

Understanding the World as a Family: A Feminist Exploration of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* in Indian Foreign Policy

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I. Introduction

The Indian philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, which broadly translates to “the world is family,” has been invoked as part of Indian foreign policy since the time of independence. Its popular revival under the Narendra Modi-led government (since 2014) is evident in the use of the term during India’s successful campaign for an elected seat on the United Nations Security Council in 2020 (Government of India 2020) as well as its identification as the guiding theme for the country’s G-20 presidency in 2022-2023 (Government of India n.d.). As has been noted, “this narrative allows India to frame its foreign policy as one driven by inclusivity and cooperation, particularly in the Global South” (Panda 2026: 6). In a multilateral setting, it works as a normative antidote to the asymmetrical configurations that allow powerful states, primarily from the Global North, to dominate deliberations and the writing of international legislation and norms.

India’s foreign policy has traditionally been associated with moral leadership (see Miller and Sullivan de Estrada 2017: 30), alongside Southern solidarity and critique of international policies that undermine Southern agency. In the increasingly fractured international domain of the twenty-first century, its adherence to these principles

has been uneven; Indian foreign policy has come to be associated with approaches such as multi-alignment and strategic autonomy. It has, however, been persistent in challenging the hierarchical nature of contemporary multilateralism and contributed to the presentation of alternative ideas such as *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* and institutions such as BRICS. It is debatable, however, whether these contributions have or can transform the international order.

This essay focuses on the understanding of relationality that underpins India’s invocation of the idea of the “world as a family” in its foreign policy. By examining specific ways in which the government or Prime Minister of India have brought *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* into the country’s foreign policy discourse, it examines the scope and limits of this relational concept in global politics. The essay does not engage with the ancient philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* per se, which emerged from and spoke to a very different polity and society. Instead, conceptually, it draws on insights from feminist International Relations, that have contended with the tensions between relationality and autonomy in foreign policy considerations, to examine its value in these times.

The discussion here is divided into three sections. Section I sets the international context

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within which emerging or rising powers like India have offered alternative imaginaries of international cooperation. Section II presents a case study discussion of the use of the term *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* in India's G-20 presidency, primarily during the summit held in October 2023. Using feminist lenses, section III discusses the understanding of relationality, and subsequently an assessment of the normative approach to international politics that is presented in India's narratives. The concluding section highlights the limits of realizing the notion of the "world as a family" in contemporary global politics.

II. Setting the Context

In the decade between the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the global war on terror, from 1991 to 2001, a different world seemed possible. This was a world in which international order was to be upheld through multilateral cooperation on a wide range of issues, informed by concepts such as human security, human development and sovereignty as responsibility. That progressive gender politics was integral to this emerging international agenda is evident from, among others, the recognition of "women's rights as human rights" at the UN Global Conference for Human Rights in Vienna (1993), the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action at the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), the identification of gender-based violence as a "crime against humanity" and a "war crime" in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998), and the passage of Resolution 1325 on Women and Peace and Security (2000) by the UN Security Council. Such developments were built on decades of feminist advocacy. These were

also made possible by majority of states being willing to arrive at negotiated compromises on such issues, and were bolstered, later on, by the decision of select member states to adopt feminist foreign policies.

Terrorist attacks against the United States in 2001 marked a return to geopolitics. Furthermore, donor states began limiting their funding of multilateral initiatives due to the 2008 global financial crisis. By the following decade, the world was "re-nationalizing" and "shifting towards right wing and personalized 'strong-man' decision-making" (Goetz 2016). Taking note of Brexit and the migrant crisis in Europe at this time, Anne Marie Goetz commented that the political processes were "sharply gendered, encouraging belligerent and even violent expressions of masculinity and invoking idealized visions of nation and family based on restrictions on women's rights" (ibid). By 2025, relationship between states — more broadly, the international (dis)order — appears to be shaped simultaneously by inclusive ideas of "feminist foreign policy" as well as gender backlash and exclusionary strongman politics in the international domain.

For countries of the global south, the optimism of the nineties had a distinct darker side. The end of the Cold War had fuelled hotter conflicts in many parts of the world, including genocides in Rwanda and the Balkans. Not only was it not a peaceful decade, the international normative and policy responses that came up to address the complex challenges of these times appeared to undercut state sovereignty that was already being eroded by economic globalization. The women, peace and security agenda that developed around resolution 1325, adopted at the end of this decade, is illustrative of these concerns. The resolution presented a deeper understanding of the ways in which international security is gendered, and

highlighted the need to account for and respond to women's experiences of war and peace processes. However, as evidenced in its deployment in Afghanistan post-2001, the agenda — to some extent — also provided cover for militarized international interventions by a group of states led by the United States that were ultimately harmful for the people of Afghanistan (see Duncanson and Farr 2019). Such international interventions, direct or by proxy, were not new. But countries like Brazil and India that sought to address these asymmetries in international governance now had the economic strength to back up their alternative vision of international politics in the 21st century.

Brazil, for instance, conceived of Responsibility while Protecting (RwP) after it became evident that NATO's intervention in Libya in 2011, sanctioned by the UN Security Council for "protection of civilians," focused instead on regime change. RwP sought to prevent the "misuse [of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine] by intervening countries" (Hindawi 2021: 50). Furthermore, in contrast to the more militarized and top-down approach adopted by its Western predecessors, Brazil's leadership of the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti from 2004 to 2017 exhibited a more horizontal relationship with the host country whereby the Brazilian soldiers were presented "as brothers who were there extending a hand [to the Haitians], instead of as a disciplining father" (Rossone de Paula 2019: 61 fn 8). While these initiatives do not necessarily foreground gender or speak the language of feminist foreign policy, their attention to principles such as relationality, solidarity, respect for diversity are compatible with feminist vision of global politics. The exploration of India's invocation of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* in this essay is placed within this larger international context. As mentioned earlier, the analysis focuses on narratives presented in India's official

statements during the country's G-20 Presidency in 2022-2023.

III. One World, One Family, One Future: India's G-20 Presidency

The Group of Twenty or G-20 is made up of member states that "account for more than 80% of world GDP, 75% of global trade, and 60% of the global population" (MEA n.d.). It was set up in 1999 as a forum for Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors of major economic powers in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis and raised to an intergovernmental forum for Heads of State or government in 2008 during the global financial crisis. While the G-20 focuses primarily on economic issues, it has also come to consider related issues such as sustainable development and climate change, and indeed issues relating to international peace that have bearing on the global economy as well. For instance, a statement on "Preventing Exploitation of the Internet for Terrorism and Violent Extremism Conducive to Terrorism (VECT)" was released at the 2019 G-20 Summit held in Osaka. While such statements and declarations are not legally binding, these consensus documents emerging from deliberations among the most powerful countries in the world have normative significance and can be used to send messages to entities such as the UN Security Council that have authority under international law. With neither a Charter nor a Secretariat, states take the lead in organising the meetings of the G-20. The state holding the Presidency of the forum, with support from the Presidencies before and after it, set the agenda for the annual summits. The Presidency is an opportunity for the state to showcase their leadership, and contribute to global discourse and policymaking on macroeconomic

and related issues.

India took over the G-20 Presidency from Indonesia in December 2022 and passed over the reins to Brazil a year later. In keeping with the institutional norm, the three countries worked as a “troika” during India’s Presidency in 2022-2023. The theme for this Presidency was identified as *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* or “One Earth, One Family, One Future.” The explanation for this selection is presented on the Presidency website: “the theme affirms the value of all life — human, animal, plant, and microorganisms — and their interconnectedness on the planet Earth and in the wider universe” (Government of India n.d.). The phrase was used often in formal speeches, statements and press releases. At the annual summit held in New Delhi on 9-10 September, 2023, the three main sessions of the Summit were titled “One Earth,” “One Family” and “One Future.” A review of formal documents, primarily the text of speeches made by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, available on the G-20 website suggest that the theme functioned primarily as a rhetorical device.

Surprisingly, there was no reference to “family” in the opening remarks presented on September 8, 2023 (see Modi 2023a). But later, in his opening remarks at the Virtual G20 Leaders’ Summit held in November that year, the Prime Minister proclaimed: “The clouds of crises that we are witnessing today, as One Family, we possess the strength to work towards peace” (Modi 2023d). It is his remarks at Session 2 on “One Family,” held on September 9, 2023, that draw out some implications of understanding the world as a family. First, the Prime Minister suggests: “Just like every family has its own support system, we need to build a global support system together...When we think as One Family, we also keep in mind how to empower each member” (Modi 2023b).

His second key point is that “we must also keep in mind the challenges that lie ahead for our Global Family” (ibid). He illustrates this by pointing to the disruptions in the global supply chains during Covid and calls for building these in a way that “promotes trust and transparency” (ibid). As is to be expected, the Prime Minister’s remarks give many instances of India’s domestic policies and international initiatives geared towards capacity-building and addressing the identified global challenges. He concludes with three specific policy suggestions, including a public-private partnership for building “sports infrastructure for women in countries of the Global South” (ibid). More generally, interests of the developing world — the Global South — are foregrounded in these remarks. One section of the remarks focus on women, presumably in keeping with the attention to “women-led development” during India’s Presidency. In the only instance of recognizing different roles within a family, it is noted: “In every society around the world, mothers are the driving force of the family” (ibid). The Prime Minister goes on to illustrate women’s leadership in India across a range of sectors. Aside from this particular session, there is very little in the policy documents that develop the ideas presented in the Prime Minister’s remarks.

Commentaries on the use of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* in Indian foreign policy also mainly highlight the idea of interconnectedness that comes through in this philosophy. Shyam Saran, former Foreign Secretary to the Government of India, writes, for instance: “In one sense it is a well-chosen theme reflecting the compelling truth that we live in a densely interconnected world and our destinies as humanity are intimately interlinked” (Saran 2023: 463). The only exception is an article by Waheguru Pal Singh Sidhu (2017), an International Relations scholar, in which the idea

of family is explored in relation to its Indian roots:

First, the ‘family’ is regarded as an ideal and highly functional unit with equal rights among all individuals. Nothing could be further from reality; most families tend to be dysfunctional...Second, assuming for a moment that the one world family might be less dysfunctional than a normal family, there is still the question of who is the head of the family and how power is shared? More importantly, how will disputes be resolved and decisions enforced? Given the patriarchal nature of most Indian families, who does India consider as the leader of the one world family? Alternatively given the emerging multipolar world how will power be shared among the various leaders and centres? Or is the expectation that *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* can thrive even if it is headless?

Sidhu (2017) calls upon the Indian foreign policy establishment to apply a realist lens and recognize the dysfunctionality of the world as a family; he points out that “developing the political, economic and military wherewithal to implement and enforce the concept will be the real challenge.” From a feminist perspective, the concept can potentially offer different foreign policy pathways. This is explored in the next section.

IV. Relationality in *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*: A Feminist Exploration

The questions that Sidhu raises about the operationalization of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* are pertinent, especially in the second quarter of the 21st century when even the veneer — let alone the legal principle — of sovereign equality

has worn off. But, relying on realist principles for answers to “implement and *enforce* the concept” (Sidhu 2017; emphasis added) would reproduce the existing international order, even if the ordering within the hierarchy changes. Alternatively: “while recognizing that the moral aspirations of particular nations cannot be equated with universal moral principles, a feminist perspective seeks to find common moral elements in human aspirations which could become the basis for de-escalating international conflict and building international community” (Tickner 1988: 438). Indeed, *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* resonates with the southern African concept of Ubuntu; additionally, in his speech at a G-20 event in India, Purohit (2023) finds similarities with concepts from South Korea, Madagascar, China, and Ecuador. As such an intersubjective understanding of the “world as family” that is built on notions of interconnectedness and shared humanity is not inconceivable. But the idea of foreign policy itself that centres the interests of sovereign states, which prioritize autonomy over dependence, appears to contradict the spirit of relationality that underlies these concepts. As Robinson points out, “a feminism that is deeply relational troubles the idea of state sovereignty and of the ‘international’ as a discrete [policy] space” (Robinson 2024: 171). From this vantage point, no foreign policy can be feminist.

Without necessarily resolving this tension between autonomy and relationality, however, feminist scholars have sought to conceptualize feminist foreign policy (FFP). Aggestam et al (2019: 23), for instance, relate FFP to “ethical foreign policy and international conduct” and highlight, in this regard, the significance of “relational ontology” that privileges narratives of “marginalized groups at the receiving end of foreign policy.” In spite of feminist critique of the state as an institution, it

remains a crucial agent through which relations at home and beyond are mediated for – and ideally, by – such groups. For postcolonial societies that had to contend with the imposition of international relations by imperial powers, autonomy and self-governance through state institutions has been valuable for transforming their relations with the “international.” From calls for decolonization to advocacy for reform of international organizations, the foreign policy of several Global South countries has been directed to critique and potentially transform the asymmetrical power relations that shape global politics. The principles underlying some of these initiatives such as the Non-Aligned movement resonate with FFP.

In India, much of the recent feminist discussion on foreign policy speaks to the global discourse around FFP that has emerged in the last decade or so. However, nascent feminist scholarship has also looked into some early ideas from India’s foreign policy establishment that appear to be “blueprints” for a more organic evolution of FFP in the country. For instance, Rathore (2024) has highlighted India’s strong anti-imperialist stance as well as its leadership role in the non-aligned movement. The concept of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, which is the focus of this paper, is not nearly as well known in the international domain. However, it has had a number of iterations. In an early invocation in 1989, former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had used the term “to challenge the concept of first, second and third worlds, revive the idea of ‘One World,’ and put forward the vague notion of an ‘Earth Citizen’” (Sidhu 2017). The Modi-led government uses the concept “as a bridge to narrow ‘gaps and distances,’ referring to the divisions in world politics primarily the North–South, East–West, and the democracies versus autocracies divides” (MEA 2018 cited in Panda 2026, 11). The

G-20 statements too highlight this oneness, but recognize the need to address asymmetries. Prime Minister Modi’s remarks at session 2, outlined earlier, emphasized specific needs of the developing world. At the same session, President Lula da Silva of Brazil contended that “our family is increasingly disunited” due to growing inequality (Lula da Silva 2023). For many delegates, the key take-aways were about inclusive growth and collective efforts towards addressing global challenges. The solutions lay not only in state initiatives but also partnership with private actors and international organizations.

The rhetoric of “world as a family,” however, appears to have been undermined at both domestic and international levels. First, at the G-20 University Connect finale held a few weeks after the annual summit “family” is mentioned only once in the Prime Minister’s address to the youth. They are asked to sit with their family and make a list of everyday household things and their origins. The Prime Minister cautions: “You might not even know that the comb in your pocket might be from abroad. Friends, such foreign things have entered our homes and our lives. It is very important to save the country” (Modi 2023c). The line between the domestic and international is clearly drawn here. Second, at the inter-state level, China reportedly objected to the use of a phrase in Sanskrit, a non-UN language, in formal G-20 documents. Following this, India clarified that “it uses only the ‘English version’ of the phrase — ‘One Earth, One Family, One Future’ — in its summary documents and outcome statements” (Haidar 2023). In the shadow of negotiating accepted vocabulary regarding the Russia–Ukraine war for the G-20 New Delhi Leaders’ Declaration, China and India also negotiated “to put their own philosophical imprint on the final summit declaration” by including language on One Belt One Road and *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*

respectively (Roy 2023). Both compete to present themselves as the leader of the Global South and, in this case, their contention lay in determining whose language of inter-connectedness would appear in the G-20 document. The two instances suggest that the transformative potential of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* is yet to be fully embraced even by its advocate.

V. Conclusion

In view of the questions raised for the symposium, this brief exploration of the theme identified by India during its G-20 Presidency in 2022-2023 offers two main insights. First, rising powers from the Global South that have been at the receiving end of power asymmetries in global politics have an interest in reforming — while upholding — the post-World War II international order. India's proposals are directed especially towards addressing challenges faced by its Southern counterparts. It calls for a just global order, built upon values such as “trust and transparency,” that also takes account of specific needs and contributions of groups and communities. The rhetoric of interconnectedness in *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* is, however, frayed at the points where gains can be made for national interest. Second, India's aspirations fold in recognition of, and support for, roles that women play in various domestic sectors. “Women-led development” became an oft-used mantra at the G-20 meetings, and mothers were identified as “driving force of the family” across the world. At a time of global gender backlash, even such instrumental understanding of women's roles can counter anti-gender advocacy by other states at the international level and any domestic backlash. However, transformative gender politics

would require a more fundamental critique and reconstruction of the existing international order.

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