



Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: India's Global Responsibility

Ms. Urmilaben Arunbhai Patel

Ph.D. Research Scholar,

Sabarmati University, Ahemedabad

Mo. 9638991174, E-mail- urmipatel7769@gmail.com

Abstract

This thing explores the evolution of the ancient Indian philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam "The World is One Family" from a spiritual precept to a guiding doctrine for India's contemporary global engagement. It examines how this civilisational ethos has been operationalised to shape India's foreign policy, its role as a first responder in humanitarian crises, and its advocacy for a more inclusive multilateral world order. The article delves into the philosophical origins of the concept in the Maha Upanishad and its resonance with similar global philosophies. It then critically analyses its application across three key pillars: India's developmental partnerships and leadership of the Global South, its role in ensuring security and stability in the Indo-Pacific, and its promotion of multilateralism through platforms like the G20 and the United Nations. By drawing on official statements, policy documents, and scholarly analysis, the article argues that Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam provides a unique, value-driven framework for India to shoulder its growing global responsibilities. It concludes by acknowledging the inherent challenges and realist critiques of this idealist vision, while asserting its profound relevance in an increasingly fragmented and crisis-prone world.

Keywords: *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, India Foreign Policy, Global South, Multilateralism, G20 Presidency, First Responder, Indo-Pacific, Civilisational Ethos, Development Partnership, Maha Upanishad.*

Introduction

"Driven by a landscape of polycrises—climate change, pandemics, and global instability—the need for a unifying vision has reached a critical turning point." Amidst this landscape, India has increasingly articulated its global role through the lens of its ancient civilisational ethos, encapsulated in the Sanskrit phrase **Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam**, or "The World is One Family." This concept, once confined to the spiritual realms of the Maha Upanishad, has



been elevated to the cornerstone of India's foreign policy narrative, serving as the philosophical bedrock for its aspirations on the world stage.

The phrase, derived from the Maha Upanishad, states: "अयं बन्धुरयं नेति गणना लघुचेतसाम् । उदारचरितानां तु वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम् ॥" ("Only small men discriminate saying: One is a relative; another is a stranger. For those who live magnanimously, the entire world constitutes but a family."). While its original context described the attributes of a spiritually enlightened individual detached from material possessions, its modern appropriation speaks to a broader, more ambitious project: to position India not merely as a balancing power, but as a leading power with a willingness to shoulder greater global responsibilities .

This vision was most prominently showcased during India's G20 Presidency in 2023, where the theme "One Earth, One Family, One Future" was a direct invocation of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam . It was a deliberate attempt to bridge the divides between the developed North and the developing South, between the East and the West, and to place the concerns of the Global South at the Centre of global discourse. As External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has affirmed, "India approaches peacekeeping from its civilisational ethos... This is not just cultural wisdom, but an outlook that anchors our worldview".

The Philosophical and Historical Foundations

To understand the weight of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam in contemporary discourse, one must first appreciate its deep roots in Indian philosophy. The concept's first known textual appearance is in the Maha Upanishad, a part of the Vedic literature that forms the bedrock of Hindu spiritual thought. It is a verse that extolls the virtues of the *udāracarita* (Sanskrit: उदारचरित) the magnanimous or noble-hearted. This ideal individual transcends the narrow, ego-driven identities of kinship and nationality to recognise a shared divinity and a common existential thread binding all of humanity.

This lofty ideal did not remain isolated in the Upanishads. It permeated later literature, finding resonance in the Hitopadesha and the Panchatantra, collections of fables that imparted practical wisdom and statecraft. While sometimes used in those contexts to illustrate the perils of naivety, the core ideal endured. The Bhagavata Purana, one of Hinduism's most revered texts, refers to this adage as the "loftiest Vedantic thought". This philosophical



lineage gave the concept a moral and spiritual authority that would be invoked by leaders across the political spectrum for generations.

The universality of this thought is not unique to India. Striking parallels exist in other cultures and philosophies, suggesting a common human aspiration towards oneness. The ancient Tamil poem in **Purananuru** proclaims "*Yaadhum Oore, Yaavarum Kelir*" ("Every country is my own, and all are my kinsmen"). In a similar vein, the **Bahá'í** faith envisions a united world, with its founder, Bahá'u'lláh, writing that "the Earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens". The African philosophy of **Ubuntu**, which translates to "I am because we are," encapsulates a similar communal and interconnected understanding of humanity. These parallels demonstrate that Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam taps into a global undercurrent of thought that prioritises interconnectedness over isolationism.

Dr. N. Radhakrishnan, a former director of the Gandhi Smriti, has drawn a direct line from this ancient concept to the modern Gandhian vision. He argues that Gandhi's holistic development, respect for all life, and commitment to non-violent conflict resolution were a direct extension of the ideal that the world is one family. This historical continuum—from the Vedic sages, through the epics and fables, to the father of the nation—provides a powerful and continuous legacy for modern Indian leaders to draw upon. It is this rich tapestry that allows Prime Minister Modi to claim that the idea is "in our DNA, in our genetic system".

Pillar I: Developmental Partnerships and Leading the Global South

The most tangible expression of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam in India's foreign policy is its commitment to human-centric development and its self-appointed role as the voice of the Global South. The philosophy rejects a world rigidly divided into categories like First, Second, and Third World, advocating instead for a world where development is a shared and collaborative journey.

India's G20 Presidency in 2023 was a watershed moment in this regard. By choosing the theme "One Earth, One Family, One Future," India explicitly linked its ancient ethos to contemporary global challenges. It used its presidency not to push a narrow national agenda, but to amplify the priorities of developing nations—issues like debt restructuring, climate finance, energy access, and food security. The crowning achievement of this approach was the permanent induction of the **African Union** into the G20, a long-pending demand of the



Global South that India championed successfully. This act was a powerful demonstration of treating the global institutional "family" with a more inclusive and representative structure.

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR): From deploying naval vessels to Sri Lanka within hours of the 2004 tsunami to being the first on the ground in Nepal after the 2015 earthquake, India has consistently prioritised saving lives over political considerations. This extends to providing drinking water to the Maldives (2014) and cyclone relief to Myanmar and Bangladesh.

Expatriate Evacuations: During crises in conflict zones, India has not only evacuated its own citizens but also thousands of foreign nationals from 48 different countries, embodying the spirit of a global family in distress.

Financial and Capacity Building Support: Through lines of credit, grant assistance, and currency swap mechanisms for neighbors like Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, India acts as a first responder to financial instability in the region. Its extensive scholarship and training programs for students and professionals from Asia and Africa are long-term investments in building a global community.

The recently articulated **MAHASAGAR** doctrine ("Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions") for the Indo-Pacific is a further evolution of this vision, promising a partnership model that is consultative and inclusive, extending the hand of friendship particularly to the island nations of the Global South .

Pillar II: Security, Stability, and the Maritime Commons

While Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam promotes harmony, it does not imply naivety in the face of security threats. Instead, it provides a normative framework for collective security and stability. India's approach, guided by this ethos, posits that global security is not a zero-sum game but a shared responsibility built through partnerships.

This is particularly evident in the maritime domain. President Droupadi Murmu, during the International Fleet Review 2026, stated, "India believes that a sound maritime order is based on collective responsibility and cooperation among like-minded partners". This translates into a proactive role for the Indian Navy as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).



The Indian Navy has emerged as the "default first responder" to non-traditional security challenges in the IOR. Since 2008, it has deployed warships to combat piracy off the coast of Somalia, escorting thousands of vessels and thwarting numerous hijacking attempts. It has also been at the forefront of search and rescue missions, including efforts to locate the missing Malaysian Airlines flight MH370. These actions, while serving India's strategic interests, also function as public goods that benefit the entire community of maritime nations, from global trading powers to small island states.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), comprising India, Australia, Japan, and the US, is another arena where this philosophy is applied. India has reframed the Quad not as a military alliance, but as a "force for global good." By taking the lead in establishing the Quad Partnership on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), India ensures that the grouping's initiatives align with the region's developmental priorities and contribute to the stability of the Indo-Pacific. This approach, rooted in Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, allows India to participate in strategic balancing while simultaneously promoting a positive, cooperative agenda that delivers tangible public goods.

India's long-standing and unparalleled contribution to UN Peacekeeping is perhaps the most enduring expression of its commitment to global stability. As External Affairs Minister Jaishankar noted, the vision of the world as one family "anchors India's global peacekeeping vision". For decades, Indian peacekeepers have served as first responders to conflict, facilitating stabilization and reconstruction in some of the world's most dangerous regions, often at great cost. This reflects a profound sense of responsibility towards fellow members of the global family, regardless of geographical or cultural distance.

Pillar III: Championing Reformed Multilateralism

A core tenet of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, when applied to global governance, is the principle of equity. A family cannot function harmoniously if its rules and structures are archaic and favour only a few members. India, therefore, leverages this philosophy to champion the cause of reformed multilateralism.

At platforms like the United Nations, India has been a strong advocate for more inclusive and equitable global institutions. It argues that bodies like the UN Security Council, with a composition reflecting the power dynamics of 1945, are ill-suited to address the challenges of



the 21st century. The demand for a permanent seat for India is not merely about national prestige; it is framed as a necessary step to make the Council more representative and effective, thereby giving voice to the billions of people from the developing world who are currently unrepresented at the highest table of global peace and security.

Similarly, within BRICS, India consistently pushes for reforms in international financial institutions and for a greater role for emerging economies in global economic governance. The common thread across these engagements is a commitment to a multipolar world where power and decision-making are distributed more evenly. This is a direct challenge to a unipolar or bipolar order, advocating instead for a polyphonic world where multiple voices, including those of the Global South, are heard and respected.

The very act of invoking Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam in international forums serves as a soft power tool. It differentiates India from other rising powers by projecting an image of a benevolent, ancient civilisation that seeks the welfare of all. As scholar Jagannath Panda argues, this narrative helps India manage its "ontological security"—its sense of self—by projecting itself as a moral and cultural leader amidst a turbulent geopolitical landscape dominated by the rivalries of other major powers. It allows India to present its rise not as a threat, but as a contribution to global stability and harmony.

Challenges and a Realist Critique

Despite its noble intentions and strategic utility, the application of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam is not without its challenges and critiques. A purely idealist interpretation can be, and has been, questioned through a realist lens.

A significant critique, offered by the Brookings Institution, is that the concept has often been used as a "catch-all notion" or a "mantra" that remains ambiguous and rarely elaborated upon with concrete policy mechanisms. The question arises: who is the "head" of this global family, and how are disputes resolved within it? In a family, particularly in traditional structures, power is not equally distributed. If the world is a family, does it implicitly accept a hierarchy? And if so, who leads?

Furthermore, the analogy of the family can be problematic. As the Brookings piece points out, the two great Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, which are essentially family sagas, are tales of profound dysfunction, betrayal, and catastrophic war. The idea that



a "family" is inherently a peaceful, cooperative unit is a romanticised fiction. In reality, families are arenas of intense competition over resources, power, and inheritance. If the world is a family, it is just as likely to be a dysfunctional one, riddled with conflict, as it is to be a harmonious one.

There is also the risk of the concept being perceived as a rhetorical device that masks traditional power politics. Critics might argue that while India speaks the language of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, its actions—such as its military posture or its handling of bilateral disputes—are driven by the same realist compulsions as any other state. The gap between the ideal and the reality can lead to accusations of hypocrisy or double standards.

Finally, the challenge of enforcement remains. Developing common global norms is one thing; having the political, economic, and military power to enforce them is another. As India aspires to be a "leading power," it must invest in the capabilities required to uphold the very norms it champions.

Conclusion

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam is far more than a slogan for India's diplomatic corps. It is a profound civilisational statement that seeks to harmonise the country's ancient past with its ambitious future. From the verses of the Maha Upanishad to the presidency of the G20, this concept has journeyed through millennia to become the articulated conscience of India's global responsibility. It provides a framework that is uniquely suited to addressing the interconnected challenges of the 21st century—challenges that by their very nature, such as climate change, pandemics, and terrorism, recognise no borders and demand a collective, familial response.

India's operationalisation of this ideal is visible across multiple domains. As a development partner, it champions the cause of the Global South and walks the talk through first-response HADR missions. As a security actor, it works to build partnerships that ensure the maritime commons remain stable and secure. As a voice for global reform, it pushes for multilateral institutions that are more representative and just. The induction of the African Union into the G20 stands as a landmark achievement of this philosophy in practice.

Yet, the path of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam is not an easy one. It must navigate the treacherous waters of realpolitik, where interests often trump values, and where the family metaphor can



break down under the weight of power politics. The challenge for India is to ensure that this philosophy remains a living, guiding principle and not a convenient rhetorical tool. It must continue to build the material capacity to underwrite its idealist vision, demonstrating that a commitment to the global family is compatible with, and indeed strengthens, national resilience.

In a world fragmenting along lines of ideology, wealth, and identity, the message of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam—that the entire world is, indeed, one family—offers a powerful antidote. India's global responsibility, therefore, is not just to protect its own interests, but to be a living example of this ancient truth, fostering a world where the magnanimity of the *udāracarita* (Sanskrit: उदारचरित) triumphs over the petty calculations of the *laghucetas*.

It is a responsibility to prove that our common humanity is far more profound than our many differences.

References

- Embassy of India, Berlin. (n.d.). Article: 'Responding First as a Leading Power' by Mr. Constantino Xavier.
- The Hindu. (2026, February 18). Partnerships are key to achieving global security and growth, says President Murmu.
- Wikipedia. (2014). Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: Difference between revisions. Retrieved from Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. (2025, April 4). *QUESTION NO-5699 INDIA'S GLOBAL INFLUENCE*.
- United News of India. (2025, October 16). 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' anchors India's global peacekeeping vision says Jaishankar.
- Brookings. (2017). 'Vasudhaiva kutumbakam' for the 21st century.
- Panda, J. (2026). 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' to 'Vishwa Guru': India's shrewd management of (In) security in Indo-Pacific. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 26(1), lcaf014. Oxford Academic.
- ANI News. (2022, March 10). Indian Embassy unveils plaque of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' in Antananarivo.