

Chapter 3

“One Earth, One Family, One Future”: Unpacking the Theme of India’s G20 Presidency and Its Wide-Ranging Implications



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Abstract As part of its G20 Presidency, India has developed an important overarching theme, which it summarises as “One Earth, One Family, One Future”. This chapter unpacks the concept that serves as the inspiration for this theme. It highlights the depth of meaning contained in the concept, as well as its far-reaching philosophical and political implications. Drawn from India’s ancient texts, the concept is radical in the scale of its inclusion and the scope that it offers for individual agency. It allows us to include, but also move beyond notions of “human development” and “community development”. Self-styled “realists” who regard the motto as emblematic of the sweet nothings of idealism would be well-served to think again: delve into the concept, and it suggests important ways to uphold hard interests, while also reminding us of the importance of values. But the devil lies in the details of implementation, and the move from rhetoric to practice is seldom easy. This chapter develops ways in which India’s pioneering idea can be implemented—domestically and globally, in the course of future G20 meetings, and indeed in other forums of global governance too.

As part of its G20 Presidency, India has developed an interesting overarching theme, which it summarises as “One Earth, One Family, One Future”. This chapter unpacks the concept that serves as the inspiration for this theme, to highlight the depth of meaning that it contains, as well as its far-reaching philosophical and political implications. Drawn from India’s ancient texts, the concept is radical in the scale of its inclusion and the scope that it offers for individual agency.

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3.1 The Theme of India’s G20 Presidency

In contrast to the global summitry that accompanies formal organisations, the G20’s informal nature allows considerable scope for the host country to exercise agency. India has seized this opportunity enthusiastically and has developed a theme that draws on its ancient civilisational roots. Versions of its G20 logo reflect this explicitly by including the original Sanskrit phrase—*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*—as part of the design. India’s interpretation of the phrase for its G20 Presidency takes the formulation of “One Earth, One Family, One Future”.

The inspiration for this theme comes from an ancient Indian text, the *Mahopnishad*. The specific verse is provided below:

अयं नजिः परो वेतगिणना लघु चेतसाम् ।
उदारचरतानां तु वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम् ॥

This is mine, this is yours—only mean-minded people indulge in such bean-counting. For the generous-minded, the entire earth is one family. *Mahopnishad*, 6.71.

While most people, in India and abroad,¹ engage with this concept of the understanding that it refers to all the *peoples* of the *world* constituting one family, the notion of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम्) goes considerably further than that. The word “Vasudha” refers not to the “world” but the “earth”; apply the concept correctly and one must recognise that it is referring not only to *humans* as belonging to one family, but to all the more-than-human inhabitants of the planet.²

¹For a systematic debunking of this “grand dichotomy”, see Amartya Sen, *Human Rights and Asian Values*, Sixteenth Annual Morgenthau Memorial Lecture on Ethics and Foreign Policy, Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/archive/morgenthau/254.html, 1997.

²For far too long, liberal values of individual rights, democracy, and pluralism have been treated as the sole preserve of the West, and in which the Global South can best be schooled. Academic accounts which try to engage with questions of liberalism in developing countries tend to go only as far back as the nineteenth century, and then explore questions of contestations and interactions. The possibility that there may be autonomous and ancient origins of similar ideas is

This non-anthropocentric conceptualisation of family—and indeed also welfare, rights, and justice—is not limited to the one verse cited above. It is prevalent in several other ancient texts and thrives to this day in the verses that many Indians are taught. For instance, both as part of learning at home and in formal Sanskrit lessons at school, this author imbibed the idea of आत्मवत् सर्वभूतेषु यः पश्यति सः पण्डितः he who looks upon all beings as he looks upon himself, he is the truly wise one. The *Bhagavad Gita* similarly states:

समं सर्वेषु भूतेषु तर्षिठन्तं परमेश्वरम्।

वनिश्यत्स्ववनिश्यन्तं यः पश्यति स पश्यति॥

He who sees the divine in all creatures,

And in all mortal bodies sees the immortal soul, he is the one who truly understands.

Bhagavad Gita, 13.28

The *Mahabharat*—one of India’s two renowned epics, whose stories live in the hearts and minds of Indians even today—similarly reinforces the message of not just environmentalism and biodiversity, but a non-anthropocentric conceptualisation of equal rights that all creatures are entitled to. Among the most well-known of its stories on this topic is that of Yudhishtir—the only one among several brave and noble heroes to be accorded entry and a special status in heaven due to his refusal to abandon a faithful dog. Towards the end of the 100,000 verses-long epic, Yudhishtir is put to his final test. He is told that while he has won himself a place in heaven, entry will not be permitted to the stray dog who has loyally accompanied him on the arduous journey. In the face of multiple arguments that are meant to appeal to his own interests and others that target his high sense of morality, delivered by the king of gods himself, Yudhishtir stands firm. He offers systematic counter-reasoning and argues that the act of abandoning one who has shown devotion is more heinous than several horrendous crimes put together. He makes it clear that he is willing to even forgo celestial bliss if his faithful companion is not welcomed alongside. Importantly, at no point does Yudhishtir make a distinction between animals and humans—for this hero of the *Mahabharat*, the dog is entitled to exactly the same protection, respect, and loyalty that humans usually claim solely for themselves. For his commitment to stand for trans-species justice, and refusal to accept the world in anthropocentric terms, Yudhishtir is rewarded with a unique boon and taken to heaven with the highest honours.³

The above references serve as illustrations of a broader pattern in Indian philosophy and political thought. Across different sources, we find similar teachings

seldom considered. The author had the opportunity to present some of her ideas to address this gap in a project of the DFG-funded Excellence Cluster, SCRIPTS, on which the author served as a PI. She is grateful to members and guests of the cluster for lively debates and helpful feedback, which have helped refine her own thinking on the topic.

³On the role of narratives in international relations, see Amrita Narlikar, *Poverty Narratives and Power Paradoxes in International Trade Negotiations and Beyond*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

that emphasise not only the importance of peaceful coexistence of peoples, but also across species (also associated with the concept of *Ahimsa* as popularised by Mahatma Gandhi), and even the attribution of personhood, equality and rights across the human and more-than-human worlds. It is to the credit of the current Indian government that it has chosen a notion of “family”—at its most universal and inclusive—as the core theme of its G20 Presidency. Were this approach translated into politics, its implications could be huge.

3.2 Philosophical and Political Implications

Let us begin with the philosophical implications of the approach that India offers. In academic and policy debates on human rights, a “grand dichotomy” is presented between “Asian” versus primarily Western, “universal” values. Asian values are supposedly family and community-oriented, and offered as a justification for authoritarianism; the individual-oriented “universal” values espoused by the West, in contrast, are taken to represent liberal ideals.⁴ Via its emphasis on *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*—and the personhood that the concept offers to individual animals within species, besides considerations of trans-species justice and biodiversity—India shakes up this crude dichotomy. Instead, it advances a version of “human rights” that is even more liberal than the Western variant; the verses and stories outlined in Section I of this chapter exemplify the claim that “human rights are not human only” (Panikkar and Panikkar 1982). This Indian perspective serves up a major challenge to prior legal-philosophical assumptions on more-than-human rights and personhood. It also suggests the urgent need for a recognition of variants of liberal thought that have ancient and non-Western origins.⁵

At an operational level too, the non-anthropocentric perspective that India’s *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* concept offers is very different from the dominant Western one. Take, for instance, the increasing multi-generation climate activism in Europe. Inspired by Greta Thunberg, children across Europe (and in other parts of the globe too) have gotten engaged in *Fridays for Future* demonstrations, to demand immediate action to stop (and reverse) climate change. It is captured most patently in Greta Thunberg’s oft-quoted line: “You have stolen *my* dreams and childhood” (emphasis added). Children are thus demanding that the planet be saved for their *own* future, while their parents appeal to inter-generational justice on behalf of their children and future grandchildren. In contrast to this largely anthropocentric narrative, India’s narrative seeks trans-species justice. Such differences in narratives matter, as they lead to potentially different policies and outcomes.⁶ The Western, anthropocentric narrative, for instance, suggests the importance of environmental conservation, whereas the Indian non-anthropocentric narrative argues for the importance of ecologism.

⁴ See Footnote 1.

⁵ See Footnote 2.

⁶ See Footnote 3.

What are the political and policy implications of the difference between Western anthropocentrism and the non-anthropocentric vision being offered by India? I flag up three here.

First, on issues pertaining to economic development or security, a paradigm shift becomes necessary. Policies would have to be enacted that are not restricted to (what were once regarded as the radical concepts of) human development and human security but would need to go beyond them. Social policies to address human development, for instance, would have to be balanced by environmental policies that assign due weight to the protection of animals, plants, insects, and the many beings that also have a right to life and respect on our shared planet. Policies to address human security would similarly need to be balanced by including more-than-human considerations. When taking into account questions of “health security”, it would become necessary to recognise—and guard against—the havoc that certain diseases are wreaking on not only humans but also animals.⁷

Second, related to the Asian versus universal values dichotomy is an assumed contradiction between community versus individual-based approaches. India’s contribution to this debate is also far-reaching. On the one hand, the notion of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* broadens the notion of “community” to transcend the human. On the other hand, the attention that it gives to the rights of each and every being, allows it to place emphasis on the individual. And to each and every *human being*, it offers agency—our individual actions (e.g. via changes in our lifestyles) are crucial for protecting and sustaining all the human and non-human beings who belong to this expanded community. Together with its expansion of the concept of community and its focus on the role and rights of the individual, India suggests a pathway of peaceful and equal coexistence across species. In terms of policy implications, this requires a fundamental rethink on urban and rural planning and infrastructure development. For instance, as new highways and railroads are built, they will need to guard against not only the damage that they cause to village communities, but also the elephants, wildcats, and other species on whose territory they encroach.

⁷E.g.: “Nipah (NiV) is a zoonotic virus that made its first appearance in Malaysia in the late 1990s and soon spread to nearby countries. A bat-borne virus with a mortality rate between 40 and 70 per cent, it causes brain inflammation and can quickly lead to comatose states. Due to its contagiousness and potential for a global outbreak, NiV is considered one of the “epidemic threats needing urgent R&D [research and development] action” by the World Health Organization. While its deadly effects on humans have been well documented, NiV also presents a security threat to more-than-human animals. Pigs, for example, suffer immensely from the virus. The agroc capitalist condition of pigs in intensive meat factories in Malaysia, one of Southeast Asia’s largest pig meat producers, was a primary reason why NiV became a human and more-than-human security threat.... We often think of the human effects of pathogenic viruses to the exclusion of how more-than-human dimensions impact virus and health security decisions. In the case of factory farm conditions related to pathogenic virus transmissions across borders, we often consider more-than-human animals as sources or reservoirs of viruses. It is with less frequency that we articulate the specificity of more-than-human experiences of viruses, even though the effects of viruses and the security decisions made in response to them are experienced in complex, multi-species ways”. See Leep (2023).

And third, lest it be assumed that India's push for the idea of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* is just idealistic rhetoric, we come to the third policy implication. The concept, in fact, has the potential to allow India and other like-minded countries to overcome yet another false dichotomy of values versus interests. In fact, as I have argued elsewhere, there are insights in the Indian canon that suggest that the two are reflexive, with values shaping interests and vice versa (Narlikar 2023). The argument for better treatment of animals is not only a “nice-to-have”. We know that the horrific conditions in which animals are kept—be this farmed animals in Europe and the US or wet markets in Asia—promote zoonotic jumping and the spread of a variety of highly contagious and lethal diseases. Ensuring dignity and safety for animals contributes to not only our moral wellbeing but also better public health.

It is also important to bear in mind that India's push for global, trans-species justice comes at an opportune time when a significant and increasing group of animal rights activists are speaking up on behalf of the voiceless. There are domestic political ramifications of this, including growing pressure, especially on governments committed to liberal values, to improve animal welfare and open up the space for animal rights. For instance, Germany has recently established its first Animal Welfare Commissioner.⁸

Defending animal rights, moreover, also creates new business opportunities. Veganism is contributing to a growing cruelty-free food industry—albeit the rate of increase varies considerably across different parts of the world. In the EU-India Free Trade Agreement, labour and environmental standards have proven to be a long-standing stumbling block. India could be well-served to apply the more holistic, less anthropocentric perspective, which it has pioneered in the G20, also to its trade negotiations with the EU. This agenda-setting narrative could help reshape the debate and find a way out of this deadlock. Together, these changing political and economic conditions enable the creation of new partnerships.

The move away from anthropocentrism (in keeping with the concept of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*) would thus not only help alleviate the suffering of more-than-human inhabitants of the planet, but would also have a positive impact on multiple human concerns that include public health, climate change, and sustainable development.

3.3 From Rhetoric to Practice: Implementation

Planting innovative ideas in global governance institutions is an important first step. But the move from rhetoric to practice is seldom easy. The theme that this chapter has outlined is especially tough to implement. The difficulties arise partly from standard political economic considerations of entrenched interests, e.g. industrial farming lobbies in the West, or those who stand to gain (from both the developed and developing worlds) via trophy hunting and trade in endangered animals and products. This problem gets exacerbated by the fact that

⁸ <https://www.bmel.de/DE/ministerium/organisation/tierschutzbeauftragte/>.

more-than-human species—despite their sentence—do not have many to speak on their behalf and lobby for their rights. Additionally, on grounds of culture and tradition (ranging from whale-hunting in the Arctic regions and bull-fighting in Spain to the use of animal parts for “medicinal” purposes in Asia), there are often loud voices arguing against the changes in lifestyle and updating of rules that considerations of trans-species justice and balance require. In this concluding section, I suggest three ways in which this approach can nonetheless be meaningfully incorporated into politics.

First, the effectiveness of leading by example should never be underestimated. Having already introduced the idea via its G20 Presidency, India can and should update its own laws that credibly signal its own commitment to this issue. This would require an urgent amendment and updating of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (1960). For instance, Chapter III, Article 11, of the PCA, states the penalty and punishment for cruelty to animals as: “...in the case of a first offence, with fine which shall not be less than ten rupees but which may extend to fifty rupees and in the case of a second or subsequent offence committed within three years of the previous offence, with fine which shall not be less than twenty-five rupees but which may extend to one hundred rupees or with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three months, or with both”.⁹ Such low penalties no longer serve as a deterrent against abuse of animals; perhaps they even send a perverse signal on how undervalued the lives and suffering of animals are. These fines need to be dramatically raised, and violence and indignities inflicted on animals be treated as a much more severe offence than a three-month imprisonment term suggests. That said, even these measures—however whole-heartedly enacted—would not suffice on their own.

Accompanying the tightening of the law must also be a narrative change at local and national levels, which matches up with India’s international narrative. There are growing voices within India speaking up for animal rights, and which are successfully using social media platforms to harness transnational and domestic support.¹⁰ This would be a good support base for the central, state, and local governments to work with. And it would establish India as a credible, global leader, both on ecological concerns and the economic opportunities that would emerge from this.

Second, there are other traditional cultures across the world, which align well with the approach that India has put on the G20 agenda. In different traditions within Latin America, we see rights being accorded to a range of more-than-human beings (Fraundorfer 2018). It is opportune that Brazil will follow India in the G20 Presidency in 2024; the two countries together would be well-placed to

⁹PCA (1960).

¹⁰A recent example of this was the coalescing of diverse voices via Twitter with the hashtag of #SayNoToLivestockBill2023. The bill would have allowed the export and import of live animals—a regressive act in itself, given the growing recognition of the extreme cruelties this entails—and also included dogs, cats and other animals that could be thus traded. India’s animal rights’ activists rose up in anger against this bill, and mobilised digital support from non-resident Indians as well as non-Indians in this cause. Despite having only 10 days notice period to register their feedback, they were successful in obtaining a stay order on the bill (e.g. <https://twitter.com/DivyamKhera/status/1671253316612018177>).

mainstream non-anthropocentric considerations into international and domestic politics (especially if Brazil were to tap into its indigenous cultures on the rights of nature, rather than focus on its agro-industry). Given the relative novelty of this topic as a research subject in Political Science and International Relations—and thereby also the serious gaps in policy and politics on animal rights—Brazil and India could join forces in building a global coalition of engaged scholars. Such a coalition could study non-anthropocentric, indigenous traditions across different cultures, and investigate their modern-day relevance. Using a multi-stakeholder format, such a global coalition could go on to work with activists, policymakers, and perhaps also entrepreneurs interested in reshaping the world of business away from exploitative and abusive industries (including the animal farming industry).

Third, not all countries will agree to the non-anthropocentric agenda that the idea of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* espouses. But there *are* states (often democracies)—in both the Global South and the Global North—with vibrant civil society groups and activists, which recognise the importance of trans-species justice. Faced with new geoeconomic and geopolitical challenges and threats, many—including Biden's USA—are paying greater attention to the importance of values in shaping alliances. How governments treat their more-than-human inhabitants can serve as a useful indicator of how like-minded they actually are.

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