

## BRICS as the New Space for Dialogue among Civilizations: An Indian Perspective

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When Jim O’Neil of Goldman Sachs coined the BRIC in the fateful year of 2001, the year of the world shattering 9/11 events, he essentially culled out the four major emerging transcontinental economies from Asia, Europe and Americas i.e. Brazil, Russia, India and China which will define future global growth trajectory especially in the context of foreign investment and growth strategies. Eight years later it became a major geo economic enterprise and in 2010 with the inclusion of South Africa it expanded to Africa which is widely recognized as the future especially in the latter half of this century given its human and natural resource potential. At the last Johannesburg Summit in 2023, five more countries Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt and Iran were also included.

It all started at the Summit level in Yekaterinburg in 2009 and in 2024 again Russia is the host and the Kazan summit might see further expansion by inclusion or association as thirty or more countries are waiting to join this enigmatic group, which despite its internal differences, has been able to make a geo economic mark on the geo political and geo strategic landscape as a viable and more comprehensive alternative which hopefully will be underscored by 3 Ms – the mutual respect ; mutual interests and ; mutual sensitivities.

BRICS remit has expanded into many other domains as it not only encompasses the top ten economies of the world but also several ancient civilizations for whom dialogue has been a major rider. The interactive mechanism and objectives have become multi layered and multi—dimensional. It addresses core issues and global challenges from under-development to finance to climate change to counter terrorism to culture and people to people exchanges. The S&T collaboration is further underscored by trade and investment and connectivity both at P2P level as well as physical and digital as all member countries use their synergies to maximize the mutual benefit.

Civilizational states, as a thumb rule, prefer a multilateral world order, diversity of discourse and its accommodation of multiple cultures and strategic autonomy as the tool for international discourse. BRICS even though can boast of a very different bouquet of political governance and socio-economic models but proudly it reflects the confluence of various civilizations’ quest for global welfare through dialogue and diplomacy. Building a partnership for inter-civilization dialogue is desirable. ‘The successful cooperation of the BRICS countries proves that different social systems can accommodate each other, that different development models can work with each other and that different values can draw on the strength of each other. We should stay open and inclusive to learn from each other and make progress together through seeking common ground while putting aside differences as was mentioned by the Chinese President Xi Jinping. But his troika of GSI (Global Security Initiative) GDI (Global Developmental Initiative) and GCI (Global Civilizational Initiative) combined with BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) often smack of hegemonistic approaches and

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strategy to control than cooperate. Perceptions must be corrected by concrete example and behavioural patterns rather than wolf warrior diplomacy.

BRICS may be a new space for dialogue among civilizations, but it can boast of being blessed with the presence of the ancient and powerful civilizations among its family. Indian, Chinese, Russian, Persian, Egyptian and Mesopotamian, Arabic and Ethiopian Civilizations are indeed the fulcrum of global value systems and could all teach a lot to the world, which only is worried about one upmanship and indulging in rivalry and supremacy through power projection and cancel culture. Apart from the decimation of global governance through the continuing geopolitical, geo economic and geo religious and now geo technological contestations we are heading towards a bottomless pit where mutually destructive syndrome will only lead to disruption and divisiveness and eventual destruction. This crisis of confidence must be addressed through a value system which looks for consensus and functional as well as inclusive approaches. Fortunately, the BRICS members have a legacy which could make it into a platform to practice co-existence and mutual growth and development within both material and moral compass.

While looking at the Indian and other approaches it is imperative that certain critical ingredients and pillars must be placed around which an edifice of trust and confidence in its centrality and objectivity could be built. Nearly all countries and powers would articulate the end goals that sound good but self-adherence to the same is evident in their violation of the norms that they have set themselves. The reason that multilateral institutions have failed to achieve their stated and proclaimed objectives is precisely due to the errant behavior of the initiators and proposers themselves. They prefer unilateralism to multilateralism. Self-aggrandizement at the cost of the global good. Consequently, wars and conflicts are more common than peace. Free for all and might is right have become the primary vector and mover of the super and the middle powers. Hence, it is imperative that there should be an echo of sane voices where the larger good of the larger masses becomes a priority over myopic power games. Is it far too idealistic to expect, remains to be seen. In any case it won't be easy but if BRICS plus can bring about a paradigm shift in international discourse so much the better. However, in the race to create alternate and viable frameworks and platforms BRICS +++ will have to apply credible standards and accountable outcomes by those professing to provide a matrix of 'DIY' Do it yourself which can be trusted by others to replicate and to look forward too. A tall order indeed but that's where civilizational values positively neutral yet humanistic would bail out the fractured world. theoretically this was already emphasized the 2<sup>nd</sup> BRICS Summit declaration in 2010 "This coexistence was reiterated by the declaration made at the second BRICS meeting early on , where the five countries declared their support for a fair and equitable world underpinned by "law, equality, mutual respect, cooperation, coordinated action and collective decision-making of all states". Hence, the way is known but methodology for its smooth passage will have to be worked out by all member countries to make BRICS a space for dialogue and consensus.

### **The essential markers for the dialogue among civilizations and countries alike:**

- Inclusive Vs Exclusive. It is imperative that the approaches must be inclusive to make them acceptable and implementable. Exclusivity, unless in excellence and inclusive exceptionalism, leads to greater polarization and divisiveness.

- Permanence vs Transient: The proposed value systems will have to be practiced by the propagators and applied in their discourse in an impartial way keeping a larger and more noble goal in mind with a long-term perspective.
- Cooperation Vs Conflict:
- Universality Vs Localistic or for that matter Local for Global
- Idealistic Vs ideological narratives
- Open to listen to others and accommodate and change rather than “I am the chosen one’ hence others should follow me approach. Then only acceptability and credibility will lead to enhanced trust and mutual benefit. An example is the plethora of interfaith dialogues where religious and politico-religious leaders and thinkers and even atheists for that matter say the right thing but without any constructive outcomes since the religious divide continues to persist. This should not become an integral part of the civilization’s heritage and dialogue.
- All civilizational values and exhortations and practices might not be equally applicable to modern day landscape. Hence conscious and productive interpretation with a positive attitude is a must.
- Trust Vs Skepticism among the custodians of respective civilizations. Hence, BRICS will have to contend with intra-group divergences and inter-group contestations to be able to play a constructive role. Who will be the arbiter is a key question and what will be the methodology to reduce the countering parameters among competing nations is a challenge which BRICS will have to handle ab-initio.
- Hegemonism and domination or even intent therefore needs to be assiduously avoided for a fruitful dialogue to occur. Perceptions can be more dangerous than reality.
- Dialogue, Disruption, Dissonance and Dominance especially, which is generated due to existing geopolitical fault lines, would need to be amicably addressed through 3Ms approach.
- We must discard Huntington’s ‘Clash of Civilizations’ and Fukuyama’s “End of History’ theory and thesis because the reservoir of culture, civilization, ethos and righteousness was not considered of the civilizations like ours.

### **An Indian Perspective:**

While chairing the BRICS presidency in 2021, Prime Minister Modi said ‘The theme that India has selected for its tenure of Chairmanship demonstrates exactly this priority – ‘BRICS@15: Intra BRICS Cooperation for Continuity, Consolidation and Consensus’. These four Cs are in a way the fundamental principles of our BRICS partnership.’

In one of my recent writings<sup>i</sup>, I observed that Asianism, given its intrinsic strength, has gone through its own evolution over the centuries as the major Asian civilisations and cultures have interacted often seamlessly and occasionally competed with one another. Assimilation has often been the result. Ancient is intrinsic to the Asian thought, philosophy, and existence. Harmony with nature and share and care attitude have been the hallmark for the quest for eternal peace and coexistence. Yet political Asianism has occasionally witnessed conflicts and wars in the name of supremacy and superiority which was hardly the real essence of the Asiatic value systems. The battle between the West and East accentuated that through the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and the World Wars I and II. Western system moved forward as Japan was defeated but eventually became a part of the western alliance system. India became

independent and avoided the Cold War era and geo political competition while remaining an integral part of global governance architecture by the dint of her ancient mystical heritage and fountain of knowledge , new found democratic credentials , moral and principled stance reflected through her non-aligned approaches and pragmatic emphasis on peace and development for the 1/6<sup>th</sup> of humanity thereby leading the newly freed developing countries from the clutches of colonialism across Asia to Africa . This has provided India an authoritative international voice of reason. And this is what will combine her software to soft power appeal. Through the centuries, India's benevolent and benign influence and approaches have been accepted in Asia and elsewhere and have remained ingrained across geographies and remains even relevant today for the international discourse. In this paper effort has been made to connect the Indian sub text in the re-emphasis of Asianism and role the timeless values and heritage could play provided India remains true to her lofty ideals. Time is ripe as the global pivot has shifted once again towards Asia. Indian diplomacy and the outreach are ready to bite the bait!

It has also been a fact of history for millennia that when India interacts with others in the international discourse or for a cause celebre it does from the strategic position of peaceful co-existence and non-violence which remain integral and have been the essence of teachings of Lord Buddha and Mahatma Gandhi. Even though she claims to be the founder of Algebra and trigonometry or for that matter Kautilya's diplomacy and 'Zero' by itself it does not believe in the 'zero sum' game in international discourse. But wishes to work with everyone believing in the global goods and commons that has most recently been witnessed in her Vaccine Diplomacy driven by guiding principle of 'Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam' -World is one family. It is in this spirit that Indian ethos and value systems and knowledge travelled to vast tracts of Asia and the world and remain vibrant in a transformed yet closely intertwined form with the local belief systems .Having suffered the quest for riches nearly by all the kind of invaders and colonial powers, India ( Bharat Varsha) has learnt the art of maintaining unity in diversity and thereby enriched further through osmosis and assimilation of ideas, ideals, cultural nuances that have been reflected through myriads of achievements and expressions . All these cumulatively have impacted India's world view.

It is important to identify some of the Indian ancient value systems and moralistic approaches that are even relevant in today's fractured international discourse and the transitional world order. However, for that to continue to remain relevant and have the legitimacy the modern-day India, which aims to become a 'Vishwa Guru' once again, must remain a beacon of high moral standards and inclusivity in her domestic discourse for she will be harshly judged by the eternal value systems and standards she has created for herself and propagates to the world. Meanwhile, being a Vishwa Mitra (friend of the world ) is the preferred course of diplomacy and global interactions while professing sane foreign policy with dialogue, diplomacy and respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity as enshrined in the UN Charter with multilateralism as the most viable matrix of cooperation.

Unfortunately, religion especially the politics of it has become a divisive factor for centuries both in domestic and international discourse. India has not only been the originator of four major religions Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism but a preserve of many other religious groups and cultural entities who made India their home. Persecuted Parsis and Jews not only found refuge in India but also enriched its culture and enterprise. Not many would know that Christianity and Islam came to India way before they went to Europe or the Middle

East and have become major religions in India as well. In fact from Fa Hien (during the reign of Chandra Gupta II) to Huen Tsang (during King HarshaVardhana) when India was known in China as Yintu or Indu to Al Berouni (Tahqiq-e Hind from 1030 AD) or Ibn Battuta (1333 AD during Tughlaq's time) and scores of others became the messengers and carriers of Indian knowledge to their world and beyond.

On the other hand, some major religions, which were born post beginning of AD and are monotheistic, tend to denigrate other non-Abrahamic religions propagating exclusivity. It is also a fact that the way the plethora of Gods and practices have existed in India's spiritual and religious philosophical domain they have provided the active tolerance as a desirable virtue and eventually the independent India followed a politically secular constitution where freedom to practice religion were dissociated from the State and became an individual's responsibility and constitutionally guaranteed. This also became equally important in practice of democracy where inclusivity predicates the societal interactions.

No wonder, Stephen Knapp, the noted scholar opined that "What we find in Vedic culture are areas of study, progress and expression that are as relevant today for human advancement as they were hundreds or thousands of years ago. India and its Vedic culture have contributed much to the world, such as its music, beautiful forms of art and architecture, martial arts, astronomy, holistic medicine in Ayurveda, and the mathematical system based on the number ten, along with its yoga and philosophy<sup>ii</sup>

India has been a firm believer in global welfare through unfettered access to global commons and global goods. Unfortunately, certain powers have preferred to constrain the access through myopic policies and power play. One could have understood it during the era of colonialism when colonisers dictated the rules of the one-sided game, but it appears that the neo colonialism is as much to be blamed for it in the modern era during the past seven decades in the post World War II. Apartheid of various kinds is still very much in play. Most recent examples have been the Vaccine apartheid and Green apartheid where developing world faced utter discrimination and therefore denied access to means to fight the pandemic and the climate change which still remains a major challenge.

It is in this context that India, which despite being the most populous country in the world with over 1/6<sup>th</sup> of the global population, not only provided medical assistance and vaccines to her own people but shared these with over 150 countries including the developed world as per their request. Former Brazilian President termed the Indian vaccine supply as the lifesaving legendary "Sanjeevani" drug of the epic Ramayana days. Fact that India despite her own challenges rose to the occasion when the western world was indulging in the 'Vaccine Apartheid' as claimed by the South Africa President Ramaphosa at the Franco-African summit, says it all. India believes and acts in unison with the universality of humankind. It is in the DNA of Indian culture and Indians in general. Think beyond your shores to help others in need dictates the standard discourse. Share and Care guide the actions of the Indian state and society which is amply evident in the capacity building assistance India provides to 161 countries mostly from the Global South across continents from Africa to Asia to Americas to Europe and Eurasia. No wonder her benign and global welfare-oriented leadership has enabled her to become the 'Voice of the Global South'.

In their daily prayers , Hindus invoke their Gods by saying the following in the civilizational language of Sanskrit ; By the way most philosophers and practitioners agree that Hinduism is a way of life .

ॐ सर्वे भवन्तु सुखिनः	Om Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah	Om, May All be Happy
सर्वे सन्तु निरामयाः।	Sarve Santu Niraamayaah	May All be Free from Illness
सर्वे भद्राणि पश्यन्तु	Sarve Bhadraanni Pashyant	May All See what is Auspicious
मा कश्चिद्दुःखभाग्भवेत् ।	Maa Kashcid-Duhkha-Bhaag-Bhavet	May no one Suffer
ॐ शान्तिःशान्तिःशान्तिः॥	Om Shaantih Shaantih Shaantih	Om Peace, Peace, Peace

India's approach to conflict resolution and peace is driven through dialogue and diplomacy and adherence to the principles of peaceful coexistence. Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam , the world is one family – does not necessarily think only of humans but the whole planet including nature, plants and animals which form the virtuous cycle of human existence . On Climate Change, India's inherent approach is so nature centric that they respect all life and its sustenance for ages hence fight against climate change comes so naturally. Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the G20 Summit and other international fora has often spoken of LiFE – Lifestyle for Environment as the guiding principle while taking all precautionary measures and policies to contain further deterioration. Emergence and launch of initiatives like International Solar Alliance (ISA) and Global Biofuels Alliance, CDRI -Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure are all manifestations of her civilizational values and heritage in the modern era. Mahatma Gandhi often reiterated that there is enough in the nature for the need of the humankind but not for their greed. But in the so-called developed world precisely the opposite happened and continues to happen. This is an existential problem, and everyone needs to be onboard. Could we not learn from our own ancestors and texts and practices!

India's G20 presidency in 2023 is a case in point which began with India defining the most apt theme of "One world , One family and One future' and where it was able to bridge the super power differences while making the G20, as People's G20 , hosting over 200 events across India . Issuance of the Delhi Declaration was an eventual achievement where consensus prevailed for the larger good. Inclusivity was demonstrated by India holding two Voice of Global South Summits when the views of the developing world were not only ascertained but mainstreamed. More importantly it was able to create a consensus to include African Union- representing 55 countries as a permanent member which would provide them a voice and capacity to flag their issues directly from within. What can be more telling on inclusivity!

In my view, India's foreign policy is world centric and based on principles of equity and justice and sanity in international discourse as it grows strongly on a robust economic path being the largest democracy, most populous country. third largest economy by Purchasing power Parity (PPP) and a first responder in any crisis. This policy is followed through the 3 Ms principles of Mutual Respect, Mutual Interests and Mutual Sensitivities and friendliness with all. The key drivers are 5 Vs – Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam (World is One family) and

Vaccine Maitri (Vaccine friendship) is part of it; Being the Voice of the Global south; Value based foreign policy with strategic autonomy as a prime mover; and to become a Vishwa Mitra (friend of the world) . And to that end and for reformed multilateralism India aims to propagate Samman (Respect); Samvad (Dialogue); Sahyog (cooperation) ,; Shanti (Peace ) and Samridhi( Prosperity) for all. Isn't that the most plausible way out of the morass of defeatism and destruction!

That is why, in totality if one were to summarise and I would like to quote Dr S Jaishankar, Indian Foreign Minister for this, who in his celebrated book: *Why Bharat Matters* writes that “India can matter by just being there, as a market place, as a contested ground , a resource or a platform as it did during colonial times or it can matter through the power of the ideas and actions as an engine of, a hub of innovation or a democracy that delivers”, he further expostulates “ the case of India is more than just of demography. For it is among the few civilizational states that has survived the ravages of history ... India takes a long view especially regarding global issues. Many of their goal and objectives are built on traditions that are not readily shared by contemporary peers. Simply put there is not only a scale and history but an exceptionalism about India that makes it matter.”<sup>iii</sup>

### **In Conclusion ...**

An expanding BRICS has all the ingredients to evolve into a credible space for dialogue among civilizations by frank and honest admission in the first place and discussion over the divergences and finding a path through consensus for the global good. However, it is imperative that intra-organisational dissonance must be seriously studied through a realistic assessment and three-dimensional prism. There is no denying the fact the Sino-Indian, Iran and Saudi Arabia and Egypt and Ethiopia among the current members do have deep mistrust and perhaps genuine reasons and grievances due to the hegemonistic approaches of some powers in the respective regions. How should that be bridged as BRICS works on consensus and does not deal with bilateral issues, continue to remain a challenge. Indians have often been described as “argumentative” and legacy of “Shastrarth” intellectual discourse and dialogue have entrenched the unity in diversity in the past, present and indeed will do so in future as well.

BRICS has done amazingly well, and future holds greater promise. As Russia carries on its ambitious Presidency in 2024, President Putin's words ring prophetic “In general, Russia will continue to promote all aspects of the BRICS partnership in three key areas: politics and security, economy and finance, and cultural and humanitarian contacts.” He further added "We cooperate on the principles of equality, partnership support, respect for each other's interests, and this is the essence of the future-oriented strategic course of our association, a course that meets the aspirations of the main part of the world community, the so-called global majority,"<sup>iv</sup> Let us hope the BRICS will surpass the expectations in consensus building ,culture, commerce and connectivity including that in digital, physical and spiritual domain through dialogue and diplomacy and mutual respect which will engender harmony and hope .There is a crying need for a new thought and platform in this disruptive world which can only come from the ancient civilizations . Time for right ideas has come. But let us not forget Charity begins at home.

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### **NOTES**

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<sup>i</sup> Asianism -the Indian sub text” special issue of Startegic Analysis -Asianism Retold by Taylor & Francis for IDSA Vol 46 July-August 2022 page 416

<sup>ii</sup> [www.stephen-knapp.com](http://www.stephen-knapp.com)

<sup>iii</sup> Why Bharat Matters by Dr S Jaishankar p 199/200 Rupa Publications 2024

<sup>iv</sup> [Putin says BRICS works for 'global majority' | Reuters](#)