The politics of gifts and reciprocity in South–South Cooperation: The case of India's Covid-19 diplomacy

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Abstract
Development economists have often argued that South–South flows of capital and aid are devoid of the conditionalities and hierarchies that define North–South flows of the same. Maussians and neo-Maussians maintain that gifting—which allows for the ethos of reciprocity—leads to the formation of more equal international partnerships. This article focusses on India's development diplomacy. We unpack Indian cultural notions of ‘gifting’, which do not allow for imaginings of reciprocity, and show how ‘the gift’ has been strategically employed by Indian actors as a tool of state-making to forge relations of hierarchy and dependence globally.

KEYWORDS
Africa, India, reciprocity, South–South Cooperation, the gift

1 INTRODUCTION

In her ground-breaking analysis of how North–South and South–South flows differ within a changing global development landscape, Emma Mawdsley (2012)—in From Recipients to Donors—creatively draws on anthropological gift theory to analyse ‘aid’ and development cooperation between emerging donors and recipient nations in the Global South. In contrast to how donors in the Global North usually assume that their ‘gifts’ of aid flow only in one direction, Mawdsley contends that southern development cooperation is congruent with ideas found in classical anthropological thinking about reciprocity, insofar as it is anchored in social relations of equality, and understood and performed through gift exchange (Mawdsley, 2012, p. 268). In this way, Mawdsley convincingly shows how gift theory is a useful analytical tool for shedding light on the ways in which ideas about reciprocity are embedded in and articulated through South–South Cooperation, both in its discursive framing as well as in material practices.
In this article, we build upon Mawdsley’s arguments about gifts and reciprocity in South–South Cooperation. While we agree that there is much to be learnt about this phenomenon by looking at it through the prism of generic anthropological theories of exchange, we argue that a better appreciation of more culturally specific notions of the gift is required in order to understand how the logic of reciprocity is understood in some instances of South–South Cooperation. Such locally grounded cultural understandings have, however, hitherto largely been neglected in the discipline of International Relations. Our aim in this article is therefore to show how enhanced attention to the culturally specific can shed further light on the operation of reciprocity at multiple scales, in statecraft, in the public imagination and in relationships between nations. To illustrate this, we focus more specifically on India’s development diplomacy, which we seek to understand by drawing on the considerable ethnographic and sociological scholarship on the various gift-giving traditions that exist in India (Arumugum, 2019; Copeman, 2011; Dirks, 1993; Laidlaw, 2000; Parry, 1986; Raheja, 1988), shaped by the country’s many cultural, ethno-linguistic and caste formations. It is our contention that these traditions form part of a cultural repertoire of reference which informs how policy makers, commentators and popular discourse think about and make sense of moral and hierarchical relationships between people and between nations and of India’s place in the world today. To substantiate this, we analyse India’s Covid-19 diplomacy which invoked the language of friendship, solidarity and giving and which evoked much pride at home (even if actual aid flows from India also utilised commercial and blended modalities of finance). Of particular interest to us, however, are the gestures of moral and material support that India received also from countries in the Global South when it faced an unprecedented domestic Covid-19 crisis in May–July 2021. This moral and material support was received in India with public embarrassment, and sometimes even outrage, even though it came from nations that India’s development diplomacy rhetoric framed as equal partners in South–South Cooperation. We use this case to explore the complex ways in which Indian notions of state-making and diplomacy are intimately tied to forms of giving and receiving, where ‘the gift’ can be tactically employed as a tool of statecraft to forge relations of hierarchy and dependence, despite current diplomatic rhetoric about cooperation between equal partners. Methodologically, we draw on the authors’ long-term research on Indian foreign policy, a close reading of ethnographic analyses of gift giving in India and media coverage of and commentary on India’s Covid diplomacy.

The article is structured as follows. We first review the literature on the gift in development diplomacy. We then provide a short overview of India’s development diplomacy, arguing that its emphasis southern solidarity (rooted in shared conditions of postcolonial economic marginalisation in the Global South), and the need for and reformed multilateralism, can be seen to create the normative conditions for reciprocal exchange between equals. We also offer a brief description of India’s varied instruments of development cooperation to separate what constitutes a ‘gift’ from other commercial and tied modalities of development finance. We then use the case of India’s Covid-19 diplomacy as an entry point to the discussion of India’s multiple gift-giving traditions and their ethics of reciprocity, foregrounding understandings of the gift as a tool of statecraft and the unreciprocability of certain gifts. While we use this discussion to shed light on a particular moment in India’s Covid-19 diplomacy, we also argue that this culturally specific lens enables us to better appreciate how logics of gift giving and reciprocity inform current Indian understandings and practices of statecraft and multilateralism.

2 THE ‘GIFT’ IN DEVELOPMENT DIPLOMACY

Marcel Mauss’s (1990 [1924]) landmark essay entitled The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies foreshadowed numerous debates in anthropology and sociology on gift giving and reciprocity. Since then, a growing corpus of literature engaging with both Maussian and neo-Maussian perspectives have proliferated, including particularly in the past few decades within international relations and the study of foreign aid (Furia, 2015; Hattori, 2001, 2003; Kowalski, 2011; Mawdsley, 2012). This latter body of literature interrogates two alternative propositions that are crucial to our discussion: whether ‘gift giving’ in the form of foreign aid flows enables and sustains unequal
political and economic relationships; or, whether ‘gift exchange’ establishes a more equal imagination of global multilateralism through the Maussian ethic of reciprocity.

Mauss argued that the act of giving is a multidimensional process which creates a social bond between the donor and recipient, irrespective of whether the act of giving is motivated by altruism, friendship, affinity or obligation, or by bolstering the donor’s moral or economic status. The act of receiving a gift in turn legitimises the social bond, reaffirms the relationship between giver and receiver and creates an obligation on the part of the receiver to reciprocate, whereas turning down a gift entails a negation of that social relationship and possibly an insult to the donor. For Mauss, the gift is therefore essentially a ‘free’ transaction, which creates a moral economy of symbolic and material exchange between donor and recipient.

Mauss’s ideas were later elaborated by the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (1972) who developed a typology of different forms of reciprocity. Sahlins’ typology includes the idea of negative reciprocity in which self-interested parties seek to maximise personal gains through strategic forms of gifting, effectively creating relationships of superiority and inferiority between giver and recipient (Mawdsley, 2012, pp. 258–259). In a similar vein, and also within anthropology, Bourdieu (1990) argued that if and when the recipient agrees to enter into relations of reciprocity created through the act of gifting, they are in fact complicit in enforcing and legitimising their own subordination in a hierarchical relationship characterised by symbolic domination (Mawdsley, 2012, p. 259).

These modes of thinking about gift giving, reciprocity and hierarchy have been applied widely to explain the dynamics of North–South aid, especially that which flows from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC) to the Global South. Realist theories in International Relations, for example, have argued that foreign aid (both commercial and non-commercial; tied and untied) is an instrument that furthers the pursuit, promotion and defence of the donor’s national interests (Morgenthau, 1962, p. 302, quoted in Mawdsley, 2012). Echoing Nye’s (1990) description of soft power, aid is here a ‘soft’ mechanism for influencing the framing of agendas and eliciting goodwill towards the donor (Gulrajani et al., 2020, p. 7). And, in a comparable vein, although from a radically different point of departure, World Systems theorists and Marxists see the ‘giving of aid’ as a means of sustaining uneven forms of capitalist accumulation that serves donor states, elites in the peripheries, as well as large transnational or multinational corporations (Mawdsley, 2012, p. 258).

Such hierarchical relationships between the Global North and the Global South are thus underpinned by the North–South political and moral economy of foreign aid in the postcolonial era, accompanied by market-oriented commercial strategies, and governance and market reforms enacted by multilateral organisations. However, scholars such as Bräutigam (2009) and Mawdsley (2012) argue that South–South flows are fundamentally different from North–South flows insofar as they do not pivot around hierarchy and dependency. These South–South flows have a longer history, with Brazil, China and India in particular providing some form of ‘aid’ to Africa and other parts of the Global South since the 1950s, initially in the form of modest financial investments, capacity-building initiatives and technology transfer. But the scale and nature of these engagements has increased greatly in recent years. The emerging powers of the Global South with active development assistance programmes resist being designated as ‘donors’—a term they see as associated with ‘paternalism, hierarchy and neo-colonial interference’ (Mawdsley, 2012, p. 257)—and instead frame their engagement as ‘development cooperation’, which indexes (in theory at least) a transaction amongst equals. As indicated above, Mawdsley's work on the distinctiveness of southern development cooperation has been particularly influential in these debates. According to Mawdsley (2012, p. 263), four main characteristics of South–South Cooperation and the rhetoric that surrounds it serve to set it apart from conventional North–South flows. These are:

1. the assertion of a shared experience of colonial exploitation, postcolonial inequality and vulnerability to uneven neoliberal globalisation;
2. a shared identity as developing nations based on this shared experience that in turn gives rise to a specific expertise in appropriate development approaches and technologies (which do not emanate in the Global North);
3. a rejection of hierarchical North–South relations and a strong articulation of the principles of respect, sovereignty and non-interference; and
4. an insistence on mutual opportunities and win–win outcomes of South–South Development Cooperation.

Characteristics such as these form the basis for her assertion that ‘the gift element of southern development cooperation is congruent with Mauss’s depiction of the social relations between more or less equals, performed through gift exchange, rather than Sahlins’ account of negative reciprocity’ (Mawdsley, 2012, p. 268) and its attendant formation of relations of hierarchy. However, in her more recent writings, Mawdsley (2019) has identified a gradual change in South–South Cooperation, attributable to altered political and fiscal regimes and new geopolitical ambitions among donor nations. These changes include a more ‘muscular’, pragmatic, outcome-oriented narrative framing of economic diplomacy; difficulty in maintaining claims to non-interference; and Southern partners showing less ideational and operational distinction from ‘established’ Northern donors. These more recent changes, existing alongside continued emphasis on equality and exchange over hierarchy and dependency are evident also in India’s development diplomacy, to which we now turn.

3 | INDIAN DEVELOPMENT DIPLOMACY: MODALITIES AND INTERPRETATIONS

When Indian commentators speak of the country’s ‘development diplomacy’, they usually refer to a broad set of relationships and actors which define India's social, economic and political engagements, mainly, but not exclusively, with the Global South. Some Indian analysts take a holistic view of India's development diplomacy and include trade, investment, an array of commercial transactions, concessional finance including elements of ‘non-commercial’ aid, grants in the form of educational capacity building, knowledge sharing and technology transfers (Aneja, 2015; Chakrabarty, 2018; Chaturvedi, 2016; Dubey & Biswas, 2016; Modi & Venkatachalam, 2021). Some go further to argue that development diplomacy and cooperation in a broad sense also includes diplomatic participation in a series of regional and global multilateral institutions championing the shared economic and political concerns of the Global South (Aneja, 2015; Narlikar, 2020), aimed at a normative multilateral order that is equitable and representative of the ‘rising’ South.

The narrative that frames India’s engagement in South–South Cooperation is derived from the country's perception of postcolonial marginality and the normative imaginary of key post-independence politicians. India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru (in office 1947–64) was a strong critic of the post-Second World War order, which was characterised by the gradual demise of European imperialism, the emergence of the liberal capitalist system and the intensification of the Cold War. Nehru, one of the architects of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), believed that the countries of the Global South should insulate themselves from the divisive politics of the Cold War and press for universal nuclear disarmament. Ideas of peaceful interstate co-existence were spelt out in the Panchsheel Agreement—also known as the Five Principle of Peaceful Co-existence—with China in April 1954, as well as within the NAM which brought together many soon-to-be-independent African and Asian nations (Venkatachalam & King, 2021). India's early foreign policy under Nehru is therefore today often described as a form of South–South Cooperation, even though as a term, ‘South–South Cooperation’ only acquired currency in the late 1970s when the UN acknowledged it in 1978 in Buenos Aires (UN, n.d.). However, in line with the more general changes to South–South Cooperation in recent years (Mawdsley, 2019), several scholars have argued that India’s involvement in South–South development cooperation is becoming increasingly synonymous with ‘economic diplomacy’ and ‘economic statecraft’, which essentially use financial modalities to bolster Indian economic, political and geostrategic interests overseas (Narlikar, 2020; Taylor, 2016). While there is arguably a strong element of truth to this, at the level of rhetoric Indian actors continue to insist that their development cooperation with countries of the Global South is
collaborative, free of conditionalities, demand-driven and non-hierarchical and based on ‘win–win’ outcomes (Chaturvedi, 2016; Dubey & Biswas, 2016; Viswanathan & Mishra, 2019) for equally placed partners.²

In current practice, the line between Indian commercial and non-commercial flows is often blurred (Mawdsley, 2012) as India’s ‘development cooperation’ comprises multiple modalities of development assistance and concessional finance (Waisbich & Bhatia, 2021). Capacity-building initiatives undertaken by the Indian government’s Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme and scholarships disbursed by the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) may be categorised as ‘non-commercial’ transactions, as may humanitarian disaster relief aid, debt cancellations and donations of medical and other supplies. Other modalities fuse the ‘gift’ and commercial transactions, such as India’s well-studied lines of credit (LOCs), dispensed by the EXIM Bank of India at the behest of the Government of India. LOCs have a grant element built into them, depending on the classification into which the receiving country falls. Rates of interest and the grant element are calculated based on International Monetary Fund (IMF) formulations. Some low- and lower middle-income (L and LMI) countries with ‘minimum binding concessional requirements’ receive loans where the grant element is as high as 37.48%, the rate of interest 1.5% and the maturity period 25 years. Some developing countries that do not fall into the L and LMI categorisation are eligible to receive loans where the grant element is just 24.31%, interest rates are Libor³ plus 1.5% and the maturity period 15 years (DEA, 2015). LOCs are widely regarded as a tool to introduce Indian firms to external markets. Recently, the EXIM Bank has introduced a Buyer’s Credit for overseas governments to purchase goods and services related to projects from India. Here, interest rates are slightly higher and the grant element much smaller. In addition, large public sector banks such as the State Bank of India and the Bank of Baroda provide concessional finance for Indian companies to operate abroad, as well as commercial loans to stakeholders in the geographies in which they operate (Waisbich & Bhatia, 2021).

It is within this wider canvas of India’s historical involvement in South–South Cooperation; its gradual shift towards using financial modalities to bolster its economic, political and geostrategic interests overseas, in practice albeit not in rhetoric; and its mix of non-commercial, commercial and blended modalities of finance in current forms of development assistance that we locate India’s Covid-19 diplomacy to which we turn next.

4 COVID-19, INDIA’S ‘GIFT’ DIPLOMACY AND THE PROBLEM OF RECIPROCITY

Following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Indian government embarked on an ambitious Covid-19 outreach programme. This programme mirrored India’s broader development compact in that it fused capacity building, debt relief, technology transfers and commercial transactions. At home, it was legitimised to domestic constituencies as showcasing India’s indigenous vaccine and drug manufacturing capabilities, ensuring security and peace in a Covid-hit world, countering China’s influence in the South Asian region and displaying altruism and solidarity with the nations of the Global South (Roychoudhury, 2020) which were otherwise given a raw deal by the vaccine nationalism of most countries in the Global North.

Several components in India’s Covid-19 diplomacy can be classified as gifts and understood within the logic of giving and reciprocity. First, India’s continued insistence on reformed multilateralism saw it donate to a number of international organisations. At the Global Vaccine Summit in 2020, India pledged USD 15 million to Gavi, the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization. India also initiated efforts to set up a SAARC Emergency Fund, to which it has made the largest contribution of all member states, of USD 10 million. India also contributed USD 2 million to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), a full 20% of the total amount pledged for the next 2 years. In 2020, India announced a USD 2 million contribution to the International Solar Alliance programme ‘ISA-CARE’ to support the deployment of solar power in health centres in 46 Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and Least Developed Countries (LDC) (Roychoudhury, 2020).
Second, the Government of India wrote off some of its loans to Covid-hit countries. It provided debt relief to the Government of Mozambique by suspending repayments on LOCs worth USD 700 million. And it activated a currency swap of USD 150 million for the Maldives, as part of a USD 400 million swap agreement signed in July 2019 to help the country deal with revenue losses from the tourism sector. Sri Lanka—whose tourism sector and economy in general has been badly hit by Covid-19—requested India for a moratorium on the USD 2.9 billion debt it owed that year, as well as for a currency swap facility (Roychoudhury, 2020).

Third, the Government of India donated food supplies to countries in its immediate neighbourhood. As part of Mission Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), the Indian Naval Ship Kesari delivered 580 tonnes of food to the Maldives. India also dispatched two separate consignments of food aid to Afghanistan, containing donations of approximately 5000 and 10,000 metric tonnes of wheat, respectively, of a total pledged donation of 75,000 metric tonnes (Roychoudhury, 2020).

Fourth, several capacity-building initiatives were sponsored by the Government of India. In the initial stages of the pandemic, India dispatched 15 doctors to Kuwait and 14 paramedics to the Maldives. The government also extended to partner countries several virtual ITEC courses on Covid-19 prevention and management (Roychoudhury, 2020). A delegation of 88 nurses, affiliated with the Aster DM Healthcare group of private hospitals in Kerala, Karnataka and Maharashtra, were sent to the United Arab Emirates, although this was not funded by the government. And fifth, the Government of India supplied hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) to a large number of countries around the world. As of April 2020, India had exported 285 million tablets of HCQ to 40 countries on a commercial basis, while 5 million tablets were gifted (The Hindu Business Line, 2020). Of the 115.417 million made-in-India vaccines supplied as of January 2022, 13,767 million were grants. The grants went to several countries beyond the immediate neighbourhood, identified as a strategic priority for Indian policymakers: from Albania to Trinidad and Tobago, The Bahamas, Nicaragua and many countries in Africa. The bulk of vaccine grants, however, were sent to the immediate neighbourhood where all SAARC countries (except Pakistan) received made-in-India vaccines. Bangladesh received 3.3 million doses, the largest quantity received by a single country (MEA, 2021).

India’s global Covid-19 outreach programme was to a considerable extent couched in the language of South–South Cooperation and gift giving. One commentator noted how:

Partnership and mutual benefit are core tenets of India’s foreign policy and development cooperation. The crisis has presented India with an opportunity to put these principles into practice, demonstrating that it has the knowledge, expertise, and capacity to make significant contributions to global public goods in times of crisis. (Surie, 2021)

Prime Minister Modi comparably proclaimed that India’s vaccine production and delivery capacity would be used to help all humanity in fighting the Covid-19 crisis (Al Jazeera, 2020), stressing India’s role as a long-trusted partner in meeting the healthcare needs of the global community. Its vaccine distribution was executed through the vaccine maitri (vaccine friendship) programme which, as the name suggests, stressed friendship as the cornerstone of the programme. Much Indian media coverage of vaccine grants being shipped abroad described them as ‘India’s gift’ to countries in need; and one top US scientist called India’s rollout of Covid-19 vaccines both at home and abroad ‘India’s gift to the world’ (BusinessToday.In, 2021).

Yet India’s gift diplomacy ran into an unprecedented crisis already from March 2021 as a second domestic Covid-19 wave began to be felt. In April, the number of cases climbed rapidly, and by May, the country reported as many as 400,000 infections per day (Krishnan, 2021), with the number of unrecorded cases estimated to be many times higher. Global and national headlines captured the dire situation, highlighting India’s overstretched healthcare system, the unavailability of essential medical supplies and the long queues at crematoriums and burial grounds (Lalwani & Johari, 2021). Media spaces were filled with criticism of the government for sending more doses out of the country than they were administering at home. And there was notable dissatisfaction with how India’s global reputation was being tarnished by this mishandling of the pandemic: Whereas India had just months earlier been hailed
as the ‘pharmacy of the world’ that would help humanity through the pandemic, it was ironic, disastrous even, that it now ran short of vaccines and drugs for her own citizens (Horner, 2021) who tragically succumbed to the pandemic in the hundreds of thousands.

At this critical juncture, emergency relief aid began to pour into India from a number of countries in both the Global North and South. The United States, several European countries, Japan and Australia sent supplies and monetary aid (Chakraborty, 2021), while southern developmental partners such as Iran, Kenya, Ghana, Mongolia, Oman, Bahrain, Mauritius, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Egypt sent oxygen concentrators, cylinders, ventilators, medicines and gifts of foodstuff (Chakraborty, 2021; GBC Online, 2021; PTI, 2021). The scale of humanitarian aid that India received from the countries of the Global North and South differed. The United States has donated nearly USD 226 million in Covid-19 relief, including nearly USD 150 million to support India’s response to the second wave, and more than USD 55 million in emergency supplies (USAID, n.d.). Mauritius sent 200 oxygen concentrators; Egypt sent 300 oxygen cylinders, 50 oxygen concentrators, 20 ventilators, 8000 vials of Remdesivir and other medical equipment (Chakraborty, 2021). Kenya sent 12 tonnes of tea, coffee and groundnuts to provide a ‘refreshing break’ to Indian frontline workers (The Wire, 2021).

These donations were met with reactions of embarrassment from ordinary Indians, and social media reverberated with irritation about India receiving emergency humanitarian aid. (see, e.g., Gupta, 2021; My country my pride, 2021; Schandillia, 2021). One reason why many citizens reacted so strongly was that India’s self-perception is that of an emerging global power that does not receive aid. Being an aid recipient is popularly associated with an inability to care for one’s own population without outside assistance, and India had already in 2004 declared that it would stop accepting disaster relief aid – a fact that is often emphasised (disproportionately, some would say) in the media as testimony to India’s capacity. Indeed, since the early 2000s, the country has declined aid for several natural disasters such as an earthquake (2005) and floods (2015) in Kashmir and floods in Uttarakhand (2014) and Kerala (2018) (Roy, 2021).

A major cause for irritation was that India had received donations from many of its southern developmental partners, who had long been recipients of India’s development cooperation programme. (Donations from the Global North, in contrast, did not create as much of a stir). These were the southern countries that India officially frames as equal partners in South–South Cooperation. Theoretically, acts of reciprocity in times of crises could be construed in the Maussian vein as gestures that reaffirm relationships and social bonds between partner countries (Mawdsley, 2012). Yet as seen above, this was clearly not the way in which acts of reciprocity from countries in the Global South was understood in Indian public opinion. In this context, it made little impact on an angered public opinion when External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar in May 2021 explained that what the world generally portrayed as ‘aid’ to India was actually gestures of ‘friendship’ or ‘support’ to the shared global problem of Covid-19, implying that India’s earlier Covid-19 outreach to other countries was now merely being reciprocated (NDTV, 2021).

To analyse and make sense of why specific forms of gifts (in the form of aid) from specific countries invoke strong negative moral responses, we argue that we need to move beyond generic frameworks and proceed instead from culturally specific understandings of gifts and reciprocity, including ideas about the moral and social implications of reciprocating certain gifts. It is to these culturally specific notions of gifting and ‘the reverse gift’ that we now turn, starting from the interface between gifting and statecraft.

5 | THE INDIAN GIFT AND INDIAN STATECRAFT

Indian politicians and think-tank analysts now increasingly argue that there is much to be learnt about the motivations, worldviews and actions of Indian political actors by starting from so-called Indic frames of reference (Jaishankar, 2020; Saran, 2017) rather than political science textbooks written in the Global North. Indeed, think-tank analysts often suggest that insights into how India understands and performs statecraft can be gained from studying epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the Vedas and the Upanishads and a number of other classical
texts on statecraft. This renewed interest in ‘culturally’ specific, ‘indigenous’ or ‘civilisational’ knowledge forms in the domain of statecraft coincides with the rise of the political right and the so-called ‘saffronisation’ of Indian historical and political imaginaries in the last few decades preceding the ascent of Narendra Modi to power (Venkatachalam, 2021).4

There has been a particular resurgence of interest in the Arthashastra, a second century BCE text authored by Kautilya (350–275 BCE), the prime minister of Chandragupta Maurya I in the Maurya period (r. c.321–c.297 BCE). The Arthashastra, highly theoretical and often described as offensive realism, occupies a special place in the imaginary of the Indian right and is essentially a manual on a range of topics such as governance, statecraft, foreign policy and interstate relations (Basrur, 2017: 10; Solomon, 2012). In the sphere of domestic politics, for example, the current Home Minister Amit Shah is often described as a modern-day Kautilya (or Chanakya) for his tactical mastery and impressive ability to build electorally successful political or social alliances. And in the sphere of interstate relations, the treatise has been used by analysts to understand India’s troubled relationship with its closest neighbours Pakistan and China, its relations with the former Soviet Union, its attitude towards US hegemony and India’s advocacy for a multipolar world and its engagements with East Asia and Africa (Gautam, 2016; Gautam et al., 2015; Juutinen, 2019).

Kautilya’s exposition in the Arthashastra suggests that the ultimate goal of a state is to achieve the condition of sarva-bhauma or ‘universal being’ (literally the ‘whole world’) through expansion. This expansion can be either militaristic or through a civilising mission which involves the export of cultural, religious and existential wisdom—tools of soft power (Gautam, 2016, p. 43). Kautilya envisions the world as an overlapping set of mandalas or states. These mandalas are alternating zones of alliance and hostility, described in relation to the rajamandala, the state at the centre (India in our reading), ruled by the would-be vijigishu (conqueror). The various mandalas could represent ari (adversary), mitra (ally), ari-mitra (adversary’s ally), mitra-mitra (ally’s ally), parshnighraha (adversary in the rear), okranda (ally in the rear), madhyama (middle ruler, friendly to the rajamandala and his adversaries) orudasina (neutral ruler, indifferent to rajamandala and adversaries). Under the conditions of peace and war, the vijigishu must deal with these mandalas differently. The Arthashastra provides prescriptions on how to exploit this jigsaw of alternating alliances and hostilities to one’s advantage—the vijigishu has to make friends, and exploit enemies’ enemies, to weaken his adversaries (Gautam, 2016; Gautam et al., 2015).

For Kautilya, the state consists of seven prakritis or pillars, which include the (swamin) ruler, ministers (amatya), skilled workforce (janapada), fortified towns (durg), treasury (kosa), military (dand/bala) and allies (mitra). The addition of mitra or allies as a pillar of the state means that the Kautilyan state can theoretically extend its power through the capabilities that the allies offer. Hence, even strong states can seek alliances to strengthen their powerbase without diluting their own capabilities or sovereignty. This is a crucial point insofar as it acknowledges that the prosperity and well-being of a state is dependent on the cooperation of external allies—a position that corresponds remarkably to the rhetoric used to describe South–South Cooperation in India today (Ray, 2015).

In addition to the seven pillars of the state, the Arthashastra defines six modes of shadguna, or diplomacy. These consist of sandhi (treaty), vighraha (hostilities without waging war), asana (indifference), yana (war), samshraya (submitting to another) and dvaidhibhava (dual policy of simultaneous peace and hostility). Four upayas (methods) for conducting shadguna are also specified, and they may be applied in any combination in diplomatic practice. These are sama (conciliation), dana (gifts), bheda (dissension) and danda (force). One method can be privileged over others, and all of them may be applied at different moments, depending on the relationship that obtains at a given moment in time between the state in question and the rajamandala. Indeed, Kautilya tells us that there are no such thing as permanent allies or enemies—a stance akin to that adopted by modern-day realists (Ray, 2015; Set, 2015).

For the purpose of our discussion, the role of dana, or gifts, is particularly relevant as it shows the close interconnection between gift giving, diplomacy and statecraft. In interstate relations, dana along with sama are to be used against weaker states, while bheda and danda are to be used prudently against stronger states. Madhyama andudasina kings (defined as either friendly or neutral to both the rajamandala and its enemies) may also be won over by sama and dana (Shamsastry, 1915, p. 431). In this sense, a particular hierarchical relationship is created through the
diplomacy of dana (Modelski, 1964, p. 533) between a relatively stronger giver and a relatively weaker recipient, in much the same way that political realists conceptualise the giving of aid. Within this Kautilyan logic, India—as the (aspiring) rajamandala—should occupy the position of a giver of dana, in our case in the form of Covid-19 aid, especially in relation to its perceived ‘weaker’ real or potential allies in the Global South. The reversal in the flow of dana under the Covid-19 pandemic described earlier therefore upended this relationship from an Indian point of view, partially unravelling its strategies of statecraft through dana and dramatically destabilising its self-image as rajamandala.

6  |  DANA AND DHARMADANA: THE UNRECIPROCABLE GIFT

While Kautilyan arguments about gifts and statecraft are therefore important for understanding interstate relations and Indian Covid-19 diplomacy, Indian conceptions of the gift constitute a vital contemporary category of exchange that is also associated with kingship, sacrifice, sinfulness, asceticism, merit, status, class, capital and caste identity (Copeman, 2011). Indeed, key Hindu religious texts that remain widely read and known today—the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata—speak at length of dana. The famous epic the Mahabharata (300 BCE to 300 CE) importantly held that only the charitable distribution of wealth (artha) enabled men to fulfil their dharma (duty), necessary for the attainment of moksha (salvation), the goal of most Indic faiths. Ideas of dana have developed in conversation with other forms of charitable, non-reciprocal exchange, such as dharma (annual obligation to give charity) and the voluntary sadaqa (Osella, 2018, p. 3), as also contemporary forms of philanthropy embedded within the logic of capital accumulation and prosperity (Bornstein, 2009, 2012).

Mauss was able to fit dharmadana, the Hindu laws governing dana, into his universal theory of gift giving and reciprocity by arguing that the ‘spirit’ of the donor rests within the Indian gift and that therefore the owner and receiver continue to be forever bound as the recipient owns a part of the donor through the physical manifestation of the gift (Mauss, 1990 [1924]). However, most ethnographers of South Asia concur that the political gift does not allow for reciprocity because it is purposely meant to create a hierarchy. Dirks (1993, pp. 128–138), for example, concurs with Mauss that gifts from rulers (‘great gifts’, or mahadana) were indeed thought to contain the spirit of the ruler. But the giving of mahadana was essentially about interweaving elements of the polity and establishing a hierarchy of power. This negated the element of reciprocity in the Maussian sense as the relationship between the donor and recipient were inherently hierarchically constituted. Similarly, Shulman (1980, p. 306, 1985) argued that the flow of mahadana was purposefully one way: A king, by virtue of his position as ruler, accrued impurity by disciplining his subjects through punishment and coercion and by killing his enemies. To rid himself of the consequences of such adharmic (non-righteous) conduct, the king would give away material wealth, typically through patronage of Brahmins—hereditary priests placed at the top of the caste hierarchy—and temples. Significantly, since the purpose of the mahadana was thus to expunge the impurities of the donor-king, any reciprocal return gift would negate this purpose and jeopardise the righteousness of the king and his rule (Parry, 1986; Raheja, 1988; Shulman, 1985, p. 30). This means, according to the anthropologist Jonathan Parry (1986), that dana is meant to be un reciprocated.

Studies from the colonial period show how dana came to be intimately linked with donors’ social status and demonstrated what Bourdieu referred to as their ‘symbolic capital’ (Bourdieu, 1990). For instance, in the 1800s in western India, sheths (great merchants) built wells, temples and rest houses and sponsored festivals and arenas of Sanskrit learning, to demonstrate their commercial success publicly (Haynes, 1987). These acts were also conceptualised as service (seva) to deities and part of their sacred duty (dharma). The most important performative element was the improvement of abru (Persian: reputation) in society, through these gestures (Haynes, 1987, pp. 342–343). Ideas of dharma and abru came to reconfigure the purpose of dana, which gradually acquire notions of a ‘public good’, as colonialism and ‘modernity’ ushered in a shift in societal values, ideas of development and class relations (Haynes, 1987, p. 340). Dana was employed to realise core community interests which would sustain development
and the colonial economy, such as education and public health, rather than religious charity (Haynes, 1987, p. 353). South Asian anti-colonial nationalism was also influenced by this shift as it established a conceptual link between the dharmadana of the bourgeoisie capitalist class and the upliftment of ‘the masses’ impoverished by colonialism (Osella, 2018). And unsurprisingly, in the postcolonial era, philanthropic gifts of influential non-state actors, such as large corporations and multinationals (refashioned as corporate social responsibility [CSR]), continue to focus on health, education, sanitation and hygiene and cultural initiatives. When examining India’s ‘non-commercial’ or gift relations with its partners in the Global South, we find that it is focused on very similar issues, namely, education, skilling, knowledge transfer and public health. There are, in other words, undertones of many of the historically layered ideas governing dharmadana also in contemporary forms of diplomatic exchange, including its Covid-19 outreach: from gifts as unreciprocable, to associating gifts with sacrifice or yajna, to purging perceived sins (accumulated through amassing material wealth) via dana and to establishing forms of hierarchy through the gift. While these forms of dana do indeed carry strong connotations of sacrifice (as defined by Mauss) in the current neoliberal globalised order, they also serve to re-enforce status, power and inequalities and index success and righteousness (Bornstein, 2009, 2012; Copeman, 2011).

7 | CONCLUSION

India’s conception of its role in the global order has gradually changed. While ideas about southern solidarity remain influential and rhetorically important today, they have been partially eclipsed by a growing feeling of Indian exceptionalism, based on a sense of pride in the country’s exponential economic growth in the last 30 years (Venkatachalam, 2021). Indian political and diplomatic actors envision their experiments with neoliberalism since the 1990s as a resounding developmental success (poor human development indices notwithstanding) and often claim that India’s development cooperation programme aims to share lessons of the country’s success with other partner nations in the Global South. Implicit in this assumption is that India is not only a politically and economically stronger nation but also at a more advanced stage of development than other nations of the Global South (Duclos, 2012; Venkatachalam, 2021). Indeed, while India continues to talk about the important of partnership and mutuality, it now envisions itself in a hierarchical relationship with its southern partners (Davis, 2018) and believes it is imparting valuable lessons of its own (successful) developmental trajectory to other countries who have so far been less successful in their journeys. Tellingly, with the rise of the political right in India since 2014, the country now portrays itself as a vishwaguru (world teacher), having achieved a balance between preserving ancient civilisational values and achieving scientific, political and economic modernity, which other southern nations could emulate.

Within this changing context, we have suggested that India’s gift giving on the global stage is becoming increasingly attuned to the country’s new self-perception. Gifts—both in South–South Cooperation and in Covid-19 outreach—are a means of statecraft that position India in a central and privileged role, both in the eyes of the Indian public at home and vis-à-vis other states in the Global South. Gift giving turns this latter relation into one of hierarchy, mirroring a Kautiliyan logic in which diplomacy via gift giving plays a key role in establishing interstate relations, and in fortifying the centrality of the donor-state. For this reason, reports of India receiving ‘gifts’ in the form of aid from countries in the Global South led to strong domestic reactions, mixing embarrassment and outrage at this sudden inversion not just in the flow of aid and gifts, but in the structural relationship between India and African nations in particular (Gupta, 2021). Though these gifts from the Global South to India in the context of a global pandemic were meagre in material terms, they were very significant in symbolic terms. Interrogating the practice of gift giving within culturally specific frameworks sheds light on how ‘the gift’ is embedded within a broader repertoire of political sense-making and practice. As we have suggested, some gifts are considered unreciprocable insofar as their reciprocation may, as Parry (1986) and Copeman (2011) show, be seen as inauspicious, negating not only the status of the donor but also the very moral essence of the motivations behind the gift.
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Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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ENDNOTES
1 Only from the 1990s did the concept gain broader currency in policy and academic circles (Davis, 2018).
2 Critiques of contemporary South–South Cooperation negate this idealism. Amanor (2013) argues that at its inception, South–South Cooperation was meant to serve as an alternative normative and fiscal imaginary to the liberal capitalist postcolonial order. But South–South Cooperation in its current manifestation is unable to facilitate capital accumulation and new forms of market socialisation in recipient geographies in no small part because of neoliberal and governance conditionalties from multilateral institutions.
3 Libor (London Inter-Bank Offered Rate) is an interest-rate average calculated from estimates submitted by the leading banks in London.
4 However, India continued to receive Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) from OECD countries, and in 2018–2019, it was the highest recipient of ODA, receiving USD 4042 million (OECD-DAC, 2021)—a fact that is downplayed in the Indian media.
5 Indian policy makers and bureaucrats have long utilised symbols drawn from the country’s repertoire of varied cultural resources to craft their development diplomacy and display their soft power. From the Nehruvian age, India emphasised the uniqueness of its civilizational wisdom, its ancient Hindu-Buddhist philosophy, and Gandhian non-violence (Venkatachalam & King, 2021). What we see with the rise of the political right is merely a reconfiguration of the frames and a more aggressive advertising of this civilisational wisdom.
6 In a 19-min video, Gupta went on to illustrate how Indian perceptions of the Global South, and especially Africa—as underdeveloped, poor and ‘backward’—were incorrect, and that 20 African countries had GDP per capita incomes that were comparable with, or higher than, India (Gupta, 2021).

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