

REFLECTIONS OF NON-ALIGNED MOVEMENT IN INDIAN GEO-POLITICS IN SHASHI THAROOR'S *THE GREAT INDIAN NOVEL*

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Abstract

*The phenomenon of non-aligned (alignment) and its association with India has been around for quite some time. Recently, the non-aligned movement came into light due to the Russia-Ukraine crisis. India's stand in the crisis has been critical. This demands the need to reassess cultural products such as literature that engage with the idea of non-aligned as a possible solution toward a peaceful world. Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* among other literary works makes a suitable case for such an investigation. The research paper attempts to explore *The Great Indian Novel* with reference to the non-aligned movement in Indian geopolitics, and its precedence, supremacy, advantages and disadvantages to India. The paper looks at the dispute between two mythological characters, Pinaka and Saranga and the neutral position taken by the Pandavas. It attempts to explore the allegorical relation with two dominant global political powers namely, the United States of America and the Soviet Union (USSR) and the neutral position of the Republic of India. The paper attempts to argue that Tharoor's critique of the Non-aligned movement remains confined to its temporal context and fails to extend it beyond contemporaneity. The researchers take an interdisciplinary approach to this literary exploration using the larger context of history, polity, and international relations.*

Keywords: *Non-Aligned Movement, Mythology, Cold war, Geo-Politics, Global Power.*

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Introduction

Geographical factors play a pivotal role in Indian politics, economy, international relations and geostrategy. The north of the Great Himalayas and the south of the Indian Ocean have a crucial role in Indian geopolitics (Basnyat). Political and other influences of China rose in the Himalayan region after China annexed Tibet. Pakistan also provided space in the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) region to the US defence forces. China installed defence forces in the Tibet region and India established defence forces in Ladakh, which all belong to the Himalayan region. Therefore, this region has become crucial from a geopolitical perspective. Especially for India, it has become essential to defend its territories from any attack. The militarization of the US, China and Pakistan in the Himalayas region has become a geopolitical risk for India. Shashi Tharoor described this geopolitical concern between India and China in his novel *The Great Indian Novel (TGIN)* by referring to the characters and incidents from *The Mahabharata* and claimed that this geopolitical concern has risen due to the active participation of India in the Non-aligned movement. The present paper reexamines Tharoor's position and underlines the need to study the non-aligned approach to creating a peaceful world.

Due to the Russia- Ukraine crisis, the non-aligned movement has been in discussion all around the world. India is one of the founding members of the movement; therefore, India's stand in the crisis is crucial. This indicates the political urgency to re-evaluate cultural and literary products that engage with the concept of the non-aligned movement to direct possible solutions to make a peaceful world. In the literary context, Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, among other literary works, offers a cynical perspective of the non-aligned movement. While the paper critically appreciates Tharoor's take on the non-aligned

movement in the novel, it also undertakes to review this cynicism in light of later developments in the non-aligned movement and India's position.

The Non-aligned Movement

The non-aligned movement (NAM) is an international multilateral movement, especially, dedicated to developing countries. The non-aligned movement was established in 1961 and its first conference was held in Belgrade, Serbia under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito of Yugoslavia, Gamel Abdel Nasser of Egypt, Jawaharlal Nehru of India, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and Sukarno of Indonesia (Gupta). Currently, it has 120 member states, the second largest group after the United Nations; these all countries are sovereign and considered to not join any power during the cold war and simultaneously, focused on promoting world peace, integrity, harmony, unity and cooperation to smooth all world affairs. The term was first used in the United Nations by India and Yugoslavia in response to refusing to align with the American and Russian military groups in 1950. The movement emerged after World War II and decolonization, as the developed nations' knot loosened on the colonised nations. Subsequently, the movement approached the Bandung Conference in Indonesia. The conference was primarily focused on the Asian- African countries which gained independence during the 1950s after the Second World War. Therefore, all those countries realised that it was in their best interest to abstain from two major powers. The movement is known as the 'Third World' because the first world is known as the American group countries and the second world is known as the Soviet Union group countries (*Nationsonline*). The movement was the counterbalance to the bipolarisation during the cold war; one group was a pro-American capitalist group, basically, the NATO group and the second was a pro-Soviet communist group. The movement stands against imperialism, neo-colonialism, racism, foreign invasion and subjugation (*Dhrishtii*).

The Soviet Union was divided into 15 countries in 1991 and the cold war ended, however, the Russian invasion of Crimea, a part of Ukraine in 2014 and Ukraine in 2022 resulted in another cold war. Therefore, the non-aligned movement became the subject of discussion in the world and India's stand on it. India was one of the founding members of the non-aligned

movement under the first Prime Minister of India, Jawahar Lal Nehru. In addition, article 51 of the Constitution of India under the directive principle of state policy suggested the promotion of international peace and security, suggested maintaining honourable relations between nations, and encouraged settlement of international disputes by arbitration (Bakshi). Therefore, the movement was highly relevant to India's foreign policy during the cold war. The researchers consider it apt to revisit Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* in light of these phenomena as the novel was in parts a critique of Nehruvian policies. Recently, in one of the interviews, Shashi Tharoor used the expression 'multi-aligned' instead of 'non-aligned', as according to him, the word 'multi-aligned' is more appropriate than 'non-aligned' (Are You Using These Common English Words Incorrectly?).

Scrutinising the present through the mythological past

Mythology blurs lines between the past and the present as it is viewed as present continuous. Writers have often used mythology in telling contemporary stories. Literatures in Indian languages as well as in English, have experimented with the Indian mythological characters in such storytelling. Numerous writers have referred to the great Indian epics such as *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* to write works of literature. Tharoor described the non-aligned movement by referring to various characters of *The Mahabharata* which kept the novel at the highest peak of literature.

The Great Indian Novel is already a work of imaginative interpretation, which explores the fictional experiences of the Indian freedom movement through Tharoor's perspective deploying an allegorical strategy referring to the resemblance of Vyasa's *Mahabharata*. The narrative is spread over eighteen chapters, however, given the thematic concerns, the paper focuses only on chapter fourteen, that is, 'The Rigged Veda'. The novel has been seen as the re-interpretation of Indian history by many, where the author uses mythological characters along with literary devices such as satire, paradox, allusion, allegory, personification and parody. There are many characters that are extracted from various mythological figures, especially from *The Mahabharata*; while some of the characters are created by the author. This paper discusses only those characters that appear in Chapter fourteen. This includes Ved Vyas, the omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient narrator of the novel, Kanika,

Dhritarashtra, the Pandavas, Bakasura, Manimir, Hungari Das, Karnistan, Comea, Chakra sometimes Chakras, Snuping, Tibia, Drowniang, Pinaka and Saranga. Tharoor does not necessarily draw these characters out on single individuals but on groups of people. For instance, Ved Vyas's character represents C. Rajagopalachari, Sanjeev Reddy, Acharya Kriplani as well as V. V Giri. Kanika represents Krishna Menon, Dhritashtra represents Jawaharlal Nehru, Yudhistir represents Moraraji Desai, Bhim represents the Indian Army, Arjun represents the Indian News Media, Nakul and Sahadev represented the Civil Service and Foreign Service (Pathak), Bakasura stands for China's army, Manimir represents the then Jammu and Kashmir, Hungari Das represents Hungary (TGIN XX), Karnistan represents Pakistan, Comea represents Goa (TGIN XX), Chakra sometimes Chakras represents China, Snuping (Snooping) represents Beijing, Tibia represents Tibet, Drowniang represents Sinkiang (The Turkic Uyghur people's place), and Pinaka and Saranga represent America and Soviet Union (Now Russia).

In *The Great Indian Novel*, the Pandavas are a composition of Yudhistir, Bhim, Arjun, Nakul and Sahadev who arrive in a village while roaming around India; the village is troubled by the conflict between two major landlords, Pinaka and Saranga. Pinaka is wealthy, powerful, and always carries an Eagle on his shoulder. He has immense holdings, farms which were run by battalions of tenants and he pays them well for their services but does not provide them with any title of the land. Saranga is also wealthy and has an immense bearing on a group of men. He also controls a vast area of land and it is cultivated by sharecroppers. He has signed over to his sharecroppers the land they tilled though, however, he still exacts a tribute from them for this act of emancipation. Both landlords employ armed gangs of armed men to protect their side of the divide and prepare threatening noises at their rivals (TGIN 417).

In the mythological references, Saranga (Sharanga) and Pinaka were the celestial and divine war bows crafted by Vishwakarma for the Hindu gods, Vishnu and Shiva respectively (Soorya). The god Brahma wanted to know who was a better archer, Vishnu or Shiva which led to a quarrel between them, resulting in the peace of the whole universe being disturbed (Blogspot). There is no comparison between mythological gods; however, many people believe that Pinaka is stronger than Saranga. Pinaka Extended Range multi-barrel

indigenous rocket was launched by the Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO) and is planned to be deployed at the borders of Pakistan and China which indicated that Pinaka might have been stronger than Saranga. The name Pinaka is given to indicate Lord Shiva's bow, which has a significant role on the battlefield (*The Indian Express*).

Tharoor's take on the Non-Aligned Movement

In one of the episodes narrated in the novel, the Pandavas arrive in the village and stay there for some time. However, they cannot participate in the villagers' conflicts. There, they follow diplomatic and neutral methods. The Pandavas plan to join one of them. To decide who between them is generous, benign and just, they arrange the meeting to see the merits of both arguments. However, they are disappointed with both of them.

As Pinaka asks bitterly,

How could you refuse to condemn Saranga when his hired hoodlums beat up poor Hangari Das, molested his wife and abducted his children merely because he wanted to keep his own harvests for himself?"

Arjun replied, "What good would it do to condemn him?" and "Would it have restored his teeth, his wife's pride or his children?" (TGIN 418)

Similarly, Saranga asks equally bitterly:

"How can you refuse to join me when Pinaka fails to give his tenants their land, earns so much profit and heartlessly replaces a tenant when he finds another who can produce more revenue by his work?"

Yudhishtir replied to Saranga, "What good would it do to join you?" Would it change Pinaka's ways, give his tenants full title, and grant security to those among them who are ill or idle?" (TGIN 418)

These instances indicate that neither Pinaka nor Saranga deserve to be considered generous, benign and just. The Pandavas, therefore, decide to play a neutral, diplomatic and abstinent role in the dispute between Pinaka and Saranga. Finally, both landlords go away

as they consider the Pandavas hopeless and untrustworthy; equally, the Pandavas consider that they cannot do anything in the divided village, therefore, they also quietly leave, abandoning both sides with the endless quarrels.

In the novel, referring to mythological characters as discussed earlier, the Pandavas are representative of the judiciary, the Indian army, news media, civil service and Foreign Service. Moreover, there was a global cold war between the USA and the USSR, where the government of India decided to abstain from the cold war. Dhritarashtra and Kanika believed that this immoral and destructive competition might inflame and disturb the peace of the world.

In light of this international political context, Tharoor's Dhritarashtra and Kanika evolve and elaborate the concept of 'non-aligned' (TGIN 418). Similar to the Pandavas' position, India refused to join any of the sides. The decisions taken by Dhritarashtra and Kanika reflect human conscience about war. Tharoor considered them both right and wrong;

For Dhritarashtra was guilty only of the insincerity of the blind and Kanika of the inaccuracy of the ivory tower. Both Dhritarashtra for idealistic reasons, Kanika for ideological ones believed in the non-aligned they preached, but neither could control the convictions or even the conduct of those who were to implement their policies (TGIN 419).

The International newspapers, magazines and institutions appreciate and bestow their efforts to maintain tranquillity by portraying them on the cover page for their decisions. However, Tharoor provided a satirical statement that sometimes the loudest proponent of celibacy might become victimised and vulnerable by the inducement of beauty; similarly, non-violent India might be stirred into a delirium by the inducement of a weak and ungoverned neighbour. Due to India's non-aligned perspective, China's imperialism policy disturbed peace not only in some parts of the Indian Territory but also in other neighbouring countries.

India accepted a non-aligned position as a result of ideological, economic and other differences. India attained independence on August 15, 1947, at the cost of pervasive

violence and brutality of partition. At that time, there were various issues faced by the contemporary government such as partition, the Kashmir issue, integration of the princely states, language and linguistic problems, communalism, untouchability or caste problems, issues of women, regionalism. Nehru primarily focused on internal issues of India and also recognised the external threat of Pakistan and China, however, decided not to join any global power, because, India had just got independence from the slavery of British colonisation and imperialism, and joining any global power indicated ideological slavery; as a result, it created the 'third world' as 'non-aligned world' to stay away from the politics of global power.

The Global References

While India was dealing with the internal issues, at the global level, there were many issues affecting international politics. The political, economic and military crisis in Hungary occurred in 1956, which caused the Hungarian revolution. Hungary was in the Russian military group during the cold war; therefore, Russia intervened in Hungary's internal matters to stabilise the state of affairs, which was known as the Russian invasion on Hungary. In addition, Jawaharlal Nehru commented that the intervention of foreign troops in any country outraged human dignity and freedom to gain geopolitical objectives without uttering any country's name.

Goa Annexation

At the home end, the Portuguese who came first and went last, still possessed Goa (referred to as Comea in the novel), a picturesque enclave of the Indian coast and a land of long beaches and cheap liquor. They refused to withdraw their government. Indian nationalists were delighted after the withdrawal of the last colonial power, the Portuguese from Goa and Indian soil. In the novel, Kanika as a defence minister becomes a national hero for his decisive action; Dhritarashtra learns a lesson from Comea and thinks that cannons might be more effective than conferences for Karnistan in Manimir issue is to be resolved. .

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In the novel, after conquering the Comea, the third election of Lok Sabha (The House of the People) occurs since independence, which is regularly the quinquennial democratic exercise of the world's largest democracy, and as Dhritarashtra triumphs in the election, Kanika returns to the parliament. Tharoor's narrative mentions that the Indian soldiers were unprotected in the icy mountain passes while the Prime Minister, Dhritarashtra and the Defence Minister, Kanika Menon are busy making various visionary speeches on the world stage about conquering the happiness of Comea, non-aligned movement or non-aligned unity, universal brotherhood. They also talk about India and Chakar's brotherhood while the Chakra Liberation Army is seen invading some parts of India pointing their eyes towards Delhi, the capital of India. This shows Tharoor's disapproval of the Nehruian government's decisions.

Tension between India and the People's Republic of Chakar

The narrative establishes the tension between India and China through their fictionalisation. The narrator informs us that the world's most populous tyrannical government, the People's Republic of Chakar, evoked in the northern part of India, consequently, anti-colonial faces grew up, especially Mandarin faces, and also, contemplated the hubris of the southern neighbours of the country. India and Chakar had separated nearly two thousand years ago due to the expansion of Tibia, which is a large nation of few people, which transferred the sect of Indian origin religion Buddhism to Tantrism. The Britishers presumed that Tibia was not a comfortable place for assigning civil service and they withdrew their knight from Tibia, nevertheless, they made trouble by concluding a peace treaty and border between Tibia and British India by a Scottish named MacDonald, which was known as Big Mac Line or McMahan line.

Currently, the McMahan line represents the 'line of actual control' between India and China but once upon a time, it represented 'the line of control between India and Tibet. Furthermore, India and China's disputes and relations are based on multiple factors; however, the geopolitical factor is one of the conspicuous parts of international relations.

China considered Tibet as a palm and Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh as the five fingers of Tibet; therefore, China always demanded those parts and tried to capture them by invading areas. China's imperialist policy increases the dispute between democratic and tyrannical governments such as India and China (Dorji).

In the novel, Dhritarashtra is one of the first applauders of anti-imperialism and pro-socialism, even the government of India was one of the first governments to accord the communist government and increased diplomatic relations with Chakar. The initial period of the People's Republic of the Chakra faced ostracism at the international forums, however, in support, India was in favour of Chakra at the various international forums, conferences and summits for 'peaceful co-existence with neighbouring countries', especially with Chakra and its capital Snuping (Beijing). In addition, they created a new slogan 'Hindi- Chakar Bhai-Bhai' which resonates with the 'Hindi- Chini Bhai-Bhai' slogan as belonging to the faith and physiognomy and the concept of neighbouring brotherhood between India and Chakar. The word Chakar is implied sweetness and sugar, therefore, the Indians were pronouncing the name carefully to endure a relationship, however, the slogan twisted by Chakar as Hindi Chakar bye-bye by invading Tibia which caused geopolitical tensions between the two countries in the area of the Big Mac Line. Though the People's Republic of Chakar's ideology was based on a new egalitarian ideology, nevertheless, they had not provided patronising support to the neighbouring and ethnically inferior countries. Chakar's invasion of Tibia troubled India more than Sir Francis had done while drawing the Big Mac Line between Tibia and India; now, it represented the border between Chakar and India (TGIN 428-9).

China's democratic and egalitarian ideology with international and neighbouring countries was only on paper, whereas in reality, it did not follow any democratic rules and regulations. It is a well proven and documented fact that China violated the norms of the Panchsheel Agreement, the five Principles of peaceful coexistence on several occasions.

Shashi Tharoor provides such an instance by composing allegorical characters of Bakasura as the Chinese Army. Bakasura is famous for wrestling and is a champion. He arranges wrestling matches and pitches tents for it, sticks posters in the villages with the headline, "he will wrestle with any man who put in hundred rupees as a deposit and if the depositor

won the contest of the wrestling, he will be paid back five thousand rupees for the winner in the town Ekachakra" (TGIN 432). The Pandavas see the posters all over town Ekachakra and insist Bhim to contest with him; Bhim refuses to challenge him, because he promises his child, Ghatotkach, to play with him on his nap. Then they look optimistically at Yudhishtir, but he refuses to contest because he is planning to attend a lecture on the Dharma of non-violence. Arjun also refuses to contest and says life is not an all-physical activity and starts to read the books as he discovers a library next door. Then, everyone cheers for Sahadeva to contest with Bakasura as he enters the ring and raises his hands with grateful and graceful namaste, whereas, Bakasura picks up from the back side spun upon his head like the blades of a helicopter and flings to the seats of the judges, without any warning, Bakasura defeats Sahadev. He shares the incident with his mother by complaining about his brothers, notwithstanding, that Arjun notified him about the wrestling rule, as there is no warning in wrestling (TGIN 434-5).

As mentioned earlier, Sahdev is seen as representing the foreign service of the government of India, which means that Indian foreign services had failed to handle such a situation against China. At that time, India's foreign policy could not create influence at the international forums and even non-aligned countries had not given any kind of support, also, other than non-aligned countries had not provided moral and strategic support. The instance provides Bhim (Indian Army), Yudhistir (Morarji Desai and Indian Judiciary), and Arjun (Media), all of those just cheering him but could not give support.

These days are challenging for the Indian army and the Indian politicians; Dhritarashtra and Kanika are delighted and complacent about the Comea alliance and victory on Portuguese territory. Dhritarashtra is happy with the popular and successful Defence Minister. Whereas, on the other side, they are getting penicillin injections from Chakar. In addition, some politicians dare to inform and warn him regarding Chakar's aggression, yet he has no desire to listen. Indian soldiers have not had enough all-weather rations, clothes and canvas tennis shoes to wear in the Himalayan snow; still, they fight and place overflowing 'pending' trays (TGIN 431).

When many politicians pursue Dhritarashtra about the war that time the Chakars

announces a unilateral cease-fire by capturing some parts of Ladakh's territory (Aksai China) and there are no other options to reject the cease-fire. Within a few days, Chakra accomplishes one of their objectives; capturing enough territory of Ladakh, ultimately a piece of land of India. Chakar also permits constriction of the roads to link Tibia in all-weather with Chakra. This presents India as shallow and immature at the international forums. It also influences the credibility of Dhritarashtra's non-aligned that panics to take the offer of the superpower countries of fighter planes and army assistance that stimulates Chakra dares to invade Indian Territory. Dhritarashtra faces vociferous and unrestrained criticism in the party as well as from the opposition parties; however, Dhritarashtra cannot resign, whereas, the hero of Comea's victory Kanika resigns from the ministerial post. Invasion and defeat by Chakar not only impact the Indian political personalities but also impact Dhritarashtra's rhetorical and dazzling visual metaphors. It fetches far away from the original international initiative and proud non-aligned movement. The defeat humiliates the military as well as Dhritarashtra's self-esteem which breaks his heart. Dhritarashtra is not able to digest the war, which creates health-related problems and causes his death. As the author describes it;

His decline was gradual but decisive. He ate little, began denying himself more and more of the little comforts we all take for granted, resigned himself to acts of painful penance. He began to sleep on the bare floor and to invent new privations for himself. He replaced his regular massages with flesh-mortifying exercises. When he had no official appointments, he would be found in the woods behind his prime ministerial residence, clad in tattered rags and penitential strips of bark. 'It is time for me,' he said to me when I approached him sympathetically, 'to take to the life of Vanaprastha' (TGIN 436).

Ved Vyas, the narrator of the story, believes that due to the non-aligned involvement of India, Chakra had dared to attack India to capture Indian Territory. This also seems to be Tharoor's position. He considers that the consequences of the non-aligned movement reflected negatively on India as it lost some part of Ladakh and also its first Prime Minister.

On the basis of the above discussion, it may be said that the initial period of the non-aligned

movement impacted India negatively. On the other hand, the non-aligned movement groups adopted a diplomatic position in the war between Pakistan and India and China and India. Thereafter, the non-aligned movement contributed to the development of economic conditions and international relations of India with many countries. At the world level, it contributed to maintaining peace. Besides, the movement also focuses on settlements of various disputes at the international platform such as the United Nations and its various tribunals and branches. The countries involved in the movement try to achieve economic, political, cultural and social objectives by their own choice, which indicates the sovereignty of the countries (Gupta).

If India had taken any one side of the two global powers, the war between India and China might have been more disastrous but Tharoor claimed that if India had taken any one side China would not have dared attack any part of Indian Territory (TGIN 432).

Current Scenario regarding Non-aligned Movement and India

Recently, the non-aligned movement came into the light due to the Russia-Ukraine crisis and therefore the research paper glimpsed India's stand in the crisis. The world was too curious to know about India's stand in the Russia-Ukraine crisis. India condemned the civilian killings without mentioning any nation's name and also abstained from voting in the United Nations and stayed neutral (Stanley). Primarily, the neutral standing of India in the United Nations belonged to one of the principles of the Non-aligned movement, which was based on Nehru's ideology and involvement in the non-aligned movement.

The current Prime Minister of India, Shri. Narendra Modi attended the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) meeting, which was held on 15 and 16 September in Samarkand, Uzbekistan and he proclaimed that "this isn't the era of war; it is the era of democracy, dialogue and diplomacy" (Narayanan). It noted that the approach that India has adopted is a new version of non-aligned (Narayanan).

Conclusion

Tharoor uses significant literary devices to develop the narrative. The instances are the mythological bows Saranga and Pinaka, connected with two major landlords representing

two global power, this envisages readers to understand the non-aligned movement; the Pandavs' method of negotiations with Saranga and Pinka leads towards the non-aligned movement and Bakasura's character provides us with China's empirical policies and failure of the non-aligned movement.

Tharoor subtly brings out the negative impact of the non-aligned movement on Nehruvian India. While the researchers also find this depiction justified especially with reference to the initial period of the movement, it is felt that the movement assisted India economically and strategically in the later period. Tharoor elaborates the novel from the Indian national movement to the period of the 1980s, therefore he may have considered the negative connotations of the movement whereas the researchers look at the development of the movement up to the present time, and find the positive side of the movement. Many people along with Tharoor blamed Nehru for China's attack and capturing of Indian Territory; however, China's dubious role stays partly undercriticised.

Bipolarization, fragmentation and rivalry are taking a centrestage in global geopolitics, which hampers the efforts of creating a peaceful world. India's development has been steady though gradual and mainly due to the non-aligned movement there has been positive reciprocation between India and its partner countries. Therefore, the world expects India to play a vital role as a global leader to protect world peace and stability through multilateral institutions. Various Indian government reports provide that India has assisted neighbouring countries like Afghanistan and Sri Lanka in their economical and other crises, which shows India's foreign policy is better in reality than on paper.

The non-aligned movement supports stabilising and maintaining peace and security in the world. The movement has gained the attention of developing countries. India did not vote in favour or against any global power, which assists, to stay away from contemporary world politics with regards to the cold war. The Government of India followed the non-aligned path to create a peaceful intervention in world policies and politics. The American and Russian bi-polar groups are strategically and economically significant for India, therefore, India's stand-in these countries' crises as neutral and abstain intervention is valuable in the Indian geopolitics.

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