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Gyan Evam Neeti: Indian Academia's Diplomatic Potential for Viksit Bharat 2047

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Abstract:

Academic Diplomacy is an emerging concept in the field of International Relations. Diplomacy generally occurs through the multi-track model, where Track 1 denotes formal channels, track 2 denotes non-formal channels and Track 1.5 denotes hybrid channels. The academia can also take part in the process of achieving a nation's foreign policy goals in the Track 1.5 and Track 2 mode, especially pertaining to the sharing of knowledge as well as building channels of communication in academic and related institutional spaces. It can also play an important role in soft power and narrative setting. From the oldest times, India had multiple systems of knowledge creation and sharing, such as wandering monks and travelling scholars, who were an important part of spreading Hindu and Buddhist practices across the world. In the current era, India also has a vibrant academic community across various disciplines. By combining traditional and contemporary academic set-ups and with the right investment in educational institutions, India can develop a broad talent pool and a broad corps for academic diplomacy befitting its rising stature as part of the Viksit Bharat 2047 agenda.

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Introduction

The importance of knowledge has been in the popular consciousness of enlightened minds all over the world. "Knowledge is power" is an oft-repeated quote, attributed to the essayist Sir Francis Bacon. Education, thus, becomes an important means of acquiring knowledge systematically. Swami Vivekananda, writing to Sarala Ghosh on the importance of education in India, had also emphasized that "through education comes faith in oneself, and through faith in one's own Self the inherent Brahman is waking up in them, while the Brahman in us is gradually becoming dormant" (Vivekananda, 1897). Amongst the different factors that make up a nation's Comprehensive National Power, it is not just the economy, natural resources, or the population. Human capital, as well as resources in knowledge and technology, are also important categories within the concept (Bajwa, 2008). In all these factors, the academia has the potential to play. Firstly, the academia has the responsibility to develop scientific, human, and technical expertise that expands India's knowledge base. Secondly, the academia, at the same time, is also expected to pursue research as members of the global academic community. The objective, when playing this role, is to advance the collective knowledge base for mankind. In other words, the academia must play both domestic and international roles while exercising their expertise. This interplay of the internal and the external makes the academia well-suited to serve certain diplomatic and foreign policy purposes outside the formal modes and channels of diplomacy.

Academic Diplomacy: The Concept

Firstly, before defining Academic Diplomacy, we must first seek to define the general concept of diplomacy itself as "the established method of influencing the decisions and behaviour of foreign governments and peoples through dialogue, negotiation, and other measures short of war or violence" (Marks & Freeman, 2024).

Within the field of International Relations, there is plenty of literature around the various modes of diplomatic engagement that go beyond the formal channels. The commonest

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framework in this regard is that of Multi-Track Diplomacy, which comprises of three basic modes. The first is Track 1 diplomacy, which consists of official channels, wherein the diplomacy is carried out formally and at the state-to-state level. It is performed by diplomats, high level officials, elected heads of state and government, generally with their counterparts from other nations with formal protocol observed. Track 2 Diplomacy, on the other hand, is composed of non-official representatives, interacting with other non-official representatives, usually outside the formal constraints posed by political power. There is also Track 1.5, which comprises of unofficial and informal interactions carried out by representatives that are otherwise parts of the formal set-up, often with mediators that are not parts of a political institution (Mapendere, 2000). Despite their unofficial and semi-official nature, track 1.5 and Track 2 have also yielded tangible results. For example, the China-US Strategic Nuclear Dynamics Dialogue run by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies from 2014 to 2019 was a result of Track 1.5 and the 1993 Oslo Accords between the State of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation are the result of a highly successful Track 2 (Sokol, 2022). In this framework, academic diplomacy could be categorized as part of Track 2. However, limiting the conception of academic diplomacy to just Track 2 misses out on the important nuances and conditions in which academic diplomacy can operate, and thus, yield the best results for India. In principle and practice, academic diplomacy can be distinct from official diplomatic and political communication applied by subnational, national and international authorities or elites" (Academic Diplomacy Project, 2021).

Globalisation is another important key to grasp to envisage academic diplomacy. One of the main features of globalisation is an increasing speed, not just of travel and communication, but also change, resulting in a "compression" of perceived space and time. Like global businesses, universities and academic institutions too have realised that formal modes of engagement must be complemented by more flexible avenues of transnational engagement (von Feigenblatt Rojas, 2023, p. 319). In a world where the process of globalisation connects everyone through internet and fast travel, networks are becoming increasingly important. Anne-Marie Slaughter has rightly pointed out that in foreign policy, there are two different views of how foreign affairs work. One is the "chessboard view" which comprises of

sovereign states as the sole actors on the international stage. The other is the "web view" where a multiplicity of actors across the globe are interacting and transacting in ever-growing relationships (Slaughter, 2017, pp. 6-7).

Data, information, knowledge, and wisdom are all interrelated in a hierarchy known as the DIKW pyramid. At the bottom of the hierarchy is data, as a collection of facts and figures in raw and unorganised form. Upon that is built information, which is data that has been cleaned of its errors and further processed to make it easier to measure and represent. At the third level is knowledge, which is the understanding of that data and knowing how to apply it. At the top is wisdom, which is the normative and ethical evaluation of knowledge (OntoText, 2023). The purpose of academic diplomacy, thus, is not just in the domain of data and information, which can easily be achieved through various open channels such as internet and other communication technology. It is also to add the sensibilities and sensitivities of India, and to also incorporate the voices of the Global South, especially in those platforms where their voices have not been heard due to pro-Western and pro-colonialism biases of mainstream platforms and institutions of knowledge.

The best utility of academic diplomacy, thus, happens not just in sharing the right academic knowledge, but also helping its recipients grasp the larger narrative under which the said exchange is happening and the larger ethical ramifications of the same. At the diplomatic front, this means to convey all knowledge that is also backed by traditional Indian ethical thought, and thus, contributing towards the India narrative. The power of attraction of national narrative and branding comes under the broader category of "soft power" given by Joseph Nye (2004). According to Nye (2004, p. 6), soft power is not just influence, but the ability to shape others' preferences and outcomes through the power of attraction. Thus, India's academic diplomacy must generate and disseminate knowledge in such a manner, that it puts forth India's growth story and raised stature on the world stage. In usual academic conferences and seminars, an academic often either only represents themselves, or represents both himself (or herself) and their corresponding institution. In situations of academic diplomacy, the same scholar is thus, by extension, also acting as a representative of the nation. By extension, the scholar becomes the representation not only of his or her

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institution's role in shaping the national vision but can also be perceived as the representative of the national tradition of scholarship. The institution can also, inter alia, serve as a site or a venue for academic diplomacy. All these add to make Academic Diplomacy a complex art.

Precedents in History and Culture

Academic Diplomacy has always existed for centuries. The only difference was that it was not recognised as such. Ever since older times, scholarly people have travelled the world in search of knowledge of the physical or the metaphysical world, connecting with people and spreading ideas. This circulation of knowledge is now thus recognised and categorised as Academic Diplomacy (Chandramohan & Rycroft, 2018). It essentially conceptualises bridging two independent principles, what Fredrick Whitling (2011, p. 647) terms as "the specific marriage of political diplomacy and scholarly objectivity." The land of Bharat is no stranger to its scholars, mystics, and monks wielding diplomatic influence through non-violent means. One of the earliest examples of this are the Buddhist missions under Emperor Ashoka of the Mauryan Empire. The story of Emperor Ashoka renouncing war of aggression is well known – after the bloody conquest of Kalinga, which also completed his empire's hold over most of India, he was so overcome with grief that he renounced wars of aggression and took up Buddhism. This was followed by his efforts to spread Buddhism. This policy was termed by the Mauryan state of Bharat as "Dharmavijaya" or "conquest through Dharma" not just within his empire but also territories bordering his empire (Guruge, 1994, p. 73). This meant that his emissaries spread the message of Buddha, and by extension, the larger cultural vocabulary in which Hindu and Buddhist traditions were embedded. With his efforts, Buddhist traditions took organic roots in current day Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos. The spread of Buddhism had a strong academic diplomacy component to it. India's traditional centres of learning not only taught to Indian scholars. Foreign monks would visit centres of learning like Nalanda and Odantapuri, learning from their learned Indian gurus. Often, the Indian gurus themselves would travel to the student's land of origin on special request.

The best example of an ancient forerunner to academic diplomacy is the Samye Debates in Tibet. The debate, which was held over the course of a few years, was primarily centred on whether enlightenment was an instantaneous or a gradual process. The debate was contested by two sides. The Chinese monks, led by Moheyan, argued the case for instant enlightenment, while the Indian side, led by Kamalashila from Nalanda University, argued for gradualism. Ultimately, the Indian side under the Nalanda monks had prevailed, and as a result, the Tibetan empire chose to translate the Indian Vajrayana Buddhist perspective, which had been written down in Sanskrit (van Schaik, 2011, p. 38). Thus, as the Indian Vajrayana form became embedded into Tibetan Buddhism, Tibetans increasingly came to imagine India has a holy land, a source for their sophisticated civilization (Huber, 2008, pp. 58-59). Similarly, at the domestic front, when the religious traditions seemed on the verge of excessive fragmentation, Adi Shankaracharya had launched debates and discussions to reunify within the larger Hindu umbrella traditions, establishing his four *matths* or monastic centres of learning in the four cardinal directions of the landscape of Bharat: Badrinath in the north, Shringeri in the south, Puri in the east and Dwarka in the west. Looking at both examples from the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, we can see that the scholarly community of India has, in the past, played both internal and external roles when undertaking the necessary exchanges that are part and parcel of the academia. These examples from history can serve as guides for crafting a future model of Academic Diplomacy.

Contemporary Academic Diplomacy

Academic Diplomacy has been a well-running practice even in the era of nation-states. As early as 1904, Berlin University and Harvard University established exchange programmes for professors. While German academics had, at first, taken to the development negatively, it had resulted in flourishing relations, not just between the German and American academic communities, but also helped Harvard University become a top intellectual hub (Adam & Lerg, 2015, p. 299).

The post World War II era has been defined with an increase in interconnection of nations through faster air travel and ever-growing speed of communication and transfer of capital. In

this era, national cultural institutes served as the early conduits for rebuilding relations between war-torn nations, sometimes even reverting to the older modes of engagement. For example, the Swedish Institute of Rome, under director Erik Sjöqvist, facilitated the return of four German libraries to Rome, which had been evacuated during World War II (Whitling, 2011). This opened a new avenue for connection and cooperation between Germany, Italy, and Sweden, benefitting all the parties concerned. In the 1970s, academic exchanges between Cuba and United States, especially in the field of humanities and social sciences, which also enabled the travel of presidential candidates, senators and other high-level officials from both sides, after the government change in Cuba in 1959 had ruptured all contact between the two nations (Martínez & Resende, 2006, p. 31). This is an important aspect to keep in mind, given that the Cuban Missile Crisis had occurred during 1962, so the contact kept crucial knowledge sharing intact absence of formal channels of diplomacy.

Academic Diplomacy has also been a potent tool in conceptualising and explaining large-scale projects of regional and geopolitical re-engineering. For example, not only did China extensively use its university and higher education institutions to spearhead many of its projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), but also mobilized its cultural institutions such as Confucius Institutes and Confucious Classrooms to organise the necessary lectures, forums, conferences, etc. Along with this, there were extensive scholarships, cooperations in running educational institutions, teacher training programmes, etc. (d'Hooghe, 2021, pp. 40-41). The European Union too is no strange to Academic Diplomacy. Currently, it operates projects such as the HEIDI (Higher Education Informal Diplomacy) Initiative to improve the interface between science and policy, especially pertaining to Sustainable Development Goals (European University Institute, 2023).

Institutions and institutionalized conferences can also be a useful template. In the current contemporary set-up, India does have multiple grand platforms that have become avenues of Academic Diplomacy. On the strategic policy front, one of the prime examples and perhaps the flagship event of this category is the Raisina Dialogue hosted by the Observer Research Foundation along with the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. It serves as the premier platform which brings together a large network of people working in the field of

International Relations, Foreign Policy, Security Studies, Area Studies, etc. and giving them a chance to interact with the important policy-makers and decision makers of not just India, but India's strategic allies as well. Similarly, the Samvad Conference also creates a similar confluence, but more on the cultural aspects. The first Samvad Conference was held at Bodh Gaya in Bihar, as a "Hindu-Buddhist Initiative on Conflict Avoidance and Environment Consciousness" in September 2015. It had contained representatives from over 15 countries such as Bhutan, Cambodia, Japan, Myanmar, Nepal, Taiwan, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam, and the main crux was to emphasize India's civilizational linkages with these nations, as well as the legacy of the teachings of Gautama Buddha, Swami Vivekananda, and other important Hindu and Buddhist spiritual leaders (VIF India, 2020).

There have also been attempts to incorporate Academic Diplomacy into the regular modes of diplomacy. For example, in November 2020, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation hosted a digital exhibition dedicated to common Buddhist heritage, which coincided with the SCO heads of government meeting, on the initiative of India (Shaghai Cooperation Organisation, 2020). In its curation, all the national museums of the SCO member states were involved, and India took the leading role. National cultural institutions such as museums have always played a historical role as important actors in implementing cultural policy. This has been through building cultural bridges, tourism, and thus facilitating diplomatic dialogue through this means (Grincheva, 2013, p. 40).

Overall, Raisina Dialogues and Samvad Conference can be considered as large-scale models as well as potential templates for Academic Diplomacy. To create a thriving Academic Diplomacy scene in India's universities, research institutions, cultural institutions, and other related educational institutions, an intermediary step would be to thus hold multiple smaller to middle-range versions of the premier models, where the main conference can play the role of the facilitator as well as mentor.

Conclusion: A Vision for 2047

The vision of Academic Diplomacy for 2047 Viksit Bharat is to envision India as a leader in the human quest for knowledge, and for the ever-growing need to channel it to solve

challenges that faces everyone – terrorism, economic inequality, climate change, mental health crisis, and so on.

This can be achieved by an active approach, which the author would argue as the *gyan evam neeti* approach. The *gyan* component signifies knowledge and expertise generated indigenously. The *neeti* component here focuses on deliberate and carefully crafted policies meant to make the *gyan* portion truly live to its full potential. The Government of India, under the *gyan evam neeti* approach, thus can and should encourage all academic, cultural, inter-cultural institutions to develop pan-India and international links with like-minded institutions whose visions are amendable to India. To ensure that the required goals are met, the necessary guidelines and mechanisms for reporting progress could be developed. Funding facilities could be made contingent, with different amounts made available at different stages of progress and incentivise those ventures that are able to hold successful ventures and projects pertaining to Academic Diplomacy. This would encourage India's up and coming scholars and institutions pursuing Academic Diplomacy to seek the implementation of such programmes enthusiastically.

With this approach, India can play a leading role in pioneering educational, technical, and cultural cooperation. Undertaking a grand project of Academic Diplomacy for the Viksit Bharat 2047 agenda will therefore require investment, which the Government can provide, and should also encourage interested private parties to do so. The benefits of academic diplomacy are likely to easily exceed the resource investment for the same. Delivering the right kind of resources to our educational and cultural institutions can kickstart the process. Its monitoring can thus be carried out by a body that is co-constituted by expertise from the Ministry of External Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, and the Ministry of Education. The land of Bharat will thus, once again, become an active crossroads and creator of world knowledge again.

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