

Saffronizing diplomacy: the Indian Foreign Service under Hindu nationalist rule

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This article presents a first draft analysis of a moving target, still developing its institutional shape: the saffronization of the Indian Foreign Service (IFS). Saffronization—a process named after the colour saffron that adorns Hindu nationalist symbols—involves imagining India as a Hindu nation, both by reconstructing an imaginary past defined by Hindu unity and by refashioning political institutions to reflect majoritarian ideals.¹ Inside the Indian state bureaucracy, saffronization began in 2014 with the election of Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi, of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and has gathered pace since his re-election in 2019. Institutional path dependencies and the capacity constraints of a severely understaffed service mean that individual Indian diplomats have unusual autonomy in respect of day-to-day diplomatic conduct.² Yet very little is known about how Indian career diplomats have made sense of the change in political power in New Delhi. It is this gap that this article addresses.

The experience of Indian diplomats invites a broader question in the global age of populism: how do contemporary diplomatic services adjust to a nationalist regime coming into power? I suggest that the slow internalization of new political norms and diplomatic practices is only partly a function of ideological misalignment between an internationalist bureaucracy and a nationalist government. What also matters is the extent to which the status of the social class represented by the bureaucrats is undermined by the government's political project. Old school internationalist diplomats resist populist incursions into diplomacy partly because these incursions threaten to conform to Pareto's theory of elite circulation: radical regime change does not occur when rulers are overthrown from below and an elite-less future is born, but rather when one kind of elite replaces another.³

In India, career diplomats are caught in a double bind. Hindu nationalism represents a rejection of much of the foundational dogma and diplomatic tradition that have defined the IFS since independence in 1947. Yet saffronization also promises

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¹ See e.g. Edward Anderson and Christophe Jaffrelot, 'Hindu nationalism and the "saffronisation of the public sphere": an interview with Christophe Jaffrelot', *Contemporary South Asia* 26: 4, 2018, pp. 468–82.

² Manjari Chatterjee Miller, 'The un-argumentative Indian? Ideas about the rise of India and their interaction with domestic structures', *India Review* 13: 1, 2014, pp. 7–8.

³ Vilfredo Pareto, *The mind and society: non-logical conduct*, vol. 1 (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1935), p. 1563.

its own kind of diplomatic elite circulation: the once dominant Anglophone class of diplomats is to be replaced by a new Indian elite invested in Hinduism, the Hindi language and a narrower sense of nationalistic pride. Many diplomats feel personally excluded from this narrative of ‘authentic’ Indianness. In fact, the traditional upper echelons of the IFS represent precisely the kind of cosmopolitan, secular, westernized, upper-class India that Modi’s populist rhetoric has sought to devalue in the eyes of the nation. Therefore, it is not only non-Hindus whose status is threatened under Hindu nationalist rule, but also the traditional elites who have long presided over the governance of postcolonial India.

The saffronization of the IFS matters for the larger quest to understand how diplomatic bureaucracies respond to populist leadership, as well as for a grounded understanding of rising India as a global player. First, a ‘nascent and burgeoning scholarship on the nexus between populism and foreign policy’ is emerging at the intersection of International Relations, comparative politics and sociology;⁴ but little work exists on the role of career diplomats in it, especially in non-European contexts.⁵ A study of Indian diplomats contributes to a globally relevant reading of how diplomats operate under populist leadership. India’s case is particularly fascinating, since its career diplomats have unusual autonomy—and, unlike in US state bureaucracy, for example, there is no tradition of lateral recruitment of specialists from outside government service which could be used to expedite institutional change through political appointments.⁶

Second, interrogating the lived experience of diplomats makes for a more socially attuned understanding of rising India. The IFS plays an outsized role in Indian foreign policy-making. Therefore, if its character is changing, this is likely to have consequences for the behaviour of a major rising power. Scholars of Indian foreign policy such as Rajesh Basrur, Ian Hall, Manjari Chatterjee Miller and Kate Sullivan de Estrada have persuasively argued in the pages of *International Affairs* and elsewhere that Modi’s purportedly transformative approach to foreign policy has failed to defy any basic tenets of India’s long-running foreign policy doctrines.⁷

I suggest, however, that change is afoot elsewhere: among the elite diplomatic cadre to whom it falls to conduct everyday diplomacy under Hindu nationalist rule. While they may be incremental, one would expect changes in diplomatic tone, professional priorities and personal conviction among diplomats to manifest themselves in interactions with foreign counterparts, especially over politically charged subjects such as Indo-Pakistan relations or the very question of India’s

⁴ Sandra Destradi, David Cadier and Johannes Plegemann, ‘Populism and foreign policy: a research agenda (introduction to the special issue)’, *Comparative European Politics*, forthcoming, publ. online 14 Sept. 2021, p. 2.

⁵ A welcome exception is found in Michelle Morais de Sá e Silva, ‘Once upon a time, a human rights ally: the state and its bureaucracy in right-wing populist Brazil’, *Human Rights Quarterly* 42: 3, 2020, pp. 646–66.

⁶ Devesh Kapur, ‘Why does the Indian state both fail and succeed?’, *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 34: 1, 2020, p. 48.

⁷ Rajesh Basrur, ‘Modi’s foreign policy fundamentals: a trajectory unchanged’, *International Affairs* 93: 1, 2017, pp. 7–26; Ian Hall, ‘Is a “Modi Doctrine” emerging in Indian foreign policy?’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 69: 3, 2015, pp. 247–52; Manjari Chatterjee Miller and Kate Sullivan de Estrada, ‘Pragmatism in Indian foreign policy: how ideas constrain Modi’, *International Affairs* 93: 1, 2017, pp. 27–49.

role on the world stage. To gauge whether these changes will reflect Hindu nationalist priorities or internal resistance to them, we must first understand how diplomats perceive Hindu nationalism. The saffronization of a historically secular and relatively liberal bureaucracy like the IFS raises questions of future impact across the wider Indian state machinery, too—particularly about the degree to which more politically exposed and domestically orientated bureaucracies like the Indian Administrative Service or the Indian Police Service might come under challenge. These changes may transform the very nature of India's bureaucracy precisely as the country's global footprint is growing.

The article builds its arguments on the back of a larger research project on the IFS, for which I conducted 85 candid semi-structured interviews between February and June 2019 in New Delhi and Bangalore. Of the interviewees, 33 were career diplomats who had personally served under Modi, 47 had retired by the time of his swearing-in ceremony in May 2014, one was a BJP affiliate working for the Ministry of External Affairs, and two were Indian foreign policy experts. I also conducted interviews with some former ministers and current or former members of the Rajya Sabha, India's upper house of parliament. Additionally, the article draws on archival research in the National Archives of India, and on papers and oral histories found in the archives of the Nehru Memorial Library in New Delhi.

Interviewing Indian diplomats is a fraught endeavour. Scholars such as Manjari Chatterjee Miller, Deep K. Datta-Ray and Swapna Kona Nayudu have conducted such interviews on diplomats' social attitudes and working practices.⁸ These have not, however, addressed diplomats' engagement with Hindu nationalism. Can one learn anything of substance by engaging with individuals whose careers are premised on smoothing out rough edges and persuading an interlocutor of the truth of any matter, however implausible or unpopular? Is there not a self-censorship that permeates conversation in an age of accelerating attacks on academic and press freedom in India?⁹ There was often the hint of a taboo on discussions of Hindu nationalism, both because diplomats worried that dissenters would be vilified as out-of-touch elites and because the clash with the existing institutional culture was striking enough to elicit strong views in both directions. Yet the anonymity accorded to interviewees relaxed the boundaries of acceptable speech beyond the standards that commonly govern commentary on Indian diplomacy in the age of Modi. Recently retired officers were most forthright in their assessments, but serving diplomats often ventured their own commentary too, even during interviews in which I raised no questions on the government myself. Sometimes diplomats offered subtle gestures, which I discuss below, that allowed them plausible deniability. Indeed, these interviews, conducted around the time

⁸ Manjari Chatterjee Miller, 'India's feeble foreign policy: a would-be great power resists its own rise', *Foreign Affairs* 92: 3, 2013, pp. 14–19; Deep K. Datta-Ray, *The making of Indian diplomacy: a critique of Eurocentrism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Swapna Kona Nayudu, "'India looks at the world': Nehru, the Indian Foreign Service and world diplomacy", *Diplomatica* 2: 1, 2020, pp. 100–17.

⁹ See e.g. Academic Freedom Monitoring Project, 'Scholars at Risk Reports on Jawaharlal Nehru University', *Scholars at Risk*, 2019, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2019-12-09-jawaharlal-nehru-university>; Reporters without Borders, 'India: Modi tightens his grip on the media', 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/india>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 6 Nov. 2021.)

of Modi's re-election for a second term, may have been considerably more uncensored than comparable interviews in the future will be, as Hindu nationalism cements itself as the dominant ideological idiom in New Delhi.

The article proceeds in three stages. First, it considers changes to diplomatic discourse, protocol and training initiated under Modi. Second, it details how diplomats have adjusted to or resisted the saffronization of their service, and how they navigate their commitments to the international community under changing domestic conditions. In the third section, I consider saffronization as emblematic of the analytical need to understand populist challenges to conventional diplomacy not merely as ideological critiques of internationalism but as sociological responses to the elites with whom these ideologies are associated. Conversely, diplomatic resistance to populism also reflects a worry that nationalist leadership will invalidate the social status of the kinds of cosmopolitan, elite-educated individuals that diplomatic services often attract.

Trading solidarity for saffron: from Nehruvian internationalism to Modi's Hindutva

Change and continuity

Indian diplomatic tradition has stood in the shadow of its iconic first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru (in office 1947–64) for much of its postcolonial existence.¹⁰ The core tenets of Nehru's 'idea of India' went virtually unchallenged inside India's diplomatic circles after his passing in 1964.¹¹ In his dual role as foreign minister and prime minister, Nehru worked intimately with the small cadre of diplomats around him, borrowing from the cultural grammar of the freedom struggle a conception of diplomacy as global liberation. This was postcoloniality in the making, and in India it was conceived as 'Nehruvian' in nature: secular, left-leaning, internationalist, and fiercely invested in democratizing an international order emerging from underneath the yoke of colonialism.¹² For Nehruvians, the domestic and the international were inextricably intertwined and therefore required, in the words of Foreign Secretary T. N. Kaul (1968–72), 'look[ing] upon India in the world perspective and India's struggle for independence as part of the struggle of all colonial peoples and territories'.¹³ Nehru endowed the IFS with an 'internationalist, globalist culture', a proud Cambridge-educated former senior

¹⁰ Pratap Bhanu Mehta, 'Still under Nehru's shadow? The absence of foreign policy frameworks in India', *India Review* 8: 3, 2009, pp. 209–33.

¹¹ For a long-running debate on 'the idea of India', see Sunil Khilnani, *The idea of India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2004); Perry Anderson, *The Indian ideology* (London: Verso, 2013); Partha Chatterjee, Sudipta Kaviraj and Nivedita Menon, *The Indian ideology: three responses to Perry Anderson* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2015). On the persistence of Nehru's vision, see Ian Hall, 'The persistence of Nehruvianism in India's strategic culture', in Ashley J. Tellis, Alison Szalwinski and Michael Wills, eds, *Strategic Asia 2016–17: understanding strategic cultures in the Asia Pacific* (Seattle and Washington DC: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2016), pp. 141–67.

¹² Priya Chacko, *Indian foreign policy: the politics of postcolonial identity from 1947 to 2004* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

¹³ T. N. Kaul, 'Draft of an introduction to a manuscript of autobiographical nature', n.d., p. 6. 'Miscellaneous articles by T. N. Kaul', contained in 'Speeches/writings by him', serial no. 141, in T. N. Kaul papers, Nehru Memorial Library.

official elucidated; it was 'like fish swimming in water' for old-school officers to consider themselves part of a larger project of remaking the world in the image of its former margins.¹⁴ Even the BJP Prime Minister A. B. Vajpayee (1998–2004) once called himself a Nehruvian—meaning, argued one retired diplomat, that the founding principles of the IFS were not fundamentally challenged until 2014.¹⁵ The election of a Hindu nationalist government calls these commitments into question, however. If Nehru was a towering figure in Indian diplomacy, Modi, too, seeks to be one: while the individual influence of Indian career diplomats has long ebbed and flowed in tandem with changing governments,¹⁶ the rapid concentration of powers in the prime minister's office under Modi has been notable.¹⁷

Despite protestations to the contrary from diplomats themselves, politicization is not an inherently novel phenomenon for the IFS. Nehru's intimate involvement tied the executive branch to the service from its very beginnings. The Emergency, a period from 1975 to 1977 during which Prime Minister Indira Gandhi suspended the normal functioning of India's democratic apparatus, introduced the concept of 'committed bureaucracy' to the institutional lexicon of the IFS, and diplomats have often strategically aligned themselves with the Congress Party or more recently the BJP, sometimes even leaving the IFS to assume ministerial positions.¹⁸ Indeed, if Modi represents a deviation from a democratic norm, the Emergency may offer a parallel. In interviews, diplomats who witnessed it rationalized their decision to stay within a compromised state machinery by emphasizing their belief that the suspension of a democratic, broadly tolerant governing ideal would prove a temporary aberration, and that the outward-facing IFS would be better insulated against political pressures than domestic branches of the state bureaucracy.¹⁹

What does stand out by historical comparison is the break with official secularism, which has not faced a systemic challenge inside the IFS before. To combat exoticized western impressions of India as inherently Hindu in the 1970s, diplomats even took to correcting the convention in Spanish-speaking countries of referring to Indian nationals as 'Hindu': for example, Indian Ambassador to Argentina B. K. Sanyal requested in 1971 that the Ministry of External Affairs instruct all foreign offices in countries where India had missions to limit the term's use to instances describing religion, not nationality, having already written to the Spanish Royal Academy of Letters about the term's description in Spanish dictionaries.²⁰ Similarly, officers entertaining religious figures at embassies have traditionally received a reprimand from their superiors.²¹ In other words, Indian

¹⁴ Interview 23, April 2019.

¹⁵ Interview 43, April 2019.

¹⁶ J. N. Dixit, *Indian Foreign Service: history and challenge* (Delhi: Konark, 2005), pp. 199, 241, 252.

¹⁷ Sumit Ganguly, 'Has Modi truly changed India's foreign policy?', *Washington Quarterly* 40: 2, 2017, p. 142; James Manor, 'A precarious enterprise: Multiple antagonisms during year one of the Modi government', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 38: 4, 2015, p. 737.

¹⁸ Interview 45, April 2019; Dixit, *Indian Foreign Service*, pp. 177, 241.

¹⁹ Interview 4, March 2019; interview 22, Apr. 2019; interview 24, April 2019.

²⁰ B. K. Sanyal (Ambassador to Argentina), 'Letter to the MEA', 3 March 1971, 'Use of the word "Hindu" in Argentina when referring to Indian nationals'. File W(II) 307/3/71, Ministry of External Affairs section, National Archives of India.

²¹ Interview 7, March 2019; interview 45, April 2019; interview 85, May 2019.

diplomats have in the past consciously countered any foreign impressions of India as a *Hindu rashtra*, or Hindu nation.

Hindutva as everyday diplomatic practice

With its intellectual roots in the writings of authors such as V. D. Savarkar, M. S. Golwalkar and Deendayal Upadhyaya, Hindutva—the predominant expression of Hindu nationalism in India—emphasizes the spiritual superiority of Hinduism, believes in a conservative imperative of natural authority under unified Hindu domination, and proffers a narrative of Hindu victimization at the hands of Muslims as an internal other.²² In its diplomatic garb, Hindutva challenges the project of representing a diverse, secular India. What it offers instead is a political investment in civilizational greatness, hyper-masculine conceptions of international security, and anti-western ideologies of Hindu revivalism.²³ Slowly, the blurry edges of ambiguous Indian identity, traditionally more civic than ethnic or religious in nature among India's ruling elites, are being drawn in sharper strokes: a once almost ethereal conversation about 'Indian culture' is, one Muslim officer argued, becoming a conversation about 'blood and soil'.²⁴ Hindutva therefore revises India's diplomatic identity: away from a Nehruvian postcolonial Indian-ness premised on transnational solidarity across the global South and towards a saffronization of the Indian self, insistent on uniform civilizational and religious identity.

The Hindutva accents on everyday diplomatic life involve, in the words of one senior ambassador who served under the first Modi government, 'going back to more quote-unquote "Indian" aspects' of diplomacy: a reassertion of India's 'civilizational' identity and Hinduism, expressed in annual diplomatic practices such as the celebration of Kumbh Mela, a major religious festival.²⁵ There has been a proliferation of Hindu events held at or sponsored by Indian embassies, including those organized by the paramilitary Hindutva organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)²⁶—followed by an 'immediate backlash' from the service's religious minorities and secular-minded Hindus, one officer noted.²⁷ The levels of outside interference by RSS or BJP functionaries are difficult to verify. The BBC foreign affairs correspondent Ashis Ray suggests that after 2014, 'senior diplomats began to look over their shoulders, RSS activists were planted at Embassies and High Commissions and local loyalists of Modi started bossing over pliant or petrified Heads of Mission'.²⁸ While the details of institutional intervention are

²² Thomas Blom Hansen, *The saffron wave: democracy and Hindu nationalism in modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

²³ Ian Hall, *Modi and the reinvention of Indian foreign policy* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2019), p. 41.

²⁴ Interview 7, March 2019.

²⁵ Interview 3, March 2019.

²⁶ The RSS ('National Volunteer Organization') has intimate ties to the BJP. See e.g. Walter Andersen and Shridhar D. Damle, *Messengers of Hindu nationalism: how the RSS reshaped India* (London: Hurst, 2018).

²⁷ Interview 52, May 2019.

²⁸ Ashis Ray, 'Has the "Foreign Service" declined?', *National Herald*, 14 July 2020, <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/opinion/has-the-foreign-service-declined>.

disputed, its effects are evident: one officer, who had once been lectured on the importance of a secular IFS by Nehru himself, considered it ‘almost demolished’.²⁹

The soft end of saffronization overlaps with a seemingly innocuous celebration of Indian culture. For example, Modi insists on visits to Hindu and Buddhist temples as part of his itinerary on foreign trips, and chooses Hindu artefacts like the religious tract the *Bhagavad Gita* as gifts to political counterparts.³⁰ Rajesh Basrur questions the diplomatic novelty and relevance of cultural–religious inflections such as yoga and Ayurveda, especially since the Indian Council of Cultural Relations has been promoting such forms of ‘soft power’ since its founding in 1950.³¹ It is certainly possible to overstate the cultural cache of diplomatic practices of this kind. And yet the tenor in which Indian culture is propagated is significant, since the very possibility of fronting ‘soft’ features is what allows Hindutva to find international respectability. The ‘soft power’ emphasis on yoga—at India’s initiative, the UN has observed International Yoga Day since 2014—portrays India as a ‘benign and beneficial cultural force in global affairs’, while also employing a globally popular phenomenon to normalize tenets of cultural–nationalist discourse.³² Moreover, even ‘soft’ Hindutva marks a departure from a time when ambassadors would negotiate with Spanish dictionary-makers to combat impressions of India as a *Hindu rashtra*.

With the Modi administration has also come an aggressive push to marginalize English in diplomatic communications, in favour of Hindi. This may be framed to foreign audiences as a delayed ‘decolonization of the mind’, as India sheds the language of its former colonizer. However, it also serves the domestically controversial end of cementing Hindi, most prevalent in northern India’s ‘Hindi belt’, as the country’s one ‘authentic’ language in a diverse country whose constitution recognizes 22 regional languages.³³ At the time of the interviews in 2019, the very first Hindi-language book for the Indian Council of World Affairs was close to publication, the first Hindi-language foreign policy conference was being planned, and the prime minister’s conference for heads of mission had been held in Hindi, with even ambassadors struggling with Hindi made to speak in it.³⁴ This is part of a wider bureaucratic pattern, with heads of various government ministries called in front of official language committees to testify on how Hindi is being brought into ministerial work. Should these efforts be deemed insufficient, you ‘get quite a scolding’, one mid-level joint secretary warned.³⁵

This cultural aversion to English will have diplomatic consequences, for English has long presented the IFS with an inherited diplomatic advantage. Deprived of

²⁹ Interview 25, April 2019.

³⁰ S. D. Muni, ‘Modi’s “neighbourhood first” initiative’, in Sinderpal Singh, ed., *Modi and the world: reconstructing Indian foreign policy* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2017), p. 126.

³¹ Rajesh Basrur, ‘Modi, Hindutva, and foreign policy’, *International Studies Perspectives* 20: 1, 2018, p. 10.

³² Aavriti Gautam and Julian Droogan, ‘Yoga soft power: how flexible is the posture?’, *Journal of International Communication* 24: 1, 2017, p. 18.

³³ On the complex language politics of English versus vernacular languages in India, see e.g. D. L. Sheth, ‘The great language debate: politics of metropolitan versus vernacular India’, in D. L. Sheth and Peter Ronald deSouza, eds, *At home with democracy: a theory of Indian politics* (Singapore: Springer, 2018), pp. 169–95.

³⁴ Interview 61, May 2019.

³⁵ Interview 61, May 2019.

hard power as a currency of diplomatic persuasion, English established itself early on as one of the sharpest assets of eloquent Indian diplomats, known abroad for marshalling their arguments in expressive turns of phrase—a gift which diplomats believe stood them in good stead in negotiations.³⁶ English made India a ‘natural’ choice for committee work and drafting at the UN on issues ranging from conflict mediation to international development,³⁷ granting the country significantly more diplomatic sway than its rank in the world’s material distribution of power would have suggested³⁸—as an Anglophile diplomat strategized, ‘the person who presents the first draft has the advantage’.³⁹ For all the talk of Modi as the quintessential pragmatist,⁴⁰ his disapproval of officials using their expressive English to maximal diplomatic effect is driven by a cultural–linguistic preference for Hindi as the ‘authentically’ Indian idiom over English as a tainted language of the foreigner.

Diplomatic pedagogies, too, are acquiring hues of saffron. Many changes to diplomatic training, which successful IFS applicants undertake before assuming their first post, are ‘an offshoot of this government’, as one diplomat sympathetic to the administration phrased it.⁴¹ They follow the mandate of the ‘Ayush’ ministry, established in 2014, which, among other indigenous modalities, promotes Ayurveda and homoeopathy; yoga is accorded a particular centrality, with academic and physical classes to prepare future diplomats to promote yoga abroad.⁴² While ‘protocol attachments’ usually involve diplomatic probationers joining international summits or conferences, in 2019 they were dispatched to the Kumbh Mela religious festival in the recently renamed city of Prayagraj (a Sanskrit word replacing the Mughal name, Allahabad).⁴³ In February 2020, what had been known as the Foreign Service Institute since its founding as a training centre for diplomats in 1986 became the Sushma Swaraj Institute of Foreign Service, in honour of the late BJP minister of external affairs (2014–19).⁴⁴ Many diplomats once known for decrying the mimicry of western diplomatic practice in IFS training now wondered how to advocate for more Indian culture without sanctioning a pedagogy of ‘aggressive superiority’ which exalts a parochial Indianness while rejecting all things ‘foreign’ as culturally corrupt.⁴⁵

³⁶ Interview 12, March 2019; interview 17, March 2019; interview 25, April 2019; interview 43, April 2019.

³⁷ Interview 4, March 2019; interview 20, April 2019; interview 26, April 2019; interview 28, April 2019; interview 29, April 2019.

³⁸ See e.g. Shyam Saran, ‘India and multilateralism: a practitioner’s perspective’, in Waheguru Pal Singh Sidhu, Pratap Bhanu Mehta and Bruce D. Jones, eds, *Shaping the emerging world: India and the multilateral order* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013), p. 43.

³⁹ Interview 28, April 2019.

⁴⁰ See e.g. Harsh V. Pant and Yogesh Joshi, ‘Indo-US relations under Modi: the strategic logic underlying the embrace’, *International Affairs* 93: 1, 2017, pp. 133–46; Surupa Gupta, Rani D. Mullen, Rajesh Basur, Ian Hall, Nicolas Blarel, Manjeet S. Pardesi and Sumit Ganguly, eds, ‘Indian foreign policy under Modi: a new brand or just repackaging?’, *International Studies Perspectives* 20: 1, 2019, pp. 1–45.

⁴¹ Interview 38, April 2019.

⁴² Interview 32, April 2019.

⁴³ Interview 32, April 2019.

⁴⁴ ‘Home—Sushma Swaraj Institute of Foreign Service’, <https://ssifs.mea.gov.in/>.

⁴⁵ Interview 4, March 2019.

(Inter)nationalism reconsidered

There is a paradox at the heart of Modi's quest for global recognition. Although he is socially invested in personal rapport with world leaders,⁴⁶ and his increasingly authoritarian moves at home are widely interpreted as damaging India's stature,⁴⁷ Modi rejects the importance of cross-cultural communicability in diplomacy. During an address to diplomatic probationers in the presence of media representatives on 12 June 2014, the newly elected prime minister compared foreign nations to a haughty aunt, never as deserving of diplomats' loyalty as Bharat Mata (Mother India): 'Apni ma phate purane kapdon mein bhi toh bhi ma hoti hain, aur mausi agar ache kapdon mein ho toh bhi mausi hi rehti hain' ('Your mother is still your mother even in old and torn clothes, whereas your aunt, even in her best finery, is still an aunt').⁴⁸ The worldly diplomat, conversant in diplomatic etiquette, was no longer an ideal to be imbibed: 'Chammach kahan rahkna hain ... in sab baton se hatke kaam karo' ('Where your spoon has to be laid ... ignore that kind of issue and do your work'). For the UN veteran and former Congress minister of state for external affairs, Shashi Tharoor, the taunt was emblematic of 'the Modi notion of stoutly resisting the siren call of foreign countries while haranguing others about the strengths of your own'.⁴⁹

Indeed, Hindutva diplomacy does not allow for the compatibility of internationalist commitments and nationalist preoccupations. In this negation, it stands at odds with IFS tradition. For diplomats who emerged under Congress rule, cosmopolitanism meant that 'global citizenship' and national loyalties were never mutually exclusive—what Ulrich Beck calls the 'both/and' logic of cosmopolitanism, juxtaposed to the 'either/or' logic of nationalism.⁵⁰ One retired multilateralist recalled his civil service entry interview in the late 1960s, when the interviewer representing the Indian Police Service told him that the correct answer to a question about a diplomat's most important quality would have been 'patriotism': for effective diplomacy, 'it's the opposite that is true; you need to attenuate your pursuit of the national interest' in favour of a conciliatory cosmopolitanism.⁵¹ In this Nehruvian reading of the national interest, Beck's 'both/and' logic was at play: cosmopolitanism became a sophisticated version of an attenuated 'patriotism through a different lens'.⁵²

Since 2014, patriotism through a different lens is giving way to diplomacy as nationalism by other means. As one former foreign secretary noted, 'a strong assertion of national identity' is now expected in the discharge of diplomatic

⁴⁶ Hall, *Modi and the reinvention of Indian foreign policy*, p. 150.

⁴⁷ Manjari Chatterjee Miller, 'India's authoritarian streak: what Modi risks with his divisive populism', *Foreign Affairs*, 30 May 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/india/2018-05-30/indias-authoritarian-streak>; Kate Sullivan de Estrada, 'In the world's eyes, the Indian state may be declining but its citizenry is rising', *The Wire*, 25 Dec. 2019, <https://thewire.in/rights/india-citizenship-protests-narendra-modi>.

⁴⁸ Shashi Tharoor, *India shastra: reflections on the nation in our time* (New Delhi: Aleph, 2014), p. 59.

⁴⁹ Tharoor, *India shastra*, p. 59.

⁵⁰ Ulrich Beck, *Cosmopolitan vision* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2006), p. 57.

⁵¹ Interview 28, April 2019.

⁵² Interview 28, April 2019.

duties.⁵³ A BJP-affiliated contract employee of the Ministry of External Affairs declared that the old-fashioned regard for cosmopolitan niceties had only ever tied India's hands as it fended for itself abroad.⁵⁴ Much as Nehru's postcolonial nationalism was the basis of his Third Worldist and multilateralist world-view, so too Modi's Hindu nationalism is intimately tied to India's diplomatic existence. Or, in the phrasing of a devoted multilateralist who served under Modi's first term: 'If India looks narrowly at itself, it will look narrowly at the world.'⁵⁵ Diplomats are expected to adjust their ideals and habits accordingly.

Adaptation and resistance: diplomats under Hindutva

It has been speculated that Modi derives backing for his religiously tinted diplomacy not from the IFS officers who staff the Ministry of External Affairs but from his BJP party.⁵⁶ This seems to be broadly true of the service's historically dominant Anglophile elites, socialized as they are into Nehruvian world-views. At the same time, responses to Modi's reign often reflect a sociological dividing line, pitting traditional elites against a more demographically representative officer intake in recent years. Former and current diplomats debate the essence of majoritarianism, the diplomatic purchase of Hindutva and the foreign policy overtures under Modi on an ongoing basis in a closed Google group of about a thousand members.⁵⁷

Modi's reign is too current for there to exist publicly available archival material recording diplomats' attitudes towards his Hindutva regime. The Nehru Memorial Library does, however, hold exchanges between some of the service's earliest officers responding to the infamous Hindu nationalist violence unleashed at the illegal demolition of the Babri Masjid, a contested mosque, in the northern city of Ayodhya in 1992. In letters from December 1992 and February 1993, the retired Indian ambassador Arthur Lall writes to his former colleague B. K. Nehru denouncing the 'stupid lack of civilized restraint displayed first at Ayodhya and subsequently in many parts of the country',⁵⁸ and wondering whether the BJP has 'taken into account the regional and international consequences of its actions, not just its actions, but the interpretation that Ms [*sic*] around the world will give to them?', following political statements which, to Lall, were 'so prehistorical as to make one despair'.⁵⁹ Beyond dispersed archival finds, it is in confidential interviews that diplomats can articulate their positions.

⁵³ Interview 45, April 2019.

⁵⁴ Interview 2, Feb. 2019.

⁵⁵ Interview 27, April 2019.

⁵⁶ Ian Hall, 'Narendra Modi's new religious diplomacy', *International Studies Perspectives* 20: 1, 2019, p. 13.

⁵⁷ Interview 1, Feb. 2019; interview 10, March 2019; interview 15, March 2019; interview 35, April 2019.

⁵⁸ Arthur S. Lall, 'Letter from Arthur Lall to B. K. Nehru', 8 Dec. 1992, 'Individual correspondence' between B. K. Nehru and Arthur Lall, in B. K. Nehru papers, Nehru Memorial Library.

⁵⁹ Arthur S. Lall, 'Letter to B. K. Nehru', 3 Feb. 1993, 'Individual correspondence' between B. K. Nehru and Arthur Lall, in B. K. Nehru papers, Nehru Memorial Library.

Riding the saffron surge

Responses to Hindu nationalist rule over the IFS take many forms. There are officers who have professionally benefited from it: Modi has surrounded himself with retired and seconded diplomats, appointing former foreign secretary Subrahmanyam Jaishankar as his minister of external affairs in 2019 and filling senior positions in the prime minister's office with trusted IFS appointees.⁶⁰ At the same time, many of those who aligned themselves with aspects of Modi's reign sought hard to distinguish between a 'modernizing' Modi and the regressive expressions of Hindutva in whose name he governs. They spoke not of Hindutva but business, lauding the right-wing BJP's emphasis on economic diplomacy, exemplified by the 'Make in India' branding campaign which diplomats are expected to champion abroad.⁶¹ In many conversations, too, there was a sense that the sheer fact of Modi's accentuated interest in foreign affairs elevated the status of the IFS, offering opportunities for officers to prove themselves—even if this focus has been accompanied by a devolution of foreign policy-making into the orbit of the prime minister's office.⁶²

In daily diplomatic practice, one senior diplomat who served under the first Modi administration explained, the IFS had been 'quick to readjust to his style', modulating its Nehruvian rhetoric and adopting a 'modern-world approach to things'.⁶³ However, a more visibly concerned retired officer was convinced that the service's growing number of RSS sympathizers signified a cultural project of re-education, which could not be adequately described through the modernizing language of business but only captured in the nationalist argot in which Hindutva is traditionally articulated.⁶⁴ Indeed, the BJP affiliate working as a contractor for the Ministry of External Affairs expressed confidence in the slow churn of promotion patterns, estimating that it would take about one-and-a-half decades for attitudinal change to take root, with Nehruvian diplomats retiring and more nationalistically minded colleagues assuming their place.⁶⁵

There was some disagreement among officers on the sincerity with which colleagues embraced saffronization. One retired Muslim diplomat suggested that certain colleagues would 'wear their culture on their sleeve' only to win favour

⁶⁰ Sreemoy Talukdar, 'S Jaishankar's appointment as foreign minister reveals Narendra Modi's mindset on trust, acumen and leadership', *Firstpost*, 31 May 2019, <https://www.firstpost.com/politics/s-jaishankars-appointment-as-foreign-minister-reveals-narendra-modis-mindset-on-trust-acumen-and-leadership-6737001.html>; Press Trust of India, 'Sanjeev Kumar Singla appointed private secretary to PM Narendra Modi', *Livemint*, 20 July 2014, <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/xHmdQISo3l9bDHFmDtorxj/Sanjeev-Kumar-Singla-appointed-private-secretary-to-PM-Naren.html>; Press Trust of India, 'IFS officer Vivek Kumar appointed private secretary to PM Narendra Modi', *Business Standard India*, 19 July 2019, https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/ifs-officer-vivek-kumar-appointed-private-secretary-to-pm-modi-119071900678_1.html.

⁶¹ Interview 2, Feb. 2019; interview 3, March 2019; interview 32, April 2019; interview 39, April 2019; interview 45, April 2019.

⁶² Interview 1, Feb. 2019; interview 2, Feb. 2019; interview 3, March 2019; interview 4, March 2019; interview 5, March 2019.

⁶³ Interview 3, March 2019.

⁶⁴ Interview 7, March 2019.

⁶⁵ Interview 2, Feb. 2019.

with the current government.⁶⁶ In the words of a staunchly secular-minded Hindu colleague, nationalism ‘plays well now’.⁶⁷ Many, a former foreign secretary noted, had joined the BJP before the 2014 and 2019 elections—a pattern that matched an older practice of officers aligning themselves with the Congress Party.⁶⁸ Others speculated that the change in government would continue to reveal ‘closet RSS’ diplomats,⁶⁹ and those newly emboldened to ‘be proud of being Hindu’.⁷⁰

And yet, although diplomats were keen to speculate on colleagues’ politics, few were personally willing to be counted among Hindutva advocates. Partly, this was perhaps because of the stigma attached to diverging from the service’s traditional outlook, or because of the self-perpetuating sociology of interview ‘snowballing’, whereby like-minded officers would recommend each other as interviewees. By and large, in the most senior circles, sincerely held Hindutva allegiances seemed to be considered a fringe occupation of some ‘less bright’ colleagues.⁷¹ ‘I slept through the rise of the Hindutva movement,’ a retired Muslim diplomat frowned, because to diplomats it had always seemed like ‘something that happened on the side’, not inside their service.⁷² This inertia in the face of deviations from established service culture underlines the stickiness of old path dependencies, ideological arrangements and the social sanctions for violating them.

Most of the critique was courteously cryptic—even when the demeanour, tone or context may have betrayed more conviction than the utterance itself. ‘Loyalty or patriotism is not the monopoly of any religion,’ one retired Hindu diplomat noted;⁷³ and a veteran of the first Modi government mentioned, as though in passing, ‘you can’t make it a fetish to be Indian’.⁷⁴ One young officer, seemingly *à propos* of nothing, suggested that ‘there is a broad consensus’ among his colleagues ‘that we want to represent a modern, rising, progressive India’, and that, since ‘broadly the ethos remains intact’, ‘we will survive as it is’.⁷⁵ Others agreed cautiously that most of their colleagues have been ‘compelled to compromise’ on their values.⁷⁶ Many spoke in a seemingly theoretical register, but with knowing eyes and raised eyebrows, of the importance of distinguishing between a brand of enlightened patriotism and narrower forms of religious nationalism.⁷⁷ The intellectual historian Quentin Skinner is insistent that ‘anyone issuing a serious utterance will always be doing something as well as saying something’.⁷⁸ The pointed talk among officers of a more inclusive patriotism, or indeed the sheer frequency

⁶⁶ Interview 53, May 2019.

⁶⁷ Interview 85, May 2019.

⁶⁸ Interview 45, April 2019.

⁶⁹ Interview 85, May 2019.

⁷⁰ Interview 45, April 2019.

⁷¹ Interview 3, March 2019; interview 43, April 2019.

⁷² Interview 7, March 2019.

⁷³ Interview 1, Feb. 2019.

⁷⁴ Interview 3, March 2019.

⁷⁵ Interview 66, May 2019.

⁷⁶ Interview 14, March 2019.

⁷⁷ Interview 1, Feb. 2019; interview 3, March 2019; interview 42, April 2019; interview 45, April 2019; interview 48, May 2019; interview 52, May 2019.

⁷⁸ Quentin Skinner, *Visions of politics*, vol. 1: *Regarding method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 106.

of unsolicited commentary on the sacrosanctity of India's diversity, seemed to be doing something: inviting a parallel with Hindutva between the lines.

Sometimes, dissent need not be vocalized. One junior diplomat spoke to me across his office's coffee table, which featured nothing but our cups of *chai* and a copy of the most recent issue of *The Caravan*—an investigative Indian magazine known for its distinctly anti-government disposition. Even as I forewent interrogating him on anything that would compromise the status and security of a serving officer, I could not help but wonder whether the magazine had been placed between us as a kind of signal—an emblem of his silent rebellion, which certainly would not have been unthinkingly displayed upon the table for a visit by a superior.

Since their capacity for free speech is wider than that of serving colleagues, retired officers were often less guarded: one incensed diplomat who had retired by 2014 confided that it would have required considerable 'self-discipline' on his part to 'represent this wretched country even now'.⁷⁹ 'The current regime represents a completely contradictory value system' to the one into which older generations had been socialized, a Congress-affiliated prominent former diplomat argued, claiming that even those who did not speak up had had 'their world-views challenged'.⁸⁰ An elderly Sikh officer broke into tears describing a battle to uphold the values of diversity and secularism he had spent his career defending.⁸¹

Hinduism versus Hindutva

Hindutva's reception inside the IFS is not a mere matter of approving Hindu diplomats pitted against critical officers of different religious affiliations.⁸² In testimony to the strength of existing institutional culture, the service's scepticism extends to many devout Hindus who had previously objected to what they perceived as a suppression of Indian culture within their Anglophile service. Indeed, Indian secularism was never about divorcing religion from politics outright, in the style of French *laïcité*. Instead of shrinking the space for the sacred in public life, it is about 'the recognition and acceptance of difference', so that 'the question of secularism has been posed as a question of pluralism, or of tolerance between diverse religious and cultural communities'.⁸³ Hence, it is entirely possible to identify as a 'secular Hindu' by espousing a politics of secular toleration while

⁷⁹ Interview 37, April 2019.

⁸⁰ Interview 43, April 2019.

⁸¹ Interview 26, April 2019.

⁸² There are no official data on religious representation inside the Foreign Service, but it is safe to assume that Hindus, who constitute over 80% of India's population, form an overwhelming majority of diplomats. While Sikh and Christian minorities tend to be slightly overrepresented in Indian bureaucracy, a non-governmental 2006 Sachar Committee report found that, while Muslims constituted around 13% of India's population, they made up only 1.8% of the Foreign Service. See e.g. Sanya Dhingra, '5% Muslims among new civil services recruits, only one in top 100', *The Print*, 4 Aug. 2020, <https://theprint.in/india/governance/5-muslims-among-new-civil-services-recruits-only-one-in-top-100/474488/>.

⁸³ Gyanendra Pandey, 'The secular state and the limits of dialogue', in Anuradha Dingwaney Needham and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, eds, *The crisis of secularism in India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 157.

personally practising religion. One former foreign secretary critical of his internationalist colleagues' lack of interest in Indian tradition considered the 'endless talk' about India's '5000-year-old civilization' overblown—'you don't challenge China by doing yoga'.⁸⁴ A BJP-supporting former foreign secretary thought that the rejection of foreign influences could be exaggerated, decrying the 'fake resistance' to the '*savoir-faire*' of western diplomatic custom.⁸⁵ Similarly, a diplomat who had publicly spoken of the importance of engaging with Hinduism in diplomatic representation insisted that he had—perhaps falsely—imagined that this was possible 'without jingoism'.⁸⁶ We must, therefore, distinguish between Hinduism and Hindutva—the former theoretically compatible with secularism and internationalism, the latter rejecting them altogether.

Hindutva emerged against the secular consensus, as Faisal Devji argued two decades before Modi's rise to national leadership, 'as the only credible, organized form of alternative politics in a country where the ruling elite has appropriated secular nationalism so completely as to allow no room for dispute in its terms'.⁸⁷ When official expressions of religiosity are taboo, even a majoritarian push for a singular religion can dress itself up as emancipation, whereby the 'real' India is released to express its 'authentic' self. 'Secularism is not born out of denial' was the retort of a conservative-leaning millennial officer for whom India's 'composite culture' owed its pluralistic nature to Hinduism's universalism, making it entirely appropriate for state institutions to propagate 'a Hindu perspective' which his urban elite educated superiors derided.⁸⁸ In his binary answers, world-views always linked back to the kinds of people who held them: either 'real' Indians joining the service from the country's rural heartlands and vernacular schools or the out-of-touch elites who regarded them with disdain. This view points towards a wider pattern: internationalism is resisted partly because of a social resentment against the internationalists themselves. Conversely, the internationalists read a nationalist challenge as a personal affront to their status.

Ideological departures, sociological fault-lines: the cosmopolitan elite as the internal other

The Hindutva challenge involves a twin rejection: of both internationalist, liberal principles and the elites who claim to hold them. Hindutva ideologically rejects Nehruvian principles, yet saffronization also threatens the very status of India's traditional elites themselves.

Therefore, it matters not only what Indian diplomats *think* but who they *are*. Historically, the IFS has been an exclusive club chosen through an exacting civil service exam,⁸⁹ and dominated by upper-caste, upper-class men from select

⁸⁴ Interview 45, April 2019.

⁸⁵ Interview 39, April 2019.

⁸⁶ Interview 4, March 2019.

⁸⁷ Faisal Devji, 'Hindu/Muslim/Indian', *Public Culture* 5: 1, 1992, p. 5.

⁸⁸ Interview 65, May 2019.

⁸⁹ Miller, 'India's feeble foreign policy', p. 13.

families, with elite degrees from places like Oxbridge or Delhi's prestigious St Stephen's College.⁹⁰ Its social hierarchies have cohered around valorizing the 'IFS type': 'elite, English-speaking, Anglicised and urbane'.⁹¹ By contrast, only about 5–10 per cent of Indians speak English—a figure that faithfully reflects class, caste and educational inequalities.⁹² As one former foreign secretary summarized, in a country of striking diversity the service has traditionally been 'pretty feudal'.⁹³ According to two Oxford graduates who joined the service in the early 1960s, 'you couldn't tell the difference' between IFS officers and veterans of the British Raj's Indian Civil Service, many of whom held top posts at the Ministry of External Affairs until as late as the 1970s,⁹⁴ and who 'had almost similar backgrounds' to post-independence diplomats.⁹⁵

Ideas are not free-floating entities without social moorings. For example, the linguistic preference for English, however diplomatically advantageous, is socially suspect in the eyes of diplomats from less privileged backgrounds. Officers whose English does not match exacting standards of diplomatic poeticism,⁹⁶ or whose accents are deemed 'too Indian',⁹⁷ felt that English functions as a social sieve that privileges the service's old Anglophile elite. Both Hindutva advocates and less privileged diplomats thus contest the idea that the choice of professional language is merely an instrumental one. Similarly, it is no surprise, as a former foreign secretary noted of older secular generations, that 'people felt a sense of comfort, because the social background of the diplomats was not religious themselves [*sic*]'.⁹⁸ 'The idea of India that "Lutyens Liberals" have is that India is a secular country,' an officer who left the service mid-career argued, juxtaposing popular sentiment against the elite progressivism that supposedly confined itself to Delhi's governing quarters, designed by the colonial architect Edwin Lutyens.⁹⁹ Even the most committed secularists often felt that there was a tinge of condescension in the service's stigmatization of religion, and few were surprised to see Hindu pride emerge among new cohorts, whose rural roots and provincial education were interpreted as signalling a more conservative, religious predisposition.¹⁰⁰

Indeed, changing demographics may yet make the IFS more receptive to its own saffronization. Much has been made of the speed and significance of a gradual 'democratization' of the civil services of India.¹⁰¹ A significant shift began with the increase in applicants from lower-middle-class backgrounds in the wake of

⁹⁰ Dixit, *Indian Foreign Service*, p. 90.

⁹¹ Kate Sullivan de Estrada, 'Exceptionalism in Indian diplomacy: the origins of India's moral leadership aspirations', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 37: 4, 2014, p. 646.

⁹² S. Rukmini, 'In India, who speaks in English, and where?', *Livemint*, 14 May 2019, <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/in-india-who-speaks-in-english-and-where-1557814101428.html>.

⁹³ Interview 45, April 2019.

⁹⁴ Interview 37, April 2019.

⁹⁵ Interview 31, April 2019.

⁹⁶ Interview 49, May 2019; also interview 58, May 2019; interview 73, May 2019; interview 77, May 2019.

⁹⁷ Interview 45, April 2019.

⁹⁸ Interview 45, April 2019.

⁹⁹ Interview 10, March 2019.

¹⁰⁰ Interview 10, March 2019; interview 16, March 2019; interview 45, April 2019; interview 65, May 2019.

¹⁰¹ See e.g. Kishan S. Rana, *Inside diplomacy* (New Delhi: Manas, 2000), p. 37; R. K. Barik, 'Social background of civil service: some depressing trends', *Economic and Political Weekly* 39: 7, 2004, pp. 625–8.

the liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s, and a concomitant expansion of India's long-running constitutionally mandated affirmative action programme which, after the so-called 'Mandal reforms', now reserves 50 per cent of bureaucratic positions for members of designated lower castes and indigenous communities.¹⁰² The diversification of cadre intake means that the IFS is gradually becoming more reflective of India at large—and thus more likely to reflect the popular support for a Hindutva platform. 'Rural India, small towns have started exerting themselves and their values' in the service, one recently retired Delhiite Nehruvian noted,¹⁰³ although the shift has as much to do with class and caste as with geography. In the words of a veteran of the first Modi government, new diplomatic generations are showing 'more consciousness of who they are', religiously and culturally.¹⁰⁴

This is not to say that only socio-cultural elites can hold internationalist views—indeed, it seems to be part of the social schism inside a changing IFS that many unfounded cultural anxieties are projected by the traditional Anglophone elite onto diplomats from less privileged backgrounds. And yet it is precisely these social forms of mutual distrust that may push some towards Hindutva. Despite a nominal 'democratization' in cadre intake, IFS culture and top posts are still dominated by an old upper-caste elite.¹⁰⁵ This discrepancy was felt widely across interviews and breeds its own resentments. Many old hands of the service seemed to consider respect for diversity a clarion call of the elites against a broader population of Indians, who were deemed culturally incapable of appreciating it. In the exclusionary rendition of one St Stephen's College and Oxford-educated retired officer: 'You can't be a semi-literate person and be expected to understand the beauty and richness of our country.'¹⁰⁶ That two Dalit officers—the 'untouchables' outside India's caste system—distinguished themselves as particularly articulate supporters of the current regime and its purported anti-elitism might jar against a political logic which assumes that marginalized castes will feel most at ease in secular, liberal circles. Yet it made sense given the officers' lived experience of social condescension at the hands of upper-caste liberal colleagues.¹⁰⁷

The personal, then, is political. The contrast between an English-educated Kashmiri Pandit like Nehru and a 'man of the masses' like Modi, who in the political mythology of the BJP rose from a lower-caste tea-selling *chaiwallah* to become prime minister, symbolizes a praiseworthy 'de-elitification' to his sympa-

¹⁰² Leela Fernandes, 'Restructuring the new middle class in liberalizing India', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 20: 1, 2000, pp. 88–104.

¹⁰³ Interview 33, April 2019.

¹⁰⁴ Interview 3, March 2019.

¹⁰⁵ 'Top IFS posts still out of bounds for SCs, STs', *The Hindu*, 5 Dec. 2015, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/top-ifs-posts-still-out-of-bounds-for-scs-sts/article7950262.ece>.

¹⁰⁶ Interview 37, April 2019.

¹⁰⁷ Interview 38, April 2019; interview 67, May 2019. There is a lively debate on caste politics and mobilization in Modi's India. See e.g. Christophe Jaffrelot, 'Class and caste in the 2019 Indian election: why have so many poor started voting for Modi?', *Studies in Indian Politics* 7: 2, 2019, pp. 149–60; Sukhadeo Thorat, 'Dalits in post-2014 India: between promise and action', in Angana P. Chatterji, Thomas Blom Hansen and Christophe Jaffrelot, eds, *Majoritarian state: how Hindu nationalism is changing India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 217–36.

thizers.¹⁰⁸ The BJP's recent general secretary Ram Madhav, whose omnipresence on the Delhi think tank scene reflects his increasing engagement with foreign affairs, in 2017 mapped Nehru and Modi onto opposing sides of a transnational class divide: while the Harrow- and Cambridge-educated Nehru espoused ideas that 'were transmitted by the colonisers of the West', the 'mob, humble people of the country are behind Modi', being 'finally at ease with a government that looks and sounds familiar'.¹⁰⁹ One former foreign secretary believed that Modi's personal brand 'is giving a message: you must not be cosmopolitan by upbringing' to join the Indian elite; nor must you be 'apologetic' about not meeting classical elite markers.¹¹⁰ Commenting on the tide of opinion against the liberal intelligentsia sweeping Delhi, the essayist Pankaj Mishra has put it more sharply, arguing that a 'cleansing of rootless cosmopolitans is crucial to realizing Modi's vision'.¹¹¹ The service has felt this, too—one retired Muslim officer offered the comment that 'five years ago all of us were cosmopolitan', but that 'in today's polarized environment, narrower assertions of identity have come to the surface'.¹¹² 'Not once' having had to justify his cosmopolitanism or Indianness in his almost 40 years of service, 'now I own ten books on the topic of culture and identity', he exclaimed. Moments of change have a tendency to shatter the self-evident nature of received institutional wisdom. They also reconfigure who gets to belong among the elite.

In the Hindutva constructions of self and other, traditional IFS elites are counted among 'a powerful foreign Other *within* India in the form of a pseudo-secular, neocolonial, and illegitimately powerful establishment that colludes with dangerous minorities who, in turn, have links to India's external enemies'.¹¹³ Old diplomatic elites are imagined as belonging to the same class of Indians as members of Nehru's Congress Party, who are depicted as a *comprador* class, maintaining a 'neo-colonialist mindset' and using the language of the colonizer to engage in cultural gatekeeping against the Indian masses who do not speak it.¹¹⁴ Fluid identities are antithetical to the Hindutva construction of self and other. Because of the outward-facing nature of diplomacy, the service's traditional Anglophone elites are a particularly suitable target for othering, blurring as they do by profession the lines between the domestic and the foreign. In fact, as Thorsten Wojczewski writes in his analysis of Hindutva discourse, there is a purposeful conflation of westernized Indian elites and foreign others, both of whom pose a 'collaborative threat to "the people"' and stand in the way of 'the realization of a strong and monolithic Hindu identity'.¹¹⁵ Thus, the saffronization of the IFS is not presented as an anti-

¹⁰⁸ Interview 1, Feb. 2019; interview 3, March 2019.

¹⁰⁹ Ram Madhav, 'Coming full circle at 70', *Indian Express*, 15 Aug. 2017, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/independence-day-coming-full-circle-at-70-atal-bihari-vajpayee-hamid-ansari-muslims-india-insecure-modi-nehru-4796919/>.

¹¹⁰ Interview 45, April 2019.

¹¹¹ Pankaj Mishra, *Age of anger: a history of the present* (London: Macmillan, 2017), p. 162.

¹¹² Interview 7, March 2019.

¹¹³ Thorsten Wojczewski, 'Populism, Hindu nationalism, and foreign policy in India: the politics of representing "the people"', *International Studies Review* 22: 3, 2020, p. 415.

¹¹⁴ Taruna Vijaya, *Saffron surge: India's re-emergence on the global scene and Hindu ethos* (New Delhi: Har Anand, 2008), p. 32.

¹¹⁵ Wojczewski, 'Populism, Hindu nationalism, and foreign policy in India', p. 406.

pluralist move, in the traditional populist fashion,¹¹⁶ but rather as an anti-elite move which seeks to champion true pluralism. What ensues is, as I have argued, a double rejection: both of an internationalism whose sense of self is purposefully ambivalent, and of the Indian elites who readily indulge in this ambivalence.

Conclusion

After seven decades of aspiring to represent a diverse, secular India, the IFS has been dealt a very different set of diplomatic instructions since the Hindu nationalist prime minister Narendra Modi came to power in 2014. The gradual saffronization of the IFS fundamentally calls into question what kind of India its diplomats are expected to represent. The traditionally amorphous meaning of Indianness, purposefully broad in its definition, is giving way to a narrower assertiveness which sees Indian diplomats representing not a postcolonial coalition or a secular state but a *Hindu rashtra*. This change expresses itself in the diplomatic discourse, priorities, protocol and training of career diplomats, whose responses to Hindutva reflect not only an ideological but a sociological rift with the ruling establishment.

As the political legacy of an internationalist India is fracturing, so too are the social ideals which once legitimated the dominance of an elite-educated, Anglophone class of Indians as its diplomatic representatives. The backlash against cosmopolitan elites in India must be thought of in a sociological vein: not only in terms of the ideologies of internationalism under challenge but in terms of the elites who are committed to them. This is also why the saffronization of the IFS cannot be read as a simple Manichaeon story of an internationalist cadre of liberal diplomats confronted by an exclusionary Hindu nationalist agenda. Hindutva advocates portray saffronization as a democratization of a once exclusive club—a delayed postcolonial liberation which strives to replace an unrepresentative, colonially tainted interpreter class with a more ‘authentic’ diplomatic elite. What complicates any effective contestation of such reasoning is the fact that IFS culture and hierarchies arguably do reflect the ideals of a small Anglophile elite.

This article has asked how career diplomats socialized into an internationalist mindset make sense of a nationalist change in government. The case of the IFS is emblematic of a broader emerging pattern of diplomatic accommodation in the global age of populism, as self-ascribed cosmopolitans are forced to reconsider their role as diplomatic representatives of nations turning inwards. I suggest that what inhibits organizational change and the internalization of nationalist norms is not solely ideological disagreement between internationalist diplomats and a nationalist government. What matters is also the government’s perceived invalidation of the diplomats’ social status in society. Comparative work across a broader spectrum of diplomatic services could tease out common patterns in organizational response, ideological resilience and diplomatic self-perception. In India’s case, more ethnographic work among diplomats—perhaps by scholars with better

¹¹⁶ Johannes Plagemann and Sandra Destradi, ‘Populism and foreign policy: the case of India’, *Foreign Policy Analysis* 15: 2, 2019, p. 283.

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elite access and political connections than the present author—could expand on the impact of Hindutva on diplomatic decision-making processes. Institutional path dependencies mean that saffronization cannot occur overnight. However, if Hindu nationalists rule India long enough for new generations of diplomats to be socialized into Hindutva ideology right from their entry into the IFS, we may experience a tipping point in organizational change and bureaucratic compliance.

For now, what can be offered is an evaluation of changes in the making, still to unfold in full. And yet the changes already speak to something: not only to possible future trajectories but, just as crucially, to the underlying social tensions of the past which are only now coming to the surface. They reveal cracks in the compromises historically forged in the making of postcolonial India. In so doing, they prise open some of the ostensible consensus around cosmopolitan elites and diplomatic representation that has governed India's engagement with the world since decolonization.