up the national interests of India and in turn affects or defines its neighbourhood policies towards South Asia.

It is important to highlight at this stage that as a theoretical premise, this paper is essentially revolving around the role of domestic identities in shaping India's neighbourhood policies with reference to South Asian region. In this context, it is important to note that when referring to the notion of 'identity' under the constructivist framework, the element of 'identity' is constructed and therefore contingent upon the agents that construct it (Gurbuz, 2004). In general, the concept of "Identity" is considered to be 'relational' in character. It clearly demarcates differentiation between "we" and "others". It may further be noted that an individual may have different identities (Herbert, 2013) at the same time. Therefore, an individual within a state, besides having a national identity may also claim to have different other domestic identities based on inter alia his/her ethnic; linguistic or religious background.

Under this paper, it would therefore be discerned that when the impact of domestic identities on the Indian neighbourhood policies towards South Asia is examined, the manner in which India looks at its domestic identities and weaves them into its national identity construct would have an impact on its neighbourhood policies.

For the purposes of this study, a constructivist theoretical approach towards the Indian foreign policy analysis has been adopted. However, while doing so, the causal factor which would be examined is that of domestic identities only. Owing to the constructivist framework, this study would examine as to how the domestic identities of India are actually presumed by it in relation to the region of South Asia and how does this factor influence the Indian foreign policy behaviors towards the above region. In addition, it would be assessed as to how India defines its national role and identity thus constructing the element of "We" vs. "Others" when pursuing its neighbourhood policies towards South Asia. For the purposes of this study, a qualitative research methodology would be adopted. It may be recalled that the main thrust of the qualitative research is towards a better comprehension of the motivations leading to a certain human behavior ("Motivation research") (C.R.Kothari, 2004). This type of research methodology is therefore inclined towards understanding as to how individuals or groups of people feel or think about a particular situation, thus implying a study of the opinions, behaviors and attitudes (C.R.Kothari, 2004). For undertaking the above study, resort to secondary data sources has been made. It is because, the paper essentially undertakes an assessment and analytical study of the impact of domestic identities of India on its neighbourhood policies towards South Asia under a constructivist framework and the secondary sources enable processing of the primary sources through such analysis, evaluation and assessment.

It is pertinent to mention at this stage that there remain differing interpretations as to what actually constitutes South Asia. However, for the purposes of this study, we take South Asia to

be comprised of the countries that are members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) (SAARC, 2018). This would imply that for this paper, we would take South Asia to include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka (SAARC, 2018). There are reasons for selecting South Asia as a specific focus for studying the impact of domestic identities of India's neighbourhood policies. To begin with, the region of South Asia carries prominence in global power politics today. Therefore, it is important to assess the global and regional political orientation of the regional countries of South Asia. Furthermore, owing to the fact that India itself is a part of South Asia, the significance of this region as a focus of study increases manifold.

Within the context of Indian domestic identities, it would be useful to underline that in case of India there exist some ethnic groups that spill over into different other regional countries. Winslett describes these as "Transnational groups" which are meant to imply groups that are "self-conscious" and have such presence in "multiple states" that can be considered as "politically salient" (Clarke, 2017). These groups are understandably constituted on the basis of common ethnicity, religious affiliation, tribal association or language etc. (Clarke, 2017). Accordingly, the neighbourhood policies of India towards South Asia are shaped by this factor as well.

For the purposes of this study, the following hypothesis would be tested:

The perceptions, conceptions, views, ideas and beliefs of the leadership and decision-making elite of India about its domestic identities as well as the manner and extent of foreign influence, be it regional or extra-regional, on its identities plays a crucial role in contouring India's neighbourhood policy towards South Asia.

## **2. IMPACT OF INDIAN DOMESTIC IDENTITIES ON ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICIES TOWARDS SOUTH ASIA**

India was essentially carved out following the British withdrawal from the subcontinent (Asher & Talbot, 2007). In August 1947, there were over 500 different princely states in what was at that time, the British Indian Empire. These states were quasi independent during the British Raj and became practically independent to decide their fate following the end of British Indian Empire (Copland, 1991). It was basically as a result of Indian aggression in some cases guided by Indian Deputy Prime Minister Sardar Patel that a huge chunk of territory comprising these hundreds of princely states was ultimately made part of Indian Union (Copland, 1991). This aspect is important to note in order to fully comprehend the exact nature and heterogeneity of Indian domestic identities. As a result of this forced patchwork, there emerged a peculiar demographic pattern in India. In addition to this element, following the independence of Pakistan in August 1947, a large number of Muslims were still left behind in predominantly Hindu dominated India (Shaban, 2018). This significant Muslim minority was never truly accepted into the Indian fold by the Indian Government and still continues to be discriminated against (Shaban, 2018). Essentially, as the process of partition of subcontinent in 1947 was premised on the principle of "Two-Nation Theory", which espoused that Muslims and Hindus in Subcontinent

were two separate nations in all respects and manifestations (Maid, Habib, & Habib, 2014), the underlying principle of partition resulted in Muslim majority areas joining together to constitute Pakistan while the Hindu majority areas were joined together to make India (Pandey, 2004). As mentioned earlier, to Hindu India was also forcibly added a number of independent princely states of subcontinent in order to make what now constitutes modern Indian Union (Copland, 1991). It was essentially owing to these factors that despite being professed as secular in character, the Indian Constitution also carried visible Hindu undertones (Singh, 2005). For instance, the term “secular” was only incorporated in the Indian Constitution in 1976. In the Indian Constitution, the name of the Union of India is in fact “Bharat” which is reminiscent of pre-British and pre-Muslim era reflecting what Hindutva considers as “glorious Hindu past”. The term “Bharat” has an inherent connotation of alienation and exclusion for non-Hindus and has therefore a clear Hindu bias in it. (Singh, 2005) It would be surprising to note that when the Indian Constitution was being framed, the Hindutva zealots in the Constituent Assembly of India advocated the use of term “Union” for India rather than “Federation” as envisaged in the Cabinet Mission Plan 1946, on the grounds that Hindutva idealized a strong centre and for this reason, “Union” signified a more appropriate connotation (Singh, 2005). It may be noted that many prominent minority representatives in the Indian Constituent Assembly were strongly opposed to this notion of “Union” (Singh, 2005). Resultantly, many ethnic groups also have a “feeling of betrayal” (Sahadevan, 1999).

As the Indian state policy is essentially guided by the Hindutva ideational principles (Ganguly, 2019), the country’s founding party i.e. Indian National Congress (INC) also started off by deliberately strengthening “Hindu nationalism” right from the beginning (Bhagavan, 2008). It may be recalled that “Hindu nationalism”, as a political philosophy relied heavily on the principle of “exclusion” rather than “assimilation” (Chandrasekaran, 2012). This factor is also visible from the Indian Constitution (Singh, 2005). Resultantly, the Indian leadership and decision making elite’s views, beliefs and ideals have evolved in a manner that the Hindutva ideological orientation remains strongly embedded in the Indian strategic mindset. The recent controversial decision by the Indian Supreme Court to build a Hindu temple on the site of Babri Mosque demolished by Hindu fanatics in 1992; revocation of Article 370 and 35 (a) of Indian Constitution with a view to enabling a demographic change in muslim majority Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir; controversial National Register of Citizens (NRC) leaving almost 02 million Stateless in Assam affecting mainly Muslims; and the Hindutva undertones of the Joint Doctrine of Indian Armed Forces (JDIAF) are just few instances of the manner in which Hindutva has been institutionalized in India.

With the above ideological and ideational mindset, the domestic identities in India, essentially when it comes to the religious groupings in the country are strongly based on the Hindutva principle of “exclusion”. Hindutva symbolizes the Muslims and Christians for instance as “outsiders” and therefore, these major religious minorities of India have never been accepted into the Indian social fabric (Chandrasekaran, 2012). This policy of exclusion for the religious minorities has gradually evolved in such a manner that today mob-lynching has also become quite common in India with the support of members of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (Daniyal, 2019).



India appears to have camouflaged its above weakness through externalizing its internal religious fissures, i.e. use of “diversionary theory of conflict/war” (Desk, 2019). For instance, India routinely resorts to terrorist activities against Pakistan to divert the global attention from its internal problems (Desk, 2019). This approach of India can be well explained through the exclusivist Hindutva-based approach of considering the Muslims as “outsiders” on the one end and painting of Pakistan by the Indian leadership and elite as an “enemy country” on the other side (Chandrasekaran, 2012), being a symbol of Muslim rule in the subcontinent. It is again this factor that played an important role in the origins of the Kashmir problem as well.

Owing to its peculiar Hindutva mindset, India perceives the territories comprising Pakistan to be part of its mythical ideal of “Akhand Bharat” and accordingly this element defines India’s neighbourhood policy towards Pakistan that is marked by inflexibility owing to its ideological undertones. India’s peculiar conceptualization of Pakistan as representative of Muslim rule can be gauged from the fact that the Indian National Congress’s insistence on partition of Bengal in 1947 was guided by the same Hindutva-led political ideology. As an example, within the context of Bengal’s partition, the then leader of Indian National Congress and later India’s first Prime Minister Nehru had stated that there was “no question of Hindus in Bengal agreeing to live under permanent Muslim domination” (Thinkers Talk, 2020) and thus he favored the partition of this Muslim majority province under British Indian Empire.

The domestic religious identities not only influence relations between Pakistan and India but also get influenced by this relationship. The relations with Pakistan are used by India for the purposes of its own nation building project as well as promotion of Hindu majoritarianism. For example, through employment of “Victimhood Card”, India has been prone to putting out a false narrative that all aggression throughout India’s existence since 1947 has been committed by Pakistan. This is then given a religious color to identify Muslims as invaders both from outside India as well as within. This element is subsequently used by India to present Hindus as victims of oppression (Chandrasekaran, 2012) and accordingly, Majoritarian policies are justified within India as deterrence against minority domination. The manifestation of this approach can be gauged from the fact that within India, the Indian Muslims are still identified as “Pakistanis” and their residential areas are termed as “Chhota Pakistan (Mini Pakistan)” within India (Rauf, 2018).

Another example where Indian foreign policy remains deeply influenced by the domestic identities of the country is manifested through the case of Sri Lanka. In case of Sri Lanka, the Tamil factor continues to play a predominant role in defining India’s relations with that Island country.

Briefly, during 205-161 BCE, a Tamil King from the South Indian Chola Dynasty kept the territory constituting modern-day Sri Lanka under his occupation (Perera, 2016). In reaction, the local Kings of Sinhalese descent fought numerous battles against the Tamil Kings and forced them to leave their occupied territories (Perera, 2016). However, the above occupation of Sri Lanka by Tamil Kings led the Tamil community in India to perceive Eastern and Northern parts of Sri Lanka as their ancestral region (Perera, 2016). On the contrary, Tamil community was henceforth identified as invaders in Sri Lanka.

Under the British Indian Empire, when the British colonizers brought Indian Tamil community to Sri Lanka for plantation, the old animosities again propped up and the then Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) started considering India to be an invader country. At its end, in India's perception, Sri Lanka was considered to be part of Indian Territory owing to Tamil claims on this territory. This played an important role in India's continued interference in Sri Lanka ever since its independence. While Tamils constituted a 'Transnational Group', living on both sides of India and Sri Lanka, the former considered this group only through the Indian lens and therefore deemed itself mandated to interfere in Sri Lanka's domestic issues following its independence.

An interesting element in the Tamil issue remained that while India attempted to identify Tamils community as "Indian", the Tamils refused to be labeled as such and insisted on their independent Tamil identity. This indeed created a sense of security and identity complex for India and again contributed towards Indian interference in Sri Lanka, this time out of sense of insecurity. For analyzing India's approach towards Sri Lanka through this facet, the princely state of Travancore's forced accession to India in 1949 is quite suggestive. Travancore contained a significant Tamil population (1/3rd of the Travancore population), while the majority population of the state was Malayalam. Prior to its declaration of independence, during 1946, creation of a Malayalam state comprising Cochin, Travancore and British Malabar has gained popularity. This move was however opposed by the Tamil minority of Travancore that wanted to join with Tamilnadu. Although the independence of Travancore temporarily cooled down the issue, the Tamil population of Travancore started agitating for a separate district shortly after declaration of independence by Travancore. When Travancore was forced into annexation with India in 1949, the above issue and demand of Tamils continued to trouble India. It was essentially owing to the restive Tamils within Travancore and Tamil Nadu who were now demanding an independent homeland from India (Hariharan, 2014) that India strategized to externalize its Tamil issues in order to dilute the consequent local unrest. With the same exclusion-based ideational approach premised on externalizing internal problems, India started interfering in Sri Lanka's Tamil areas in order to prop up insurgency in that island country with the aim of externalizing its internal Tamil problems. For decades, India continued supporting Tamil insurgency and terrorism in Sri Lanka. India started cultivating Tamil insurgency leader Prabhakaran since early 1970s and later even J N Dixit, former Indian High Commissioner to Sri Lanka and India's National Security Adviser admitted that Indian Intelligence agency Research & Analysis Wing (RAW) had been arming Tamil youth since 1977. Even former Law Minister of India Ram Jethmalani had accepted that India created the "Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam" (LTTE) for its own interests (Waduge, 2016). This element also depicts as to how India attempts to externalize its internal problems by inter alia harboring terrorism against its neighboring countries.

In addition to the above Tamil factor, India's relations with Sri Lanka are also shaped by the religious identity perceived by India in respect of Sri Lanka. For instance, Ramanaya, a sacred text of Hindu faith regarding fight between Rama and the Lankan King Ravana still contours India's relations with Sri Lanka (Soysa, 2010). Accordingly, in India's perception, Sri Lanka becomes part and parcel of India's territorial outreach. This has also been a major factor in terms of Indian leadership's repeated insistence on Sri Lanka's merger with India (Soysa, 2010).

India's above conceptualization of territoriality is so deep-rooted that till date the Sri Lankan map is burnt on the occasion of "Dussehra" under patronage of the state (Soysa, 2010).

Another instance through which one can analyze, under a constructivist framework, the critical impact of Indian domestic policies on the country's foreign policy towards South Asia is the case study of "Chittagong Hill Tract (CHT)" in Bangladesh (Haque, 2015). Though an old issue, CHT problem started off in modern Bangladesh in 1997. Starting in 1972, the "Jummas" ethnic community of CHT organized under the banner of Shanti Bahini had been focused on gaining independence from Bangladesh (Haque, 2015). Incidentally, as India faced challenges from within, in the shape of demands for independence from the local Nagas and Mizo communities, the country used the "Jummas" from Bangladesh against the so-called recalcitrant elements of Nagas and Mizos within India (Haque, 2015). Secondly, the country also made attempts to halt the negotiations process between "Jummas" and the Government in Bangladesh, in order to leverage them against the internal problems of India (Haque, 2015).

India's support for "Madhesi" movement in Nepal (Prasai, 2012) is another example of how Indian domestic identities affect its foreign policy towards South Asia. There is a "Madhesi group" living on both sides of border between India and Nepal (Prasai, 2012). At its end, through the use of this insurgent group that entered Nepal secretly, India is now attempting to generate political instability in the country (Prasai, 2012). The "Madhesi" factor has been exploited to such an extent that since 2008, India has even been threatening Nepal of dissolution in case the Nepalese law enforcement agencies undertook any action against the militants of the Madhesi movements (Kantha, 2010). The influence of this transnational group has become so pervasive that whenever, Nepal attempts to counter India's hegemonic ambitions by getting closer to China, India uses this group to block the supply of goods from India to Nepal through closure of border between the two countries (BASU, 2020).

These are only some of the prominent examples to help better understand as to how the Indian leadership's mindset and perceptions work out against its neighboring countries especially in South Asia. In all these episodes, it is visible that essentially, inspired by the Hindutva mindset that considers the whole of Subcontinent as "Akhand Bharat" (Bjornson, 2016), Indian Government has not been able to maintain friendly relations with any of its neighbors (Sharma, 2013). Furthermore, as India is a hotchpotch of different ethnic and religious minorities either claiming their separate nationhood in certain cases or being "transnational groups" (e.g. Tamils or Madheshis) in some other cases, the country is seen to externalize its internal dissent by blaming others for its own problems or create challenges for "others" as a means towards diluting its own societal incoherence.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

From the above discussion, it may be concluded that the impact of the domestic identities of a country on its foreign policy towards a region is contingent upon the perceptions and ideas of the leadership or decision-making elite of that country in respect of those specific domestic identities especially seen in the context of that particular region under reference. In case of India, this



paper argues that the manner in which the leadership and decision-making elite views its domestic identities, plays a significant role in terms of defining the contours of Indian neighbourhood policies towards South Asia. As the above paper is restricted to assessing the impact of domestic identities of India on its neighbourhood policies towards South Asia, it only assesses those ethnic and religious minorities in India that either mark a bearing on the South Asian periphery or get influenced through this region, as per the views and beliefs held by the Indian decision-making elite and leadership. The paper argues that owing to its peculiar construct and identity created by the former British colonizers and the perceptions of the so-called “Akhand Bharat (Greater India)” held by the Indian decision-making elite, India approaches its different domestic identities through the ideational approach of “exclusion”. This accordingly generates an internal societal rift and incoherence in the country and the Indian decision-making elite subsequently assumes that the ethnic and religious minorities in India are in fact the “others” within the country having ethnic or religious affiliations across its borders. This leads India to adopt policies that attempt to “externalize” India’s domestic challenges on one end, while also promote interference in the internal affairs of other countries on the other end, as a means towards diluting its internal societal incoherence. These approaches become more evident in the cases of different “transnational groups” within India, demanding recognition of their own nationhood. Resultantly, the impact of domestic identities on India’s foreign policy towards South Asia becomes more pronounced and to the detriment of cooperative relations with the countries of that region.

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