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Bharat, That Was India

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The foreign minister's newest book isn't the rich chronicle of how the ministry punches above its weight. That its uninspired prose isn't called out reveals much about the nation's foreign policy community.

There's a joke we've all heard some version of. There's a lion hunt. Indian police are involved. A poor donkey is found hung upside down, whipped to bits, braying a confession: he is the lion!

Indian foreign minister S. Jaishankar's most recent book, *Why Bharat Matters*, attempts something similar. India is now "a democracy that delivers," one brimming with hope and optimism, and one that knows how to capitalise on its strengths. Like never before, all Indians, especially those abroad, feel immensely proud of their country. But watch out against that pessimistic and divisive old order, one that deviously indulged the country's insecurities, he warns.

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We have often heard the claim that a new India was born after 2014. This is in essence the theme of this book: New India is a globally respected *Vishwa Mitra*. Nearly 240 pages of repeating this mantra, the foreign minister believes, will drill it into the donkey's bray.

Meanwhile, why supply the proof of the lion's roar when you can force out an admission from the donkey?

Narratives vs arguments

International context and domestic politics, both shape a country's diplomacy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy has had continuities as well as changes from previous governments. The government has built on some ties with the United States, the Gulf countries, and the Indo-Pacific, while relationships have considerably worsened in India's neighbourhood from China to Pakistan. Analysts may quibble over the accent on either, but scarcely will a foreign policy analyst suggest that the direction of Indian foreign policy in the last ten years is *sui generis* or a succession of endless gains.

But a balanced stock-taking isn't Jaishankar's aim in the book. Instead, he obsesses over distinguishing the post-2014 era as not only entirely new but unimaginably glorious too. As India strides into *Amrit Kaal*, pre-2014 India has to be conjured as a nightmare – and Jaishankar's litany of complaints only make sense if one thinks of them as dreamt-up.

According to him, India's foreign policy in the past was too enamoured with the West, since India was led by Westernised elites. But at the same time, it was also too anti-western. He is critical of the non-aligned, anti-Western foreign policy that was besotted with autonomy, but then goes on to make the lack of focus on autonomy or *atmanirbharta* his grievance against pre-Modi governments.

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Stringent anti-Americanism is Jaishankar's main grouse against pre-Modi governments. By his admission, the most notable course correction that the Modi government has achieved is resetting India-US ties. In a rare gesture, he concedes, albeit grudgingly, that India-US relations started to transform in the 2000s, especially around the nuclear deal. He makes sure however to give the entire credit to George Bush's administration. One wonders why Manmohan Singh, who put the existence of his own government in line to get that deal through, is not even mentioned. It would be a detail hard to miss for the author; after all, he was a key member of Singh's team of officials leading the charge.

The erasures extend further back, to obliterate any traces of Nehru and his foreign policy. Jaishankar would have it that the country sleepwalked through its first 65 years, committing one blunder after another, to finally be woken up by the Modi regime. He treats

post-liberalisation foreign policy – again, for much of which period he was himself in important positions – as non-existent. It is as if two-and-a-half decades of policy shifts on the neighbourhood, Indian Ocean, East Asia, Africa, nuclear issues, amongst others, do not exist at all.

But Jaishankar’s imagination is not content with birthing a new India, he also births a new world. The world before 2014 was “lulled by the soothing sounds of globalization,” he claims, until Brexit, Trump, the China-US conflict, and then, of course, the Covid-19 pandemic shook it. Halfway down that argument, he remembers 9/11, the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s and the global economic crisis of the late 2000s. So, not so quite ‘lulled’?

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Undoubtedly, there is an enviable efficiency and nimble-footedness that the Ministry of External Affairs has displayed in its handling of crises which relate to the life and safety of Indian nationals abroad. Jaishankar frequently reminds us this is one of the signature achievements of his government’s foreign policy. But he refuses to make the reader any wiser.

Likewise, neighbourhood policy, which we are repeatedly told has been a major achievement of foreign policy, is devoted just half a page in the book. The Quad and China get a chapter each, and these two are perhaps the most informative chapters in the book. But once again, his narrative and his argument are out to spar with each other. The narrative would imply that the current foreign policy direction is more of a piecemeal change over a longer period, while the argument insists on defining everything as Modi’s achievement.

This is anything but a "clinical" take on Indian foreign policy, especially from someone who has spent all his working life in the same ministry. The slick machinery that is the Ministry of External Affairs, carrying out missions and diplomacy often of a scale that vastly exceeds its capabilities, needs a comparable chronicler.

Jaishankar’s is not the one. Instead of the insider’s rich account, we get a ‘hooray we did it’, some empty chest-thumping, and more celebration of the prime minister’s style. The foreign minister dips into his bureaucratic training to write uninspired prose, content with tiresome generalities (the big revelation of the book is: guess what, the world is complex!), scaffolds it in an often-unexplained academic phraseology – his favourite being "civilizational foreign policy."

Given the generally poor state of archival access concerning Indian foreign affairs, oral accounts often provide invaluable insights. But after a point, one realises that the only way to make sense of this book is to read it not for its writing but for its writer. Jaishankar is not a modest man, but he is also not keen on political suicide, yet. He is careful to credit what may be considered his own foreign policy achievements to Modi.

Man and his master

Why Bharat Matters makes a valuable study on political amnesia. The title of Jaishankar’s previous book was *The India Way*. In this book, it is ‘India’ that has had to give way to ‘Bharat’. Must we trust the author’s new-found conviction for his emphatic assertion that we need to claim our own lexicon when he himself treats this lexicon with useful neglect? In long stretches of writing, he talks about India and Modi’s India, until he suddenly jerks up to remind everyone (and presumably himself) of Bharat.

It is clear that 2014 matters because Jaishankar’s whole point is that India was fortunate enough to be steered by a prime minister whose vision both for the country and the world is in perfect harmony. Indeed, there is no difference between an Indian ‘civilisational’ national approach and internationalism, Jaishankar boldly proclaims at one point. The reader is again befuddled: didn’t the minister criticise previous regimes for prioritising empty internationalism over nationalism all along?

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In Jaishankar’s telling, everything from Modi’s initiatives on yoga to his clothing and eating habits – and sometimes non-eating habits, i.e., fasting – to, what are supposedly original ideas such as, advocacy of solar energy, have made Modi a globally appreciated icon. Modi the man is almost a myth – a man who invented rock star diplomacy, a man who could stop wars over a phone call, a man who

has singlehandedly raised the stock of the country in the world. Indeed, Jaishankar is emphatic that through Modi, India occupies a greater mind-space in the world, like no other period in India's independence history.

In his early meetings with the prime minister, Jaishankar reveals, he was supremely impressed with Modi because the latter kept national interest in mind while pursuing policy. Ideally, one would assume that at a minimum it is what any government is required to do, although how national interest is defined may differ. Each government has different policy foci, depending upon the international and domestic context. National interest is hardly ever permanent, or singular. The task of policy is precisely to evaluate different interests and make contingent decisions on a composite understanding of national interest.

However, Jaishankar is not interested in providing the reader with a multifactorial analysis. Instead, words such as 'civilizational', 'nationalism', 'nationalist outlook', 'national interest', 'Indian values', 'political votebanks' are rhetorical conceits peppered throughout the book with the considered nuance and thought-value of a Whatsapp forward.

It is no use brawling with our foreign minister's understanding of history, but he also repeatedly laments about Modi's and Bharat's achievements not being recognised enough by Western publications. Like a stern headmaster, he reminds them that unlike in the past, Indian foreign policy is now governed by its 'democratic' choices. The trouble is that he is not too gung-ho about other countries expressing their own democratic choices. He snidely comments on how countries like Canada and the UK let their democratic process – he prefers calling it 'vote bank politics', an Indian term he is keen to export – inform their foreign policy choices.

Frustratingly, each time the foreign minister claims some achievement of Modi's government, he doesn't follow up with any evidence. Every achievement, real or conjured, is chalked up to the new leadership style. Systematically responding to every claim in the book might need another book or perhaps several, so let me focus on just one. In the foreign minister's make-believe world, under Modi's tenure, the Indian economy has done wonders for employment and skill generation. This is while every statistic suggests that the Indian economy faces an acute problem of both un- and under-employment and that the government's policies have been catastrophic for [small and medium businesses](#).

Spectres of Nehru

Jaishankar is, quite ironically, solidly Nehruvian in his articulations. The emphasis on India being a unique voice in world affairs, the assertion of India being a great 'civilisational' power, the ability to take on difficult questions with relative ease (quite unlike the current prime minister), badgering the West for its obsession with itself amidst charmed western audiences, is straight from the Nehru playbook, to the extent that seems plagiarised at times.

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However, the form is not the content. Nehruvian foreign policy navigated a world dominated by still largely colonial powers and a polity with unimaginable political, social, and economic capacity constraints. The India that Modi inherited carried a firm political and economic heft in a far-less hierarchical world. The Hindutva project uses the language of historical injury, not as a form of opposition to the West, but as a defence against the country's persecution of its minorities.

Suave, sharp and Westernised, Jaishankar is exactly the kind of external face that Modi needs to show abroad to blunt the growing perception of India's sharp slide into an electoral autocracy. Jaishankar is Modi's attempt at a hologrammed Nehru – a plagiarised form that could be projected outside, without Nehru's mind and soul.

Even in 'going native', as Jaishankar does in invoking Indian 'civilisational' thinking in the book, he parrots a Nehruvian lexicon, albeit shorn of any intellectual seriousness or historical consciousness that one finds in the author of *Discovery of India* and *Glimpses of World History*. The Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito used to joke, "With Nehru, everything starts B.C." Jaishankar's talents are, evidently, handy in the opposite pursuit of erasing history.

For 'civilisational' lessons therefore he escapes history altogether to draw on epic. In *Why Bharat Matters*, the insertion of parables from the Ramayana is meant to illustrate how the latter is relevant for diplomacy and how Indian the country's civilisational values inform foreign policy. But the lessons his narrative draws from Ramayana are as spectacularly unoriginal as: be careful of enemies, plan wisely, know the broader world, build endurance and mental strength. One wonders if everyday commonsense needs the mustering of Ramayana's authority, or indeed some amorphous civilisational consciousness.

Meanwhile, it is also quite a feat of intellectual foraging to celebrate Ram Rajya as the epitome of a rules-based order in the same book as one that approvingly cites Ambedkar’s ‘India First’ approach. Perhaps, a closer reading of Ambedkar’s *Riddles in Hinduism* is due.

Hoorays from the crowd

To give credit where it is due: Jaishankar knows his audience. The book is perhaps more generally targeted at the *bhakt* – to use the now accepted parlance – arming them with hearty hurrahs for confidently uninformed assertions on social media spaces.

But his validation, Jaishankar knows, will come from the blatantly pliant, or opportunistically aligned Indian foreign policy and strategic community. This form of scholarship is elitist by default – its analyses rely to a considerable extent on access to policymakers. And, ironically, even though the analytical framework it deals with is ‘power’, this community is most afraid to speak truth to it.

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The lack of even a hint of criticism of the book from our foreign policy literati is a good illustration of the *Raisina*-isation of Indian foreign policy scholarship. At the [annual event](#) in Delhi by that name, foreign policy ‘dialogue’ is reduced to a managed spectacle, a PR event masked as conversation, where ‘delegates’ are flown in from around the world to demonstrate India’s growing speaking prowess, the foreign minister himself occupying over half-a-dozen panels. Honourable exceptions apply of course, but the news – if no one has noticed yet – is that the Indian foreign policy and strategic community has long sacrificed the pursuit of scholarship to its craven greed for closeness to power.

Speaking at such a gathering of Western audiences or Westernised elites, Jaishankar can be suitably glib. The 17th-century English ambassador Henry Wotton famously said that a diplomat is a good person sent abroad to lie for his country. It follows that their talents can also be put to good use domestically.

Yet, when the minister’s external face meets India’s internal politics, the reconciliation is awkward. In *Why Bharat Matters*, Jaishankar is most comfortable – and most readable – when he analyses the global changes. His discomfort is apparent with the forceful importation of empty terms such as civilisational values, nationalistic outlook, and Indian values. Even he knows – one hopes he still does, for his own sake – that it is a bluff.