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Indian Diplomats and the Social Hierarchies of Global Order

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KIRA HUJU, MAR 18 2024

Cosmopolitans are the only tribe who seem convinced that they do not belong to one. This is the opening gambit of my monograph, *Cosmopolitan Elites: Indian Diplomats and the Social Hierarchies of Global Order* (Oxford University Press, 2023). Mine is a book about belonging. More specifically, it asks what it takes to belong among the cosmopolitan elite in a Western-dominated international society. It does so by examining career diplomats of the elite Indian Foreign Service, many of whom were present at the founding of this order, set out to remake it in the name of an anti-colonial global subaltern but often ended up seeking status within its hierarchies through social mimicry of its most powerful actors.

Even in a formally decolonised international society, Indian diplomats continue an awkward balancing act: despite a genuine desire to strive toward a postcolonial international society founded on diversity and difference, there coexists a lingering belief in a caricature-like notion of a white, European-dominated homogenous club, to which Indian diplomats feel a social imperative to belong. Even as these diplomats passionately contest Western political hegemony, they engage in social behaviours that betray a longing to be recognized as elite members of a Westernized elite club, in whose hierarchies of race and class they hope to ascend.

In such a social context, we should think of cosmopolitanism not as an egalitarian ethic but as an elite aesthetic: a social standard that presumes cultural fluency in Anglophone elite discourses, and social assimilation into upper-class Western mores. Membership in the club of cosmopolitans comes with its own social codes and cultural rules of entry. It assumes familiarity with dominant beliefs and manners, a resume enabled by exposure to an elite transnational class consciousness. I am “worlding” cosmopolitanism, in Edward Said’s sense: historicising it, interrogating its sociality and materiality, and paying close attention to the hierarchies embedded in it. This worlding also allows me to query the social processes that give rise to the oxymoron inherent in the very term “cosmopolitan elite”—a term which pairs equality with elitism and toleration with exclusion.

The performance of elite cosmopolitanism exposes the unequal rules of belonging in a formally pluralistic but socially stratified international society. Elite cosmopolitanism exists in an unequal world defined by hierarchies of nationality, class, race, gender, religion, and caste. This is, therefore, a story of how a geopolitically and racially marginalized collective of diplomats have sought to belong in the cosmopolitan club—and of how this project of belonging brings the club’s hierarchies, hypocrisies, and political limits into sharp relief. The book offers a postcolonial critique of how legacies of empire continued to shape Indian world-making and interrogates what a more expansive, decolonised cosmopolitanism might look like.

Cosmopolitan Elites is a double intervention: it examines the often-flawed orthodoxies through which we understand Western-led global order and develops a close reading of Indian diplomats, who have a long, distinguished history of going against the predictions and prescriptions of many Western foreign-policy commentators. The Indian Foreign Service—also known as IFS(A)—is the elite-trained cadre of career diplomats who dominate the most crucial positions at the Ministry of External Affairs.

My approach to the Foreign Service is that of critical sociological inquiry, based on 85 interviews with Indian

diplomats and ministers, as well as archival research at the National Archives of India and the Nehru Memorial Library. This involves deep engagement with the practices and conventions of the Service, embedded in the rich domestic context as well as the changing international landscape it finds itself in. Instead of drawing the Indian diplomatic corps as a technocratic entity endowed with bureaucratic responsibilities and shared knowledge—an "epistemic community" in Adler and Haas' conventional sense—I consider the Indian Foreign Service as a space of intra-institutional elite contestation. The Service is a site of world-making, in which meanings and practices of cosmopolitanism are produced, renegotiated, and resisted.

The Indian Foreign Service lies at the intersection of a complex set of hierarchies, among them not only national, civilizational, racial, or material divides that structure the world of formal states, but also the hierarchies of class, gender, religion, and caste which operate domestically and transnationally. Indian diplomats have often been marginalized in a materially unequal and racialized world, but many of them have also historically, as members of India's dominant classes and castes, sought to reinforce hierarchies that legitimate their own dominance. This complex set of hierarchies underpins the ambivalence of the elite status of Indian diplomats, reflecting both a postcolonial ethic of egalitarianism and an investment in many old hierarchies. The question of their 'insider status' in international society is a fraught one.

The cosmopolitan aesthetic survives because it serves two functions: firstly, of social recognition in international society and secondly, of domestic elite reproduction. Firstly, elite cosmopolitanism is a sorting mechanism whereby the Indian Foreign Service elite have sought parity among the global club of diplomats and decision-makers by sending their most suave, cultured, and educated—that is, cosmopolitan—members to represent India in key positions abroad. Secondly, this seeking of international parity has had the perverse effect of cementing domestic inequalities: the cosmopolitan aesthetic legitimizes the continued domestic reproduction of the traditional diplomatic elite, who use it to argue for their own unique ability to act as India's representatives. That is, the cosmopolitan aesthetic perpetuates the domestic dominance of officers who can harness their familiarity with upper-class, Westernized manners of a bygone white world to secure their own institutional position. Diplomats who match elite markers associated with the Indian upper-classes, higher castes, and Anglophile circles can leverage their compatibility with 'worldly' elite markers of distinction against those who do not – such as lower-caste diplomats or vernacular speakers. This legitimates sociocultural hierarchies at home in the name of social recognition abroad. Colonial entanglements produced the cosmopolitan aesthetic; postcolonial socialization and domestic power structures sustain it.

In interrogating how Indian diplomats learned to live under a Westernized order, the book also offers a sociologically grounded reading of what might happen in spaces like India as the world transitions past Western domination. Equally: what happens to the received habits of Westernized cosmopolitanism as India is ever more deeply engulfed in Hindu nationalist readings of identity?

Cosmopolitanism in the theoretical register of Kwame Anthony Appiah is about the celebration of difference and diversity. "Actually existing cosmopolitanism", in a sociological register, stifles precisely the kinds of difference and diversity that cosmopolitanism ought to celebrate. This paradox complicates the stories we tell ourselves about global order, the supposedly pluralistic and liberal international society that underlies it, and the cosmopolitan elites entrusted with its governance. Indeed, the stale binary between 'cosmopolitan' and 'closed', which liberal internationalists believe to be the primary struggle of our time, is misleading. Instead, I suggest that we analyse the ways in which elite cosmopolitanism itself came to propagate a closed reading of the world and that we imagine cosmopolitanism anew.

About the author:

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