

## **Critical Reappraisal of Indian Domestic and Foreign policy Decision Making**

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### **Abstract:**

*At the time of its inception India's Jawaharlal Nehru – the country's first prime minister and the architect of its foreign policy – proclaimed to follow a “non-aligned” posture as an actor in the bipolar world order alongside keeping a “secular” face domestically. Since then all Indian leaders, think-tanks and policymakers have been claiming “non-alignment” and “secularism” as foundation stones of their foreign and domestic policies respectively. Today India is neither secular nor non-aligned. The growing Hindutva movement has brutally tarnished Indian domestic character. Similarly in September 2001, quite opposite to India nonaligned claim, Vajpayee rendered full operational support to the US including its military basis for its operation against al-Qaida in Afghanistan. The startling, imprudent and abrupt decision from a state's decision-maker generated many questions amongst analysts related to Indian decision-making mechanism. This also warrants an academic inquiry under the realm of IR theories on the rationality of strategic decision-making in India, formulation of its foreign policy with its New Delhi's historic claims. This research is inductive in nature and meant to dig out the reasons of systematic demise of secularism and non-alignment in India.*

**Keywords:** India, Secularism, Non-Alignment, Leadership, Neoclassical Realism

### **I. Introduction**

In 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru proclaimed ‘non-alignment’ and ‘secularism’ as international and domestic faces of the newly emerged dominion of the sub-continent. Since then all the India leaders, think-tanks and policymakers have been claiming ‘non-alignment’ as foundation stone of the state's foreign policy that meant keeping India away from the Cold War Power Politics, military and security alliances and yet maintaining and strengthening friendly relations with other states. Similarly, they have also been preaching ‘secularism’ as national identity of India that expected the plural India society – composite of various religions, cultures, languages and dialects – to live as one Indian nation.

On December 6, 1992 the world witnessed demolition of the 400-years old Babri Mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu nationalists. Later, just after the fall of twin-towers in New York on September 11, 2001, Vajpayee rendered full operational support to the US including its military basis for its operation against al-Qaida in Afghanistan. Both the

above events being in contradiction to the India's long self-enchanted claims, generated heated debates amongst analysts of international relations (IR) on the relevance of 'non-alignment' and 'secularism' in Indian strategic decision-making.

This research is inductive in nature and is meant to inquiring the causes leading to the demise of non-alignment and secularism in India. The research shall begin with collection of empirical data from the Indian political history of the past seven decades which will be used in generating hypothesis on the research question.

## **II. Theoretical Conception**

### **A. Contributing Factors to a State's Choices**

The exponents of Neoclassical theory of Realism profess that a state's character in the world community is shaped by three factors: (1) distribution of the power on the global landscape vis-à-vis a state's relative place in it; (2) the world perception about a state vis-à-vis a state's perception about the world; and, (3) the way a state's elites think and other domestic institutions function. Political pundits argue that leaders draw strong inferences from their domestic settings and external constraints before making their strategic decisions. Beitz claims that a state and its leaders' perception of the worldly affairs play significant role in the formulation of its foreign policy options. On the other hand, Walt finds a casual relationship of a state's internal dynamics between a state's foreign policy and the global distribution of power.

The present Indian character as an actor in the anarchic world order has gone a long way since its inception in 1947. At the time of independence Indian Premier Nehru chose secularism and non-alignment as the state's new identity in national and international politics respectively. However, the present Indian character is the byproduct of numerous rational choices made by successive leaders since disappearance of Nehru from the state's decision-making community. New Delhi's decision-making machinery, its relations with other regional and international actors vis-à-vis its strategic claims related to non-alignment and secularism, make a good case-study worth analyzing India's place in the globe.

### **B. Secularism**

The concept of Secularism has been explained by many theorists, but, Smith's working definition can serve as tools for analyzing secularism in India. The definition describes secular state as 'a state which guarantees individual and corporate freedom of religion; deals with the individuals as citizens; is not constitutionally connected to a particular religion nor does it seek either to promote or interference with religion.' Secularism especially the term "secular state" has long been propagated by the Indian leadership but neither is it new nor peculiar to only Indian society. The concept of secularism had evolved with the dawn of Enlightenment age in Europe after conclusion of Peace Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. In the aftermath of the movement, the functioning of the states in Europe was separated from religion, hence, ensuring equal rights to citizens irrespective of their religious belongings. With varying degree of success, the secularization became an accepted model in Europe especially the UK, France and Italy. Secular philosophy brought following two fundamental changes in European societies: (1) domestically serving as a binding force in religiously diverse societies; and, (2) keeping their foreign policies beyond their religious boundaries.

### C. Non-Alignment

The ideological roots of non-alignment can be traced back in international relations of the post-war era. The concept of non-alignment has two faces: policy as well as movement. In late 1940s and 1950s non-alignment prevailed as foreign policy of states like India, Indonesia, Burma and Ceylon. Later, in 1960s it emerged as a movement. However, since end of the Cold War the movement lost its relevance due to rapprochement between formal blocs. Rauch has identified three major pillars of Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). These principles connote non-alignment as: **FIRSTLY**, not getting involved in the great powers' conflict; **SECONDLY**, recognizing all states as having the same rights and rejecting any involvement in the internal affairs of other countries; and, **THIRDLY**, operating fundamentally a peaceful foreign policy.

## III. Indian Case of Secular Society

### A. Historic Linkage

In order to understand the concept of secularism in India, it is imperative to understand basic contours of Indian society. Indian societal character at the time of independence was a byproduct of its historic experiences of long colonial rule and co-existence of all communities for over one thousand years. Before 1947, India had been housing ethnically and linguistically a diverse society of roughly 390 million people. With around 53 percent (206 million) Hindu, 24 percent (92 million) Muslim, 12 percent (48 million) scheduled caste, and remaining Sikhs, Christian and other communities; and existence of over 15 languages and ethnic groups India was (and still is) a very complex society. Chakrabarty argues that the Colonial experience had provoked spirit of nationalism helping Indian in securing freedom from their imperial master. Both the Hindu and Muslim communities of the sub-continent, despite possessing contrast ideological differences, share a common history of co-existence for over one thousand years besides fighting a joint freedom struggle. Jasjit Singh claims that both the varied communities had been mutually interdependent firstly under various rulers and latterly British Colonial master which served as a binding force amongst them. Barry Buzan affirms that both Muslim League and Indian National Congress put their religious identities aside for attainment of common goal of liberation of India. However, the only difference between the two was over the division of India which became the basis for creation of two dominions of British India.

After disappearance of unifying force in post-independence scenario, the biggest challenge that Nehru faced was as how to provoke sense of nationalism in the religiously and ethnically polarized society and convert India into a nation-state. That was the basic reason of introducing secular philosophy and proclaiming secularism as domestic face of India.

### B. Analyzing Secularism in India

The Smith's working definition of secularism has following three sets of relationship between state, individual and religion: (1) freedom of religion i.e. religion and individual; (2) citizenship i.e. state and individual; and (3) separation of state from religion i.e. state and religion. The same can be used as tools of analysis in India's claim of being a secular state. Firstly, analyzing *religion and individual*. The division of British India had occurred on the basis of Muslim-Hindu identity, but after independence, Indian leadership proclaimed secularism as state identity. The Indian subsequent history, however, reveals that it could not ensure freedom of religion in the society. Oomen while

identifying three prominent characteristics of Indian society – heterogeneity, externality and hierarchy – argues that in the Hindu dominated Indian society, minorities especially Muslims and Christians have always been treated as alien. Similarly, Udayakumar asserts that the followers of neo-nationalist Hindutva ideology have been endeavouring for enforcement of Hindu culture, called Hindu-Hindu-Hindustan over themselves and others.

Secondly, examining *state and individual*. The concept of state-citizen relationship spells out that individuals and not groups are basic unit of analysis, and state imposes duties and responsibilities on individuals in return to rights and privileges it grants to them. Constitution of India do cover the relationship of state with its citizens; especially its articles 14 and 15 which prohibit religious considerations in defining both the rights and duties of citizens. Where article 14 deals with right of equality, article 15 removes all barriers of discrimination against any citizen on the basis of religion, race, cast, sex or place of birth.

Whether does or not the state of India respect the above constitutional clauses, can be gauged from the following examples. The first example is related to the vast population of Indian scheduled cast. The scheduled cast had formed about 12 percent of the total Indian population in 1947. Similarly minority religions of Indic origin – Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism – constitute three percent. India has long been planning to include both scheduled cast and minority religion groups into Hindu population. Oommen argues that the process is not only against the fundamental rights of citizens as specified in Indian constitution but has also contributed towards 14 to 15 percent increase in Hindu population carrying tremendous significance in general elections.

The other example is concerning the demolition of Babri Mosque. On December 6, 1992, the extremist Hindu organizations demolished the 16<sup>th</sup> century historic Babri Mosque which followed series of Hindu-Muslim riots causing death of over 2000 people. The most pathetic part is related to the state's role during the whole episode. The incident occurred during Congress rule in the centre and BJP government in Uttar Pradesh. Being custodians of the constitution, both the federal and provincial governments were responsible to prevent the tragedy. However, the state of India and its social institutions especially Indian courts were helpless in protecting the rights of Muslims.

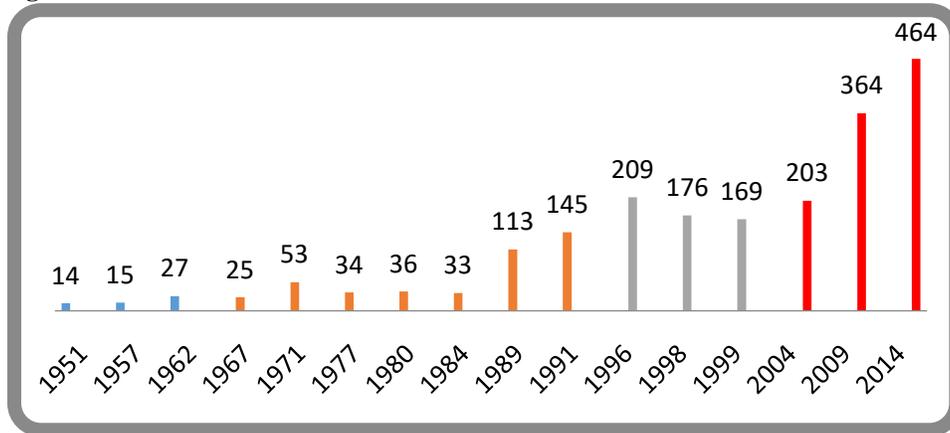
Sitapati claims that various authentic sources consider the demolition of Babri Mosque as a stain on Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's legacy for his alleged supportive role. On the other hand, UP's Chief Minister Kalyan Singh had both political and executive responsibilities and cannot be segregated from planning, organizing and executing the assault. Similarly, during 2002 Hindu-Muslims riots erupted in Gujarat which caused death toll of over 2000, most of them Muslims. The role of Gujarat government especially Chief Minister Modi was extremely discriminatory against the Muslim population. In a meeting held in Chief Minister House on February 27, 2002 where police was instructed to stay off while Hindu mob would be torching the Sabarmati Express the following day.

Thirdly, investigating *state and religion*. This relationship has two connotations: (1) there would be no state religion; and, (2) the functioning of the state would not draw inference from any religion. The evaluation of the India's study reveals that the first

constitution of India (1951), had not declared any religion to be the state religion. Later the word “secular” was included through 42<sup>nd</sup> amendment in 1976. Contrarily to the concept of secularism where all citizens are allowed to propagate their religion, there exists a general practice where Hindus groups organize mass conversion of non-Hindus to Hindu religion and are fully supported by the state.

Above all the state of India has always been protecting the slaughtering of cows. Many states take cover under Article-48 of the Constitution in imposing ban on slaughtering of cows and calves. Many court decisions consider the Article-48 as directive principle of state policy and given decisions in favour of Hindu communities. This has led to a methodical growth of political actors and Hindu identity in Indian society. In 1947 there were only two main political parties, Indian National Congress and Communist Party of India. Furthermore during the country’s first elections in 1951 only 14 national levels of political parties participated. The figure now has swollen to a record 464 political parties in 2014 Lok Sabha Elections (Graph-1).

**Figure 1: Growth of Political Parties in India**

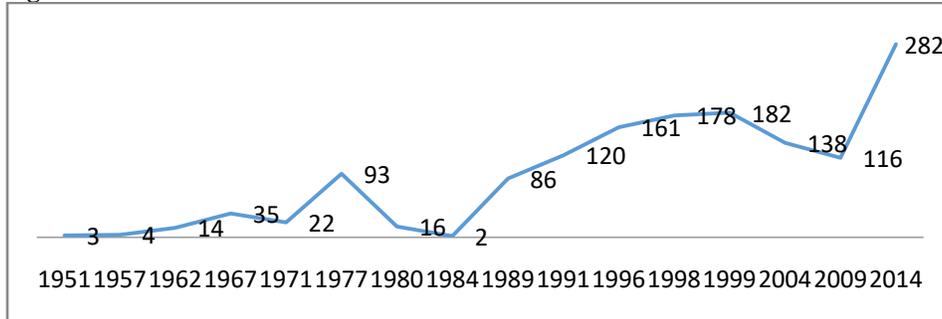


All these parties have emerged on the basis of cast, creed, community, region and language – and even religion. Many researchers claim that Hinduism has, though, been always there in Indian society, but the rise of BJP in 1990s exhibited initial signs of ascendancy of Hindu nationalism in the state’s polity. The heredity of BJP is linked with the country’s political history where it existed with different names, though same philosophy. BJP is the re-born version of Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) founded by Dr. Prasad Mookerjee in 1951 in reaction to the banning of RSS and Hindu Mahasabha and arrest of their leaders for involvement in Gandhi’s murder.

BJS participated in five Indian elections up to 1977 and demonstrated persistent rise in its vote bank. From its political journey with only three seats in the 1<sup>st</sup> Lok Sabha elections-1951, it succeeded in getting 35 seats in 1967 elections. In elections-1977, BJS temporarily merged with Janta Party (JP) and formed government with 330 seats. But, in 1980 elections BJS left JP and formed a new political party with the name of BJP. Initially BJP endeavoured to emerge as national party by distancing itself from Hindu identity, but failed to achieve desired results in general elections held in 1980 and 1984. Since then BJP followed Hindu religious philosophy for political purposes which led to

its unprecedented rise as a new political force in India. Besides showing a steady rise in its vote bank, the party formed government in the centre for three times and recorded landslide victory in 2014 elections. Graph-2 shows trajectory of BJS/ BJP in the political canvas of Indian history.

**Figure 2: BJS/ BJP Performance in Indian Elections**



The most critical domestic event that acted as catalyst BJP rise, proved to be the demolition of 400-years old Babri Mosque in Ayodhya in 1992. Kuldip Nayer claims that the demolition of Babri Masjid was “a day light murder of secularism”. He further argues that “Mahatma Gandhi was shot at on January 30, 1948 but he died on December 6, 1992.”

#### **IV. India’s Claim of Non-Alignment**

##### **A. Indian Conceptualization**

At the time of its creation, the Indian leadership chose **non-alignment** as best policy option for securing their foreign policy objective. The Indian concept of non-alignment had a direct linkage with Nehru’s personality, knowledge and perception of international relations. The initial one and half decade of the country’s policies revolved around Nehru’s philosophical thoughts as he had been unchallenged in Indian domestic and foreign policy decision-making.

Even before independence, Nehru had pronounced his vision on Indian status in the comity of nations. In 1946, he stated: "Our general policy is to avoid entanglement in power politics and not to join any group of powers as against any other group. We must be friends to both (blocs) and yet not join either." After independence, Nehru believed that India, by virtue of its capabilities could become a global power having its own identity. In 1954 he stated: “Leaving aside these three big countries, the United States of America, the Soviet Union and China . . . . the obvious fourth country in the world is India.”

Non-alignment as a policy has seen three phases in India: Nehru’s era; post-Nehru era; and, post 9/11 era. There were following three main ideas associated with Nehru’s decision of adopting non-alignment: (ONE) India would not become part of any military alliance with either of the superpowers; (TWO) its foreign policy will remain independent of the power blocs; and, (THIRD) the state of India would maintain friendly relations with all the nations.

## B. Analyzing New Delhi's Non-Aligned Proclamation

First viewing *the Politics of Alliances*. As regard to the Indian first and foremost claim of not becoming part of great power politics or joining any of the poles, the Indian leadership has often surrendered to systemic constraints. Though, Nehru had been the chief exponent of non-alignment but after suffering a humiliating defeat from China in 1962, he sought military assistance from both the superpowers. Political analysts regard that as a policy of double-alignment. During Nehru's time non-alignment had strongly been advocated by Nehru but in the post-Nehru period such promotion was found missing in Indian policy community. There, rather, emerged strong opponents of non-alignment policy. Jayapalan contends that leaders from opposition benches believed that the non-alignment policy had proved disastrous to India during various crisis situations like Sino-Indian War-1962 and Indo-Pak War-1965. Gupta and Shukla claim that non-alignment deprived India from sincere and strong friends in international system due to which it had remained a dormant actor in the world politics for a considerable period. Hence, non-alignment had proved to be "a policy of helplessness, weakness and inaction in the name of neutrality" for India.

Most surprisingly, Indira Gandhi had proved to be the strongest opponent of non-alignment. Ever since she had occupied the prime minister office, Ms Gandhi demonstrated a strategic tilt towards former USSR. She, later, executed a historic Twenty-Years Treaty of Friendship with Moscow in 1972 which practically placed India in Soviet Camp and challenged the validity of non-alignment as state policy. The post-Cold War era besides had also forced India to reshape its foreign policy choices. Where it brought an end to the world largest communist empire, the era also transformed the global order into unipolarity with the US as sole superpower. Many states including India, readjusted their positions according to systemic changes on the world power chessboard. Dixit asserts that during 1990s, New Delhi had displayed prominent signs of its alignment with Washington which substantially weakened its historic claim of non-aligned. Later, in the year 2000 President Clinton paid a visit to India, hence, marking a new bench mark in the history of both nations. While commenting on the outcome of the visit, Kissinger could not refrain to mention that the US had discovered India as its long term strategic partner in South Asia.

Finally, after the tragic episode of the 9/11, the state of India exhibited altogether a new international character. While putting aside their six decades old stance of non-alignment, its leadership offered full operational support to the US offensive against al-Qaida bases in Afghanistan. Pundits of international relations consider it as a 180 degree U-turn in Indian foreign policy decision making and, perhaps, the official proclamation of burying non-alignment deep into Indian Ocean. Secondly, examining *Neutrality in Foreign Policy*. Empirical evidences from Indian history suggest that India could not follow its rhetoric of neutrality. In 1956, the Nehru administration issued two different policy statements on similar events. At that period of time, India had neither been in the priority list of the US, nor had any converging interests with the US. However, its policy community wanted to establish close ties with the former Soviet Union. So, Nehru issued a strong condemnation of British-French-Israel invasion of Suez Canal. But, the same year New Delhi's response on the issue of Soviet invasion of Hungary was quite mild.

Finally, probing the question of *Friendly Relations*. The claim needs to be analyzed in the light of Indian history of relations with world especially with its

neighbours. India has remained a dormant player in international politics till as late as up to the end of the Cold War. It, however, was found active in some international institutions especially the NAM where it established relations with NAM's founder states such as Yugoslavia, Indonesia, Egypt and Ghana. Nonetheless, its relevance in the international arena improved when its leadership decided to succumb to the global realities and eschew non-alignment.

As far as its relations with its neighbours are concerned, New Delhi has not endeavoured to maintain an exemplary record. In its immediate region, India share geographical and sea borders with eight countries. Despite sharing common historic and cultural linkages, it has never established cordial relations with any of its neighbouring states. This fact has been recognized by many Indian scholars and former diplomats who have closely been associated with the country's decision-making process. Dixit contends: "Structuring of practical and stable relations with its neighbours is a complex challenge, as with each one its neighbours, India has numbers of issues which remain unresolved." Besides suffering a humiliating defeat from China in 1962, New Delhi has scores of unsettled border disputes with Beijing which include Aksai Chin, Shaksgam Valley and Arunachal Pradesh. With Sri Lanka, the India intelligence agency (RAW) and the state of Tamil Nadu had covertly been involved in providing financial support and training to Liberation of Tamil Tigers of Tamil Ealm (LTTE). India has also been directly involved in Sri Lanka's domestic issues. The assassination of Rajiv Gandhi also occurred due to the state's dual policies in respect of Sri Lanka.

Where it has issues with Nepal over Kalapani and Bangladesh over Muhurichar River, it had dispute with Myanmar over Manipur. Besides conducting a military adventure in Maldives in 1987, India has been using Bhutan as a buffer zone between its borders with China. As regards to Pakistan, India has issues related to identity, perception and territorial in nature. Three major wars and uncounted border encounters over unresolved territorial issues like Kashmir, Siachen and Sir Creek, and Indian open support to terrorism in Pakistan, are the major destabilizing factors of the South Asian region. The history of interstate relations of the two core nations of the region relates that New Delhi has always exercised hard power to address the existing disputes. Not only this, just after the episode of the 9/11, Indian leadership offered their country's full support to the US in its operation against Al-Qaida in Afghanistan by putting their historic claim of nonalignment null and void. India has also been actively involved in Afghan affairs and made huge investment to secure its interests. Though India leadership claims that both the above steps were in an effort to manipulate the systemic developments in its favour butno political scientist can deny that the moves were to destabilize Pakistan and undermine its role in Afghanistan.

The hindsight analysis of the Indian foreign policy draws two conclusions. Firstly, Nehru had never conceived the end point of his decision, nor considered any alternatives and analyzed their consequences before making the final choice which are the pre-requisites of a rational decision under Allison's rational actor model. Secondly, India failed to maintain any of their claims about non-alignment. During many crises situation Indian leadership – even Nehru – could not abstain from seeking assistance from global powers.

## V. Major Findings

Analysis of India concepts of 'secularism' and 'non-alignment' guide to following major findings.

- Almost all strategic decisions of Indian political history are attributed to Jawaharlal Nehru whose philosophical thoughts had served as theoretical framework of Indian behaviour as an actor in the comity of nations.
- Basing on his vision, perceptions, and knowledge on international order vis-à-vis the place of India in it, Nehru chose 'secularism' and 'non-alignment' as country's national and international features respectively.
- The concept of secularism derived from various western societies at the aftermath of Peace Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 and proved highly successful in religiously and ethnically diverse societies.
- In 1947, the newly independent state of India had housed a diverse society void of pre-independence unifying force. In order to provoke spirit of nationalism and convert India into a nation-state, Nehru proclaimed 'secularism' as country's domestic identity.
- The empirical evidences of the India history indicate that the state of India could not maintain the three level of relationship– state, individual and religion – in Indian society. The state's prejudice and discriminatory policies against minorities led to systematic growth of Hindutva, hence, converting India in to a highly polarized society on extreme religious basis.
- Hinduism has, though, been active in India for decades, but the emergence of BJP since 1980s proved to be the first sign of domination of Hindu nationalism in the country politics. Demolition of Babri Mosque in 1992 marked daylight murder of secularism in India.
- Non-alignment bears two aspects: rhetoric of Indian foreign policy and a movement of likeminded states.
- Three specified images of New Delhi's claim of being a non-aligned country include: staying away from superpowers politics; pursuit of independent and neutral foreign policy; and, establishing friendly relations with all nations.
- Hindsight analysis India foreign policy behaviour leads to following conclusions: (1) Indian leaders have often surrendered to systemic pressures and demonstrated signs of both seeking great powers assistance and toeing their interests; (2) India also been showing different responses on similar kind of international events, hence, violating the second principle of non-alignment; (3) until the end of the Cold War, India has remained a dormant actor in international community; and, (4) India has also never maintained friendly relations with any of its neighbouring states and has number of unresolved issues with each one of them.

## VII. Conclusion

The research was meant to probe reasons for downfall of 'secularism' and 'non-alignment' in India. In 1947, the Indian leadership faced two challenges: domestically provoking a spirit of nationalism in a religiously, culturally and linguistically highly diverse society; and, internationally establishing its identity as newly independent country. Being a stalwart of Indian policy-making, Nehru made 'secularism' and 'non-alignment' as rational choices of Indian domestic and foreign strategies. The succeeding leadership had never met any of the requirements to validate Nehru's claims. Even,

Nehru – the chief exponent of the strategies – failed to: firstly, prevent methodological and realistic growth of a parallel Hindutva philosophy in societal ranks; and, secondly, remain immune to systemic pressures.

The inductive nature of this research concludes that unless a rational choice is assessed under various instruments of rationality, the chances of success and durability are extremely bleak. Had Nehru conducted any cost-benefit analysis under Max Weber's rational choice theory or Graham T. Allison's rational actor model or any such tools of analyzing options, he could have made a rational choice for his country. The present Premier Modi has chosen an altogether different approach in relations to country's domestic and international character. How long shall Modi's extremist and theocratic domestic philosophy, help India in making a peaceful place for its minorities besides maintaining its relevance to the global community? The query also needs an academic inquiry by political scientists.

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