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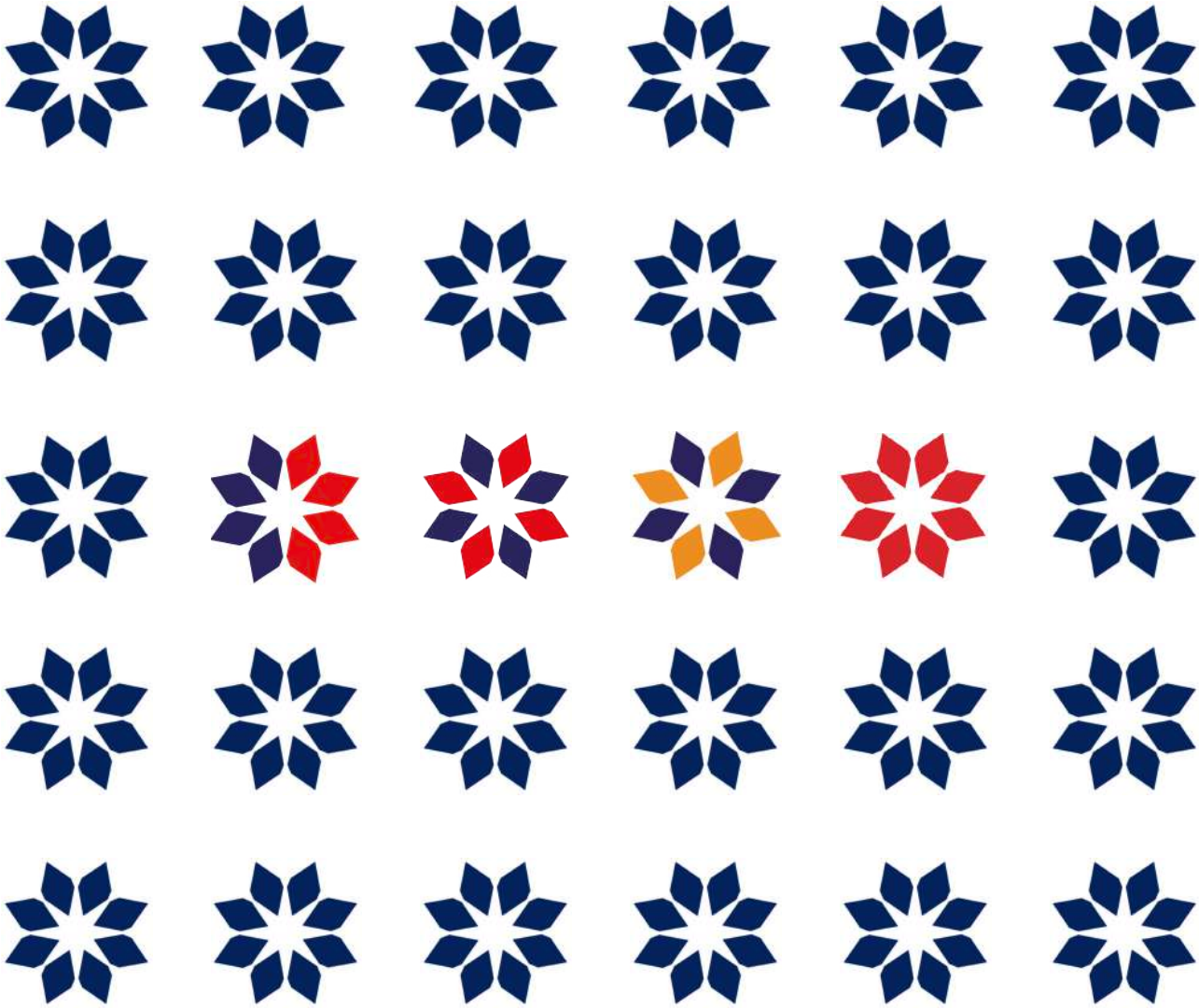

A new perspective on Asia and the diversity of its issues and cultures, combining the views of experts and high-level players.

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February 18

Side event - AI Impact Summit in New Delhi

The France India AI Initiative is organizing an event in parallel with the AI Impact Summit taking place in New Delhi from February 16 to 20, 2026, to present the results of the white paper, which aims to provide strategic recommendations for strengthening Franco-Indian cooperation in the field of artificial intelligence.

February 19

Lunar New Year

Danysz Galerie

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Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet
Editorial Director and former diplomat

EDITORIAL

The The National Security Strategy (NSS) published by the White House in November 2025 has had significant repercussions in the Asian region. This document comes in a context already marked by renewed Sino-American tensions, strategic realignments, and a reconfiguration of regional alliances. The NSS reviews the main developments observed in Asia: persistent and heightened tensions surrounding Taiwan, regional diplomatic dynamics, the growing role of allies, economic impacts, perceptions among Southeast Asian countries, and, finally, the adaptation of national strategies in an uncertain geopolitical environment.

Following a series of U.S. announcements—including significant arms sales to Taiwan (amounting to USD 11 billion, announced on December 18, 2025) and American and Japanese statements on the strategic importance of the Taiwan Strait—China intensified its military exercises around the island for two consecutive days (December 29–30, 2025).

Maneuvers dubbed Justice Mission 2025 (Zhengyi shiming-2025 yanxi) involved several dozen Chinese naval vessels and aircraft, including artillery strikes and missile launches in areas closer to Taiwan than ever before.

Regional media interpreted these maneuvers as implicit attempts to intimidate Taipei and, in particular, Japan, following statements by Japan's new Prime Minister in support of the island. In response to these exercises, several countries publicly expressed their "deep concerns," judging China's actions to be provocative and potentially destabilizing for regional and global security (see the joint statement by G7 foreign ministers, including France). For its part, the U.S. administration reaffirmed the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific and its interests in the region.

Taken together, these events have heightened the perceived risk of a military accident or a major crisis around Taiwan, which could escalate into a broader confrontation, even though leaders on all sides continue to seek to avoid open conflict.

In 2025, several important diplomatic initiatives were observed. In a context where some countries question U.S. commitment or fear a reversal in Washington's policy toward them, they have sought to establish alternative platforms for cooperation. Thus, a trilateral meeting between South Korea, China, and Japan was held for the first time after more than a year-long hiatus. These countries emphasized cooperation in areas such as health and civilian technologies, thereby illustrating a desire to revive regional dialogues independently of Washington.

Similarly, strong activity was observed around initiatives such as the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue bringing together the United States, Japan, India, and Australia), through which these countries seek to harmonize their security strategies without necessarily making their entire policy dependent solely on the U.S. NSS.

China, in its own official statements, has attempted to temper the escalation by calling

for cooperation and mutual respect, while firmly defending its sovereignty and development interests. A spokesperson from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Waijiaobu) notably explained that Beijing wished to work with the United States to promote a stable and sustainable relationship, while managing their differences constructively. Some Chinese analysts also view the NSS as a signal to engage in strategic dialogue with Washington. Nevertheless, Beijing still perceives the NSS as a containment strategy likely to increase tensions and regional instability.

Unlike Japan, China, and Taiwan, India did not officially react to the NSS. However, the American document assigns India a strategic role in the Indo-Pacific, positioning the subcontinent as a partner to contain China's growing influence in the region. New Delhi views this strategy as validation of its regional importance, while allowing it to maintain its policy of "strategic autonomy," which avoids full alignment with Washington.

The NSS indirectly encourages India to strengthen its military capabilities—particularly naval, air, and cyber—while modernizing its infrastructure to secure critical supply chains. On the economic front, the NSS offers New Delhi the opportunity to become an alternative hub to China-dependent supply chains, which should stimulate its industrial and technological development.

Japan's increase in its defense budget to 2 percent of GDP, and Tokyo's growing awareness of its strategic role in the region—particularly in a context of increasing rivalry with China—are in line with the spirit of the NSS. Tokyo's stated objective is to reduce its dependence on U.S. protection while remaining a pillar of the regional security architecture. With the NSS, Tokyo receives confirmation of the strategic importance Washington assigns to it, particularly regarding the defense of Taiwan, which Japan considers vital to the stability of the archipelago.

The NSS also comes at a time when Washington is multiplying signals of support for Taipei, thereby prompting U.S. allies to clarify their own positions. This was the case on November 7, 2025, when Japan's new Prime Minister stated before the Diet that an attack by China on Taiwan could constitute a "situation threatening Japan's survival." Although the NSS does not go into detail regarding Japanese statements, its publication reinforces a strategic climate that makes such positions more politically and militarily plausible.

South Korea, for its part, is investing heavily in high-technology systems, particularly precision missiles, while Australia continues to expand its maritime and submarine capabilities. These developments reflect a significant strategic shift for states that previously relied heavily on the United States for their security.

Beyond national defense spending, concrete cooperation has also been strengthened. The Balikatan ("shoulder to shoulder") 2025 exercises between the Philippines and the United States were designed to be particularly intensive, including, for example, the integration of new coastal defense systems such as NMESIS (Naval/Maritime Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System, a mobile anti-ship system). These exercises demonstrate a strengthening of military ties that, despite overall strategic uncertainty, continue to consolidate the U.S. regional presence, particularly in areas close to Taiwan and Southeast Asia.

U.S. policies linked to the NSS, particularly within the framework of an "America First" agenda, have had direct economic repercussions in Asia. Sharp increases in U.S. tariffs have affected ASEAN countries' exports, leading to a downturn in regional markets while strengthening China's economic influence.

Studies show that Chinese companies are increasingly redirecting their exports toward Asian partners—particularly Vietnam, Indonesia, and Singapore—in order to circumvent U.S. trade sanctions, thereby highlighting a reorganization of global value chains and a strengthening of intra-Asian economic ties.

Media outlets and analysts in Southeast Asia have all noted that the NSS mentions the region very little, appearing only twice in the main text. This has led to the perception that Washington prioritizes other geographic areas, such as Latin America (the "Western Hemisphere"), and that the U.S. capital uses ASEAN more as a bargaining chip in its rivalry with China than as an autonomous strategic partner. Such strategic dilemmas may arise and push the countries concerned to diversify their alliances.

In response, several Southeast Asian countries have sought to diversify their strategies by strengthening their own intra-regional cooperation mechanisms, increasing bilateral discussions with Beijing, Tokyo, and New Delhi, and maintaining high-level dialogues with Washington on specific issues such as maritime security, high technology, and supply chains.

One of the most significant consequences of the NSS is the intensification of public and think-tank debates on security in Asia, the role of the United States, independent national strategies, and ways to ensure regional stability without exclusive dependence on Washington.

These debates focus in particular on issues such as burden sharing, national sovereignty, the integration of advanced military technologies, and the management of Sino-American rivalry so as to minimize the risks of accidental escalation.

Since the publication of the NSS, Asia has witnessed a combination of strategic realignments, heightened tensions, and efforts toward regional autonomy.

The Taiwan issue remains a focal point of tensions, with more visible Chinese military exercises prompting political reactions from U.S. allies. Traditional U.S. allies (Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, as well as Taiwan) are strengthening their military capabilities or reaffirming their commitments to Washington, sometimes at the cost of intense domestic debates. The NSS acts as a clear signal that Asia must be more proactive and less dependent on the United States for its security. In Southeast Asia, countries are seeking to maintain a balance among the major powers while reassessing their economic and strategic priorities.

The United States emphasizes the role of the Indo-Pacific in its overall strategy, which ensures a certain level of deterrence against China and North Korea. Finally, the region is marked by a deep strategic debate on how to manage uncertainty surrounding U.S. commitment and the rise of China as a global power.

These trends show that, although the NSS may be perceived as a U.S. policy document centered on American interests—signaling an implicit revival of the Monroe Doctrine, whereby Washington places territorial security and domestic economic resilience at the core of its doctrine—its effects in Asia are concrete, complex, and multidimensional.

Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet

A career diplomat who studied Chinese studies in France and then worked in development aid as an international expert for UNESCO in Laos (1988-1991), Jean-Raphaël PEYTREGNET has held positions including Consul General of France in Guangzhou (2007-2011) and Beijing (2015-2018), as well as in Mumbai/Bombay from 2011 to 2015. He was responsible for Asia at the Center for Analysis, Forecasting, and Strategy (CAPS) attached to the office of the Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs (2018-2021) and finally Special Advisor to the Director for Asia-Oceania (2021-2023).

Pierre Haski
Journalist

Asian news

Géopolitique, a podcast offering a perspective on international affairs.

By Pierre Haski on France Inter

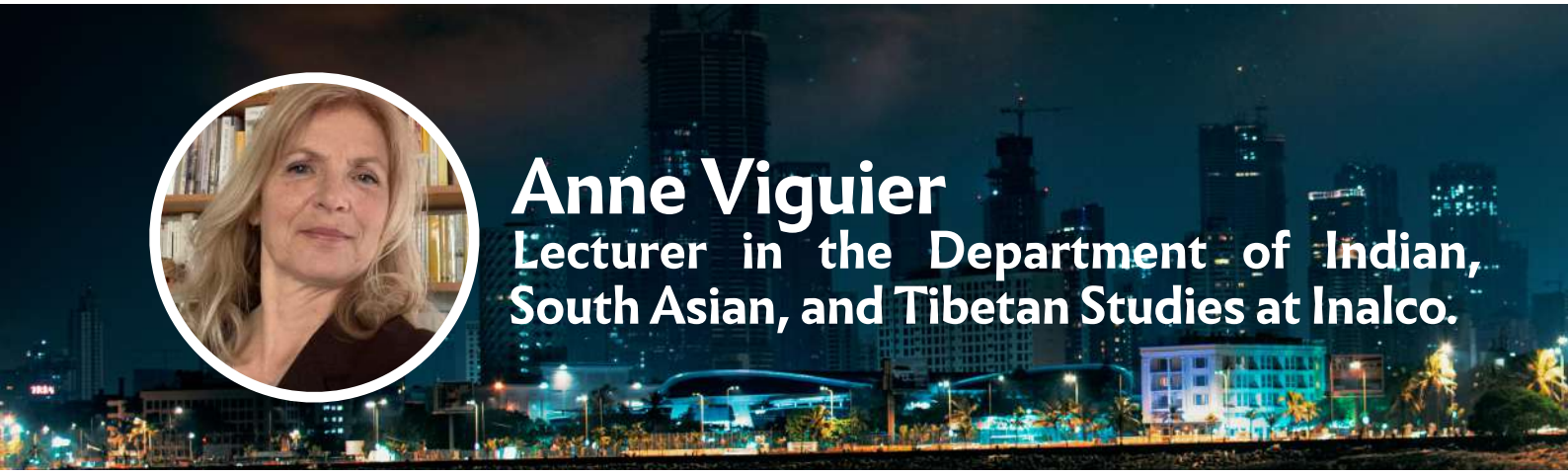
January 14 - Donald Trump's activism pushes China back, but Beijing has not had its final say.

In Venezuela as in Iran, countries close to China are under U.S. pressure, without Beijing making any move. That said, it would be risky to conclude that Beijing lacks leverage in the new global balance of power: China is playing the long game. China is closely observing this spectacular start to the year—from the U.S. attack on Caracas to the Iranian uprising, as well as tensions surrounding Greenland. Closely, but passively so far.

Listen to the podcast

Pierre Haski

French journalist, former correspondent in South Africa, the Middle East, and China for Agence France Presse (AFP) and then for the newspaper *Libération*, co-founder of the news website *Rue89*, Pierre HASKI has been president of Reporters Without Borders since 2017. Since 2018, he has been providing insight into international politics through his morning show "*Géopolitique*" broadcast on France Inter.



Anne Viguier
Lecturer in the Department of Indian, South Asian, and Tibetan Studies at Inalco.

Interview Nouveaux Regards

Understanding India: democracy, colonial legacies, and cultural plurality.

Interviewed by Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet

Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet : In your most recent book, A Brief History of India [1], recently republished, you write in the introduction that the country "seems to resist all shortcuts." Yet when I read what is written in France about the land of Mahatma Gandhi, I sometimes get the impression that certain "Indologists" adopt a reductive discourse that boils down to criticizing Prime Minister Narendra Modi and what they describe as his "authoritarian drift," while overlooking earlier, no less authoritarian policies—particularly those pursued by Indira Gandhi and the Congress Party, which she ruled with an iron hand. What is your view on this?

Anne Viguier : It is very difficult for an outside observer to grasp India in all its diversity. This may sound like a cliché, yet it is an undeniable and foundational reality. This diversity existed in the past, even within the smallest kingdoms. The anti-colonial struggle, followed by the construction of a modern nation-state, led India to develop common administrative structures.

Economic development transformed agricultural practices; urban lifestyles brought about a certain degree of homogenization; and today, the use of the Internet and social media seems to be leading to even greater uniformity. Yet in many respects—and for a significant portion of the population that remains rural—diversity still prevails: languages, religious practices and village customs, ways of eating and dressing, choices of spouses, relationships with nature, music, entertainment, and so on. The political sphere is no exception. Seeking to summarize India through a single political figure, even a prime minister with undeniable charisma across large parts of the country, is misleading. One must not forget that he came to power through elections and has never obtained an absolute majority of votes.

During Indira Gandhi's era (1966–1984), her party, the Indian National Congress, was undoubtedly far more powerful: it dominated almost all regions of India and all social categories. It was the fear of losing this dominance that led Indira Gandhi to declare the Emergency from 1975 to 1977, resulting in the suspension of democratic freedoms in the country for two years.

This possibility was provided for by the 1950 Constitution, which established a strong central state. Independent India also inherited from the colonial period certain authoritarian mechanisms allowing action in exceptional circumstances: anti-sedition laws, laws

enabling restrictions on movement during epidemics, and so forth. Practices that today appear undemocratic are therefore not new. What perhaps explains the particularly critical stance of foreign scholars and journalists, or of Indians within academic and intellectual circles, is the relative novelty of increased central control over the media and over scholarly production in the social sciences and humanities.

You suggest that approaching India's past through the history of its population settlement is, to quote you, a slippery slope. Yet it is well established that India's origins lie in the Indus Valley civilization—also known as Harappan—followed by Indo-Aryan and Dravidian civilizations, all sharing the Vedas (Hinduism). Much later, from the 10th century onward, there were Arab, Afghan, Turkic, and Mongol occupations, but the populations resulting from these account for only about 14 percent of the total. Based on these facts, could you explain your position?

The history of India's population settlement cannot today be definitively established, because sources are lacking in many respects.

As far as the earliest movements—those prior to the Common Era—are concerned, current interpretations are hypotheses largely based on linguistic studies or readings of ancient texts, rather than on indisputable archaeological evidence. For example, we still do not know the origin of the Indus civilization (c. -2600/-1900), how it disappeared, or how the inhabitants of that region subsequently migrated eastward and southward. Since its script will likely never be deciphered, obtaining definitive answers remains extremely difficult.

As for the arrival of proto-Dravidian language speakers (around -2500?), preceding that of the Indo-Aryans (around -1500?), this too remains uncertain and is above all the subject of controversy between northern and southern Indians. This is what I meant by a slippery slope: interpretations of India's ancient history contribute to the construction of regional identities. Every new archaeological discovery can be seen as politically sensitive. As for more recent population movements—particularly the arrival of Muslims from Central Asia starting in the 11th century—they are certainly better documented, but their impact is not always easy to assess. Their legacy cannot be measured solely by the proportion of India's population that today identifies as Muslim, which is indeed a minority.

The architectural, cultural, and institutional heritage is considerable, and northern India remains deeply marked by the brilliant Indo-Persian culture that flourished between the 16th and 18th centuries. As for contemporary Hinduism, it does not present a unified face. It draws on the ancient legacy of the Vedas—sacred Sanskrit literature at the foundation of Hinduism—but also on the stories of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, epics written in various Indian languages, as well as on more recent bhakti (devotional) texts.

Later in your book, you ask whether Indian democracy has colonial origins. You argue that the Indian elite's decision to introduce universal suffrage as early as 1950 was primarily intended to prevent a more radical social revolution. Could you elaborate on this argument, which I find particularly interesting?

From the 1870s onward, colonial authorities gradually developed forms of self-government in India, associating certain Indian elites with the administration of regions directly controlled by the British through elections based on property qualifications. Between 3 and 11 percent of the population could vote to elect municipal representatives or deputies to provincial legislative councils. After 1935, local governments were able to administer the provinces.

Congress leaders thus gained experience in governance that they were able to draw upon at independence. Of course, the autonomy granted to Indians remained very limited within a colonial system that retained all the characteristics of an autocracy. Moreover, conditions in the princely states—which then covered three-fifths of British India's territory and about one-third of its population—depended on the choices of the princes, resulting in a wide variety of situations.

Because of the very limited development of educational institutions during the colonial period, the overwhelming majority of the Indian population was illiterate at independence. The Constituent Assembly that drafted the 1950 Constitution had been elected by property-based suffrage in 1946 and therefore represented only a very small, wealthy, and educated segment of the population. The dilemma faced by the French revolutionaries in 1792 thus arose in India.
Should the right to vote be granted to an illiterate mass? How could one ensure that elections would truly be democratic?

At independence, India's main problem was not primarily political but social and economic. The population was extremely poor. To mobilize peasants and workers, the Congress Party had blamed the colonial system for their misery, citing the exploitation it had imposed on the country.

Yet concrete social demands for a better distribution of wealth—voiced by landless peasants, tenant farmers, and factory workers in Bombay or Calcutta—were directed primarily at Indian elites. Although the Communist Party, founded in 1928, did not enjoy broad support at the time, it accompanied the Telangana peasant insurrection (1946–1951) and had already established itself in Kerala and Bengal. Land reform, in particular, was an extremely sensitive issue.

Nehru, as a socialist, was in favor of it, but he had to contend with conservative members of his party drawn from the propertied classes. There was therefore a strong risk that, if no decisive measures in favor of social justice were adopted, the country would be drawn into major social unrest, or even a revolutionary situation.

Universal suffrage—organized with extreme seriousness despite the logistical challenges of enabling 173 million Indians to vote—could serve as a safety valve and confer a central role on the people in the new India. We know, however, that the entire democratic machinery set up at the time, though it functioned relatively well, proved incapable of truly reducing inequalities.

This is why a violent movement such as the Maoist-inspired Naxalite insurgency developed from 1967 onward in the rural areas of eastern and central India. It also explains the gradual erosion of support for the Congress Party during the 1980s.

Could the ideology of hindutva (Hindu-ness/Indian-ness), which seeks, as you write, to homogenize India, ultimately be a necessary evil in a country composed of so many states, languages, and religions—especially given a regional security environment perceived as threatening to its stability? I am thinking in particular of Pakistan and China, two countries with which India has recently had to confront tensions.

As a historian—and a foreigner at that—I would not venture to judge the legitimacy of this policy for Indians themselves.

It is undeniable that India faces security challenges that compel it to strengthen national unity.

We also know that new civilizational narratives are developing everywhere in the world today, and that each major country must engage in identity-based struggles in order to play its role. What I observe, when studying the very long history of the Indian world (whose geographical boundaries extend beyond the present-day Indian Union and include Pakistan and Bangladesh), is that diversity only became a problem for India with its confrontation with the West.

In a way, Christian proselytism and the superiority complex of European colonizers pushed Indians to rethink a form of coexistence that had long been marked by acceptance of differences. Must this shift necessarily lead to the erasure of some of the values that long animated the peoples of this part of the world—values shaping their relationship to nature, their conception of humanity's place within it, or the role of politics?

That is for Indians to decide. But we must not forget that they number more than 1.4 billion. This is not the case of the 20 million French people under Louis XIV, to whom Catholicism was imposed, nor the 39 million of the late 19th century who, through schooling, moved toward linguistic uniformity.

Perhaps this drive toward cultural homogenization may instead weaken what constitutes India's strength and originality in today's world.

In the conclusion of your book, you rightly observe that "for a long time, the French tended to cultivate a fascination with China (rather than India)." This may indeed seem paradoxical, given that, from a civilizational standpoint, we share common Indo-European roots with India, and that the country remains—whatever one may say, unlike China—a democracy as we understand it in the West, as demonstrated by its most recent national election, in which the dominance of Narendra Modi's nationalist party was challenged at the ballot box. What do you think?

This is indeed a reality that I observe and regret, like all French people who love India and wish for our country to strengthen its ties with it. There was a time when French intellectuals could see

in India ancient roots of our own civilization. That is no longer the case today.

First, because our culture itself has changed and moved away from its Greco-Roman and biblical references. We find ourselves caught between a form of rationalism that dismisses all religious phenomena as inherently suspect and dangerous, and a chauvinistic tendency toward inward retreat that seeks to avoid any external influence.

This is hardly conducive to engagement with an Indian world marked by multiple contradictions that resist easy categorization. I have always believed that Europe is the appropriate scale at which to engage with India. Indian federalism is a fascinating construction that Europeans should have studied more closely.

At one point, there were requests from the Indian side for institutional exchanges, but these were not understood in Europe. India, like Europe, must manage multilingualism and negotiate the place of English in education and internal exchanges. But for the French to approach India with fewer prejudices and anxieties, studies on the country must first be developed—and not only on political issues. Consider that in France there are only two university positions dedicated to teaching Indian history. Indological studies are declining, including the teaching of Hindi, which is nevertheless the official language of the Indian Union and spoken by 40 percent of Indians.

We should also avoid constantly judging India through our democratic models or our ideal of secularism, and remain mindful that India has many faces. Indian democracy is not a replica of ours. For example, affirmative action plays a major role there. Indian secularism is not French laïcité, and one cannot judge what threatens it by our own standards.

I believe we need neutral observation, exchanges in all fields, and trust. Perhaps economic exchanges—which will be vital in the future—will give new impetus to Franco-Indian relations within the framework of a strengthened India–Europe relationship.

[1] A Brief History of India: From the Land of a Thousand Gods to a Global Power, Champs histoire, Éditions Flammarion, Paris, 2025, 272 pages.

Anne Viguier

Anne Viguier is an *agrégée* in history and an associate professor in the Department of Indian, South Asian, and Tibetan Studies at Inalco, as well as a researcher at CESSMA. Among her publications are A Brief History of India: From the Land of a Thousand Gods to a Global Power (Flammarion), first published in 2023 and reissued in 2025, and the co-edited volume Encyclopedia of Historiographies: Africas, Americas, Asias. Gender and Sources, vol. 1 (Presses de l'Inalco), published in 2020–2021.

Interview Nouveaux Regards

The reconfiguration of the Tibetan diaspora, identities, and transmission in exile.

Interviewed by Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet with Françoise Robin

Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet : As a professor and head of the Tibet section at Inalco, you are leading, together with other colleagues, a research project funded by the French National Research Agency (ANR) focusing on the "reconfiguration of the Tibetan diaspora."

What do you mean by "reconfiguration of the Tibetan diaspora"? How does this "reconfiguration" manifest itself in concrete terms?

Françoise Robin : That is precisely what our DIASCO-TIB research team, supported by ANR funding, is currently studying, with a particular—though not exclusive—focus on France as a host country. Tibetan exiles do not form a homogeneous group.

They come from diverse backgrounds: some were born in India to parents or grandparents who were themselves refugees; others were born in Tibet; and still others were born in the West. Among them, some originate from so-called "Central Tibet," others from Eastern Tibet (the region known as Kham), and others still from Northeastern Tibet (Amdo).

Some have followed a religious path, while others are laypeople. Although the vast majority of Tibetans are Buddhists, they may belong to different traditions within Tibetan Buddhism. Some are educated, others are illiterate.

Diversity is intrinsic to any population, but in the Tibetan case one must emphasize significant linguistic diversity.

The Tibetophone world is geographically vast and sparsely populated, and is therefore fragmented into major dialect groups that are not always mutually intelligible orally. To explain this dispersion and diversity, parallels are often drawn with the Romance-language world.

Tibetans in France—whose numbers long remained very limited but have increased significantly in recent years—face a number of questions: do they aspire to reproduce this diversity, to transmit it, or are they instead moving toward standardization?

Similarly, are religious practices becoming more uniform, or do they remain distinct according to family and regional origins? Finally, what kind of "Tibetanness" is maintained in France? Will there be dilution over generations, or the preservation —and possibly the invention—of a newly shaped singularity in France, with "Franco-Tibetans" or "Tibeto-French"? And if so, what will define them? These are the kinds of questions we are asking.

From what I understand of your work, the term "diaspora," as applied to Tibetan emigrants living in France or elsewhere, is not accepted by all Tibetans in exile. Could you explain why?

The terminological debate takes place among a small number of Tibetan scholars in the humanities, living in exile and publishing in English. It is difficult to provide a definitive answer, however. In both English and French, the term "diaspora" has several meanings that vary depending on scholars and evolve over time.

Which definition of "diaspora" are we referring to? Moreover, the term "diaspora" itself is not firmly established in Tibetan. Several competing terms exist, and they tend to emphasize exile and refugee status rather than the concept of diaspora as such, clearly showing that the notion is still in the process of being conceptualized.

One need only consult the online Tibetan terminological dictionary—a dictionary aimed at standardizing neologisms, jointly developed by fourteen major Tibetan institutions in exile (from the academic, cultural, educational, and journalistic spheres, among others), under the aegis of the Tibetan government-in-exile.

The Tibetan language offers no fewer than four translations for "diaspora."

The first is tsänchöl (གཙན་སྤྱོལ།), which literally means "forced wandering" and is often used to translate "exile." The second, yülgyar (ཡུལ་ཕྱར།), can be translated as "geographical wandering," with a meaning close to the first term but adding a connotation of disorientation.

The third is chenjor (བྱེས་འབྱོར།), which can be translated as "having arrived far away," conveying the idea of uprooting from one's place of origin. Finally, the fourth, kyabchöl (སྐྱབས་བཅོལ།), combines "refuge" (in the sense of "rescue") and "to entrust oneself": one entrusts oneself to others as a place of refuge.

However, these terms remain fairly technical and have not truly entered everyday usage, with the exception of the first, which appears in the name of the "Tibetan Government-in-Exile" (བོད་སྤྱི་གཞུང་།), and the fourth (kyabchöl), which is commonly used to render "refuge," "exile," or "asylum." In short, the very idea of dispersion, which lies at the heart of the concept of diaspora, does not seem to be captured by these neologisms.

You mention the risk of religious, cultural, and linguistic erosion for second- or third-generation Tibetans born in the 1970s, whose family members first arrived in France in the early 1960s. Why is this risk real?

To better understand this risk of erosion, we need to take a detour through India. Under Nehru's initial impulse, India has hosted several tens of thousands of Tibetans since 1959. Moreover—perhaps because it is itself diverse and politically organized as a federation—India understood the need to maintain Tibetan structures and institutions in exile, under the leadership of the so-called "Ganden Phodrang" Tibetan government (that of the Dalai Lamas).

Of course, not everything was simple within the Tibetan exile community itself, since, as we have seen, strong regional identities and political allegiances existed, as T. W. Dhompa has recently shown. Nevertheless, the system functioned relatively well.

The situation in France is quite different. The French state does not encourage particularisms, especially among immigrant populations. The risk of language loss is therefore considerable.

Adult members of the Tibetan community—many of whom are deeply attached to their language—have set up "glottopolitical" initiatives, to use a term proposed by sociolinguist S. Akin, such as Tibetan-language classes on Wednesdays or weekends.

According to our preliminary research, around eight hundred children attend these classes. These community initiatives often benefit from local support (municipal provision of rooms, support from associations), but the official request to integrate Tibetan as an option in the baccalauréat (third foreign language) has not yet succeeded.

Meanwhile, in Tibet itself, "linguistic devitalization"—to use a term proposed by C. Simon, a member of the DIASCO-TIB team, in a

forthcoming publication—is a real phenomenon. Cultural and linguistic erosion is not directly linked to the numerical size of a population, but rather to its degree of concentration relative to other populations and to the institutional support it does or does not receive (factors 3 and 7 of linguistic vitality according to UNESCO).

Moreover, population circulation between Tibet and France—a factor that could potentially foster cultural transmission in France—is virtually impossible. Tibetans are mostly political refugees and are protected by France; they are not allowed to return to Tibet. Even those who acquired French nationality in the 2000s face major administrative obstacles in obtaining a visa for China. Tibetans living in Tibet, for their part, are largely denied passports by the Chinese authorities and cannot leave the region.

Yet it is often through visits to family members who remained behind that linguistic practice is strengthened, as are transnational family ties. As for remote communication, phone calls and social media used by Tibetans in China are subject to extreme surveillance, and many refugees here have given up calling their relatives.

India, with its Tibetan community of around 60,000 people and its network of Tibetan schools established for refugees, now serves as the main site for linguistic maintenance, with some parents in France sending their children there during school holidays.

On the religious level, while France hosts many monasteries and centers affiliated with Tibetan Buddhism, religious practice there is adapted for new practitioners and Western converts, and these institutions house very few Tibetan monks or nuns.

This "Western-style" practice bears little resemblance to what exists in Tibet itself or in monasteries rebuilt in exile, mainly in India. Outside the strictly domestic sphere, Tibetan children are thus cut off from a religious practice—gestures, prayers, collective rituals—that shaped their parents and helped constitute them as Tibetans.

Take funerals, for example. When a Tibetan dies, their family lights dozens or hundreds of butter lamps in dedicated places and performs prayers, often collectively. No such place exists here. Tibetans compensate by commissioning rituals in India, Nepal, or Tibet, but these remain remote practices in which the family cannot physically participate.

The domain in which Tibetans in France (and elsewhere in Europe) have succeeded in recreating a familiar environment is food and catering. Tibetan restaurants now abound in Paris, not to mention vendors selling tsampa (roasted barley flour, a staple of Tibetan cuisine), dried cheese, or laphing (cold mung-bean noodles) in parks or through informal networks. Another domain is the performing arts, which we will discuss later.

What about the integration or assimilation of the Tibetan community in France?

It seems that social pressure exists within the community to encourage endogamous marriages in response to a perceived—whether justified or not—demographic threat. Is this the case? Is there not a risk of ghettoization in the opposite direction?

Audrey G. Prost, whose 2003 doctoral thesis examined social change and medicine among Tibetans in Dharamsala (India), wrote: "The Tibetan exile community [...] strives to maintain an ideal of strict Tibetan endogamy, although in practice marriages with Indians, Nepalis and foreigners do happen and are sanctioned as long as they are seen to be technically hypergamous."

According to a survey conducted by our team, Tibetans in France do indeed very frequently marry within the community (for many of them, before their arrival) and often have two or three children. The reason is also practical: migration to France is recent, and few adult Tibetans feel sufficiently comfortable in French to marry someone outside their community, not to mention the fairly marked cultural differences.

It is also possible that the perception of a civilization and a language under threat—due to the political situation in Tibet under Chinese domination—and the very high esteem Tibetans have for their own civilization encourage marriages between Tibetans, in the belief that such unions make it easier to raise children in Tibetan culture and language, whereas mixed marriages are seen as riskier in this respect.

One can expect that Tibetan children born and socialized in France will not necessarily pursue this matrimonial strategy.

In any case, the term "ghettoization" is certainly too strong for a community that is fairly dispersed geographically, in which both parents mostly work in non-Tibetan environments, and where children generally attend ordinary public schools, with parents placing strong emphasis on academic success.

In your work, you write that "one may assume that the imperative of identity preservation—deeply embedded in the 'DNA' of Tibetans in exile since 1959 (the year of the Tibetan uprising in Lhasa and the flight of the 14th Dalai Lama to India)—will persist all the more as the prospect of return (to Tibet) gradually fades."

How does this "identity preservation" manifest itself in France? What means does the Tibetan community employ to this end?

In addition to the schools already mentioned, one can point to community festivals—open to all—that punctuate the Tibetan year and are organized by associations in exile.

These include, for example, the lunar New Year in February, the Tibet and Himalayan Peoples Festival in June at the Pagode de Vincennes, the Dalai Lama's birthday in July, and the commemoration of the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to the Dalai Lama in 1989, held in December.

Events commemorating the 1959 Lhasa uprising on March 10 are also moments of gathering, though of a more solemn nature. Regional associations also organize "their" New Year celebrations, as do associations of former students of Tibetan exile schools.

These associations also organize an annual celebration for newly graduated baccalauréat students from the community. Finally, a relatively new phenomenon in France—one that may seem anecdotal but is not—is that young (and less young) Tibetans like to gather on Wednesday afternoons and Sundays at the Jardins d'Éole, in Paris's 19th arrondissement, to dance the gorshey (Tib. རྒོད་གཤེས།).

These circle dances sometimes attract so many participants that they split into several concentric circles.

These dances are moments of conviviality for Tibetan youth, where Tibetan songs are heard and bodies engage in a "folkloric" Tibetan choreography, sometimes in traditional Tibetan clothing. In short, it is a way of re-centering body, speech, and mind (to borrow a well-known Tibetan triad) around a distinctly Tibetan cultural expression in a festive atmosphere.

Alongside the dancers, dozens or hundreds of Tibetans gather—some playing dice, others drinking butter tea, still others selling homemade Tibetan food (laphing, tsampa, dried cheese). An entire micro-society is thus recreated for a few hours, mobilizing all the senses around Tibetan culture: sounds and voices, spectacle, tastes, gestures, and conviviality.

One might imagine that the Tibetan community in France would settle in mountainous regions such as the Alps or the Pyrenees. Yet it appears to favor Paris and the surrounding region. How do you explain this?

In this respect, Tibetans follow a trend observed within the French population as a whole, which is also highly concentrated in major urban areas (90% of the immigrant population and 82% of the non-immigrant population).

Although originating from High Asia, Tibetans often spend several years in South Asia before arriving in France, if they did not grow up there. For some, life in the Indian plains is more familiar than life in the mountains. Moreover, if they were educated in one of the school networks established in South Asia, they generally have no experience of rural life, except during holiday visits to their parents.

Furthermore, even if they lived in the mountains in Tibet, their way of life there was entirely different. While Tibetans in France still enjoy spending holidays in mountain areas, very few settle there permanently.

In addition, small mountain villages in France are difficult to access, and above all their labor markets are very limited. Like most people today, few aspire to a life as farmers or herders —especially given the regulatory environment and professional practices, which are very different from what they may have known in Tibet.

Finally, it is perhaps not widely known that Tibetans arriving in France to seek political asylum come through smuggling networks. To recall, Tibetans do not hold passports, as the Chinese state does not issue passports to Tibetans; Tibetans living in Nepal have no official

status; and few Tibetans have applied for Indian nationality.

As soon as they set foot in France, they must repay a significant debt incurred to obtain a fake passport, the visa affixed to it, and the journey itself.

The urgency is therefore to repay this sum as quickly as possible, since interest accrues.

Once they obtain political refugee status—after several months—they can begin working. However, they do not speak French upon arrival. It may seem surprising and paradoxical, but most initially find employment in Chinese restaurants.

They generally understand Chinese, and for Chinese employers they represent a workforce that is compliant and legally documented. This explains why Tibetans tend to settle in Paris and the surrounding region, or in a few other French cities (such as Strasbourg).

If you frequent Asian restaurants run by Chinese owners—whether serving Chinese, Japanese, or Korean cuisine—it is not uncommon to encounter Tibetan servers or cooks, even outside Paris, as I have personally experienced on several occasions.

Data published by OFPRA (the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons) in early 2024 (for 2023) indicate that nationals of the People's Republic of China benefit from one of the highest asylum acceptance rates.

The majority of these individuals are Tibetans, suggesting strong protection granted by France to asylum seekers of Tibetan origin.

Is the same trend observed in other European countries, such as Switzerland, which has also traditionally been a country of asylum for Tibetans?

OFPRA's annual public reports classify asylum applications by country of origin, and Tibetans therefore appear under the heading "China." They are variously designated as "applicants of Tibetan origin," "Tibetan nationals," or "Chinese nationals of Tibetan origin."

Switzerland was the first European country to welcome Tibetans, with six hundred refugees arriving as early as the 1960s.

However, a tightening of policy has been observed since 2014. It is now not uncommon to encounter Tibetan asylum seekers in France who were rejected in Switzerland.

Finally, this overview would be incomplete without briefly addressing the reasons why Tibetans have increasingly sought asylum in France since the late 2000s: many Tibetans who had taken refuge in India or Nepal are embarking on a second exile.

The main factor prompting departure from South Asia is the Dalai Lama's age. Born in 1935, he will not always be present to safeguard the interests of his community in exile in India or Nepal—countries that, it should be recalled, have not ratified the 1951 Geneva Convention or its 1967 Protocol.

Tibetans are currently well received and tolerated in India, but they fear that once their spiritual leader passes away, this tolerance may disappear.

Nepal is a particularly telling case of their vulnerability. This country, bordering Tibet, has maintained cultural and commercial relations with Tibetans for more than a thousand years (and the northern regions of Nepal in the Himalayas are themselves of Tibetan culture).

Nepal thus welcomed Tibetan refugees from 1959 onward. However, since the fall of the monarchy in 1996, Nepal has gradually come under the influence of the People's Republic of China and has increasingly shown hostility toward Tibetans.

Whereas Boudha—an iconic Buddhist suburb of the Kathmandu Valley—resembled a small Tibet until the 2000s, it has over the past two decades been largely abandoned by its Tibetan refugee population, who have moved to India or, more often, to Western countries.

France (like Belgium) enjoys a reputation for offering a favorable environment in which to start a new life, and Tibetans are therefore flocking there—unlike Germany, Italy, Spain, or the United Kingdom, where Tibetan populations are smaller and community life less vibrant.

The United States, once a classic destination for Tibetan migration, may have become less attractive due to the migration policies of the Trump administration.

Canada, on the other hand, remains a preferred destination, in part because of its already sizable Tibetan population, particularly in Toronto.

DIASCO-TIB

DIASCO-TIB stands for "Diasporic Convergences: A Case Study of Tibetan Refugees", a multidisciplinary research project funded by the French National Research Agency (ANR) for the period 2024–2028 and led by Professor Françoise Robin, with Camille Simon and Anne-Sophie Bentz. It is hosted by the French Institute for East Asian Studies (IFRAE/UMR 8043), in partnership with the Centre for Social Science Studies on African, American, and Asian Worlds (CESSMA/UMR 245) and the research laboratory Languages and Cultures of Oral Tradition (LACITO/UMR 7107).

DIASCO-TIB aims to analyze the various patterns of linguistic, spatial, and social convergence at work among Tibetans in exile. The project's central hypothesis is that, in the context of a "diasporic moment," increased spatial dispersion can paradoxically trigger heightened processes of social and linguistic convergence. Rapid migratory trends—from South Asia to Europe and North America—have already led to a large-scale spatial reconfiguration of this diaspora in the 21st century, with France becoming a major hub within the multipolar Tibetan diasporic network. Our research is conducted primarily in France, but also in neighboring European countries as well as in Canada and India.

DIASCO-TIB examines several domains, including languages and linguistic practices, translocal social and economic networks, forms of collective representation (in political, civic, or artistic spheres), and religious practices. Alongside the expected convergences, lines of segmentation will also be observed as they crystallize and reconfigure the shared yet plural linguistic and social practices of the Tibetan diaspora across its diverse contexts of settlement. To learn more about the members of the DIASCO-TIB project, please consult the Research Team page. A permanent link to the project summary on the ANR website is available at: https://anr.fr/Project-ANR-23-CE41-0017.

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Analysis Nouveaux Regards

The representation of the Mughal emperor Akbar in Hindi cinema as a reflection of Indian societal issues.

By Ada Lipman

India, in its current form, is a relatively young state – it was created only in 1947, thus bringing an end to the British Raj (Empire of India). Before the British succeeded in bringing a large part of South Asia under their influence, several other kingdoms and empires existed in this region – some smaller in size, others covering vast territories, comparable in certain respects to today's India. Among the particularly large and important empires was the Mughal Empire (1526–1857).

This empire, ruled by a Timurid dynasty [1] that came to the Indian subcontinent from territories of present-day Uzbekistan and was of the Muslim faith, at the height of its expansion extended over what today constitutes part of Afghanistan (to the west), Kashmir (to the north), Bangladesh (to the east), and part of the Deccan (to the south). The Mughal Empire is particularly well known for its significant architectural legacy. Several monuments are today essential tourist destinations, for example: the Taj Mahal in Agra, the Red Forts (in Agra and Delhi), the city/former capital of Fatehpur Sikri, or the mausoleum of Emperor Humayun in Delhi.

The Mughal dynasty also left its mark on the collective imagination of the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent, and the rulers of this dynasty became heroes of fictional narratives, especially from the beginning of the twentieth century onward.

The first half of the twentieth century was marked by many important events: the beginnings of Indian cinema [2]; the anti-colonial movement; the project of creating, once freed from colonial rule, two separate states – India and Pakistan; and finally, the independence and creation of these two countries in 1947.

This turbulent period gave rise to the growth of numerous historical films, several of which (notably those produced in Bombay [3] and, after the arrival of sound cinema, in the Hindi language) told stories rooted in the Mughal past. Historical films, regardless of the period represented, had a patriotic aim: by depicting past regimes in sumptuous settings,

accompanied by the staging of military and economic power, filmmakers sought to represent India's glorious past and thus encourage national sentiment among spectators – giving them hope that once freed from British colonization, they could once again build a prosperous and wealthy country, as had been the case in the past.

Films focused on the Muslim dynasties that ruled the subcontinent [4] also had a second objective: to highlight friendly relations between Hindus and Muslims in order to ease tensions and convince Indians of different religions that they could coexist peacefully in an independent country, since such interreligious peace and friendship had already been possible before colonization [5].

The idea of creating a separate country for Muslims, Pakistan, gained momentum in the 1930s, which prompted some filmmakers (those opposed to Partition) to include calls for intercommunal friendship in their films. On a human scale, Partition, marked by population displacement, numerous acts of violence, and hundreds of thousands of deaths, was a failure. Indian cinema, particularly Hindi-language cinema from Bombay, the country's most important film industry, therefore continued to produce historical films emphasizing these bonds of friendship between Hindus and Muslims in the early post-independence years, seemingly in the hope of easing the trauma of Partition.

Whether before or after 1947, one Mughal emperor in particular emerges as filmmakers' favorite – Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar. Emperor Akbar was born in 1542 at the court of Rana Virisal, a Rajput king, in Amarkot. His father, Emperor Humayun, lost the throne of Delhi in 1540 to Sher Shah of the Afghan Sur dynasty and was forced to take refuge in Iran. During their years of wandering, one of his wives – Hamida Bano Begum – found refuge at the court of Amarkot, where she gave birth to Akbar.

Akbar was the third (after his father Humayun and his grandfather Babur, founder of the dynasty) emperor of the Mughal dynasty, but he is sometimes considered its true founder, as his predecessors had conquered only a relatively small territory, not to mention that Humayun lost his father's lands for several years before reconquering the throne of Delhi.

The figure of Akbar lent itself well to the objectives of Hindi historical films of this period: he symbolized both the glory of India's former regimes and the peaceful coexistence of its communities. Even though Akbar inherited a relatively small and weak state at the time of his father's premature death, he succeeded in expanding and strengthening it significantly.

During his reign (1556–1605, the year of his death), the Mughals established a rich and powerful empire characterized by ethnic, religious, and cultural plurality. Being Muslims themselves, they allied with and included in the state apparatus many local kings, primarily Rajputs (Hindus).

One of the reasons Akbar is particularly well known today is the territorial expansion of the empire under his reign, achieved partly through conquests, but also through alliances. These alliances (between the Mughal Empire and the Rajput kingdoms) were often sealed through the marriage of the emperor (and later his sons and grandsons) to the daughters or sisters of allied kings.

The first of these marriages took place in 1562 with the daughter of Raja Bharmal of Amber, who in 1569 gave birth to Akbar's first son (who survived early childhood), Prince Salim [6]. Subsequently, important positions within the empire's administration and army were given to the (male) relatives of the princess of Amber, as well as to other kings and princes from clans allied with the Mughals. The alliances between the Mughals and the Rajputs, as well as the famous religious tolerance characterizing Akbar's reign, thus lent themselves to the anti-colonial and unifying message of filmmakers from the 1930s to the 1960s and were also emphasized in the discourse of politicians and historians.

Indeed, from the 1930s onward, Jawaharlal Nehru [7] began to evoke Akbar in his writings, and did so in very laudatory terms. In his work Glimpses of World History, Nehru compares Akbar to another great Indian emperor, Ashoka, and writes: "It is strange that a Buddhist emperor [Ashoka] of India in the third century before Christ, and a Muslim emperor [Akbar] of India in the sixteenth century after Christ, could speak in the same manner and almost in the same voice.

One cannot help wondering whether it was perhaps the voice of India itself that spoke through its two great sons" [8]. He also insists on the fact that the Mughals were viewed by the population of the Indian subcontinent as foreigners and that it was only from Akbar's reign onward that the Mughal dynasty became Indian. As mentioned earlier, the 1930s saw a growing demand to divide the country into two at independence – a project Nehru opposed.

His vision of India and Indian identity rested on inclusive nationalism (without distinction of religion, language, regional culture, etc.) defined by the slogan of "unity in diversity." Mobilizing the figure of Akbar as a great Indian ruler was therefore for Nehru a way to counter both the separatist rhetoric of some Muslims and the discriminatory rhetoric of Hindu fundamentalists.

Under Nehru's pen, Akbar emerged as proof that one could be both Indian and Muslim and, moreover, accomplish great deeds. He was presented not only as an ideal political leader ("he worked hard for the welfare of the Indian people" [9]), but also as the father of the Indian people ("he might be considered the father of Indian nationalism" [10]).

Moreover, Nehru's vision of Akbar's proto-nationalism as placing "the ideal of common Indian nationality above the claims of separatist religion" [11] was quite similar to what he and his political party themselves promoted. The image of Akbar promoted by Nehru's political discourse and that of his party was taken up after independence by Indian historical discourse: the historian Ashirbadi Lal Srivastava [12], in his biography of Akbar, described this emperor as "our national king" [13].

As mentioned above, Akbar, a historical figure highlighted by politicians and historians, is also the hero of numerous works of fiction. Here, I will analyze only a few of them in order to answer the question of how the statements cited above are reflected in artistic discourse.

It appears that Akbar was constructed as a national hero first and foremost in cinema. In the film Humayun (dir. Mehboob Khan, 1945), devoted primarily to Akbar's father and released two years before independence, the director emphasizes the ties between the Mughals and the Rajputs by imagining friendship and mutual assistance between the Mughal emperors Babur and Humayun and the Rajput princess of Amarkot. The Mughals (primarily Babur) are presented as a people in search of a new home, who came to India not to plunder the country but to make it their homeland, and who were committed to guaranteeing all their new subjects religious, cultural, linguistic, and property freedom.

While Babur is shown as the founder of the dynasty and the first to befriend the Indian peoples, it is Akbar – born at the court of his "adoptive" aunt, the princess of Amarkot – who emerges as the first to possess this dual Mughal (and by extension, Muslim) and Indian identity.

The film ends with a shot of the child Akbar helping the princess of Amarkot raise the Rajput flag on the ramparts of her fort, accompanied by the narrator's voice-over announcing that Akbar continued, in every measure he took, to strengthen Hindu–Muslim friendship.

The film's message, calling on Hindus and Muslims to unite against a common enemy (which, in the minds of spectators in 1945, would have evoked the British colonizers) and to jointly create a multireligious and multicultural country, perfectly underscored the major issues of the period in which it was made.

After independence (and Partition), when the Indian Republic under the governance of Jawaharlal Nehru became a country "united in its diversity," the symbolic importance of Akbar did not diminish – quite the contrary. Post-independence films continued to take up the ideas set down in writing by Nehru and proposed in earlier films (such as Humayun), with the dual aim of offering an ideal of leadership for new rulers and, once again, affirming that peaceful coexistence among diverse communities was possible (an ideal all the more important to maintain after the violence of Partition).

Thus, in 1960, in the film Mughal-e-Azam (The Great Mughal, dir. K. Asif) [14], Akbar is presented by the narrator (using the same device as in Humayun) as one of those men who did not come to India to plunder it but who truly loved it. Whereas the audience had heard similar statements legitimizing the Mughal dynasty from Babur fifteen years earlier in Humayun, this time they are presented as more objective. In Mughal-e-Azam, it is not Akbar himself who declares his love for India (or Hindustan, as the country is called in the film) and who wishes to

distinguish himself from other "foreign" rulers who governed the subcontinent – it is an extradiegetic narrator (in voice-over) who informs the spectators.

Moreover, unlike the narrator of Humayun, that of Mughal-e-Azam introduces himself in his opening monologue – he is Hindustan, which makes him a witness to the entire history of many regimes and dynasties of the subcontinent and renders his words all the more truthful for spectators.

That said, even though Akbar, the Great Mughal eponymous hero of K. Asif's film, is presented from the outset as a major historical figure and a positive character, he later also becomes the antagonist of the film by opposing the union of his son, Prince Salim, with a court servant named Anarkali. It should be noted here that the film is based on a legendary story of the forbidden romance between Prince Salim and the beautiful Anarkali [15], first mentioned at the beginning of the seventeenth century by the English traveler William Finch, who visited the city of Lahore [16], where a mausoleum dedicated to a woman nicknamed Anarkali was under construction at that time.

The legend recounts that Anarkali, a simple servant, was punished for her love defying social hierarchy by Akbar, who ordered her to be walled up alive. This version, recounted by Finch, fit into a Western tendency to portray Indian rulers as corrupt, which later served to justify colonization as the liberation of the Indian people from the yoke of despots.

Even though the idea that Akbar, the benevolent and tolerant ruler, could wall up an innocent young woman alive posed a problem for some Indians from the twentieth century onward, it was taken up by works of fiction such as the play Anarkali by the playwright Syed Imtiaz Ali Taj (first published in 1922) and its subsequent cinematic adaptations.

However, filmmakers gradually realized that it was difficult to present Akbar as a good ruler while respecting the canonical ending of the legend. In 1953, Nandlal Jaswantlal proposed his Anarkali, in which Akbar decides at the last moment to commute the death sentence, but before Prince Salim, tasked with transmitting his father's new order, arrives at the execution site, Anarkali has already died, walled in. K. Asif was the first to drastically change the ending of this well-known story in Mughal-e-Azam. In his version, Akbar, remembering that the emperor is the guarantor of justice, decides after meeting Anarkali's mother to secretly free the heroine.

He tells the young woman that he is not "the enemy of love, but the slave of principles," and that for the good of the empire Salim must remain convinced that his beloved is no longer of this world. Anarkali leaves the country through an underground passage leading beyond its borders to ensure the stability of the empire. Indeed, as Akbar explains, if a prince were to marry a servant, the enemies of Hindustan could invade it by arguing that Mughal rule was no longer legitimate because of this misalliance. Thus, even though Akbar's behavior in the film remains in some ways ambiguous and the spectator can never be sure to what extent the emperor's primary concern is the well-being of his people or to what degree he himself despises this union due to class bias, the reputation of the Great Mughal is ultimately saved – he is presented as one who sacrificed himself to preserve the stability of his country, even if it meant that posterity would consider him a tyrant.

In this way, Asif succeeded in his film in meeting the expectations of an audience familiar with the legend of Anarkali and in aligning himself with the nation-building project proposed by Nehru and his party, which presented Akbar's era as a golden age of tolerance and peace to which the newly independent India should aspire.

It is important to note that in comparison with Humayun, Mughal-e-Azam appears less didactic with regard to communal issues. Asif does not preach friendship and inclusion of different religions and ethnicities within a single country, but presents them as something already established.

Indeed, several important secondary characters are Hindus holding high positions at the Mughal court: Queen Jodha, Akbar's Rajput wife and the mother of Prince Salim; Raja Man Singh, the commander-in-chief of the Mughal army and a member of Jodha's clan; and finally Durjan Singh, Man Singh's son and Salim's best friend, who tirelessly helps him overcome obstacles to be with Anarkali. Syncretic culture is also presented as natural at Akbar's court.

The film begins with Akbar and Jodha's pilgrimage to the hermitage of a Sufi mystic

(Muslim) to ask for his mediation with God, as the couple still has no child/heir. Later, Akbar participates in the rites associated with the festival of the Hindu god Krishna organized by his queen in her apartments – Akbar's active participation and the fluidity of his gestures indicate that he is familiar with Hindu rituals and that his wife's culture has already become his own.

The emperor also organizes large-scale celebrations in the palace for both the festival of Krishna and Nawroz – a festival of Zoroastrian origin (Persian New Year), later adopted by certain Muslim communities.

In the post-Partition context, Asif seems to want to emphasize the syncretism of Indian culture, here assimilated to the culture of the Mughal court, rather than highlighting differences to be overcome. Thus, even though Akbar is married to Jodha, a Hindu woman, there is no discussion whatsoever of potential difficulties or the possible strangeness of an interreligious marriage.

The film's main conflict arises from the fact that Prince Salim wishes to marry a servant – a woman who is far below him in the social hierarchy. The difference in social status (even within the same community, Salim and Anarkali both being Muslims) thus proves more problematic than that of religion (Akbar and Jodha belong to different religious beliefs but both come from royal families).

The film seems to tell the Indian audience that it must first resolve tensions related to religion before fighting for a more egalitarian society in terms of social classes. According to scholar Swarnavel Eswaran, Akbar here represents the vision of Mahatma Gandhi, who fought for peaceful unity among religious communities but did not challenge the caste system within Hinduism. Salim, according to Eswaran, would symbolize Jawaharlal Nehru and his more socialist and egalitarian project [17]. The film's ending, which shows Akbar secretly freeing Anarkali, suggests that society is not yet ready for greater social equality and that even if those in power recognize its importance, a generational change must occur before more egalitarian policies can be implemented.

At the same time, the film seems to send a message to political leaders: they must always dispense justice, especially moral justice, even if they must do so secretly when it challenges overly rigid (and sometimes unjust) laws governing the country.

The most recent Hindi film featuring the figure of Akbar is Jodhaa Akbar (dir. Ashutosh Gowariker, 2008), which, as the title indicates, focuses on the imperial couple: the Mughal emperor Akbar and his Rajput wife Jodha, the princess of Amber.

The film, released in 2008, was created in a sociopolitical context very different from that of the mid-twentieth century. Since the 1970s, the Congress Party led by the Nehru–Gandhi family had been in decline, even though it won some elections, while parties previously in opposition, notably those linked to Hindu nationalist right-wing movements [18], were gaining strength.

The Hindu nationalist turn marked the 1990s, and as Hindi cinema specialist Rachel Dwyer points out, this political shift is particularly reflected in Hindi cinema of that period. According to Dwyer, "it would be surprising if, from the 1990s onward, Hindi films, produced and consumed by the new middle classes, did not manifest Hindutva ideology [19], just as nationalist and Nehruvian ideologies dominated earlier films" [20].

If the 1990s emerge as a decade in which no film focused on Akbar was produced, this may perhaps be explained by the fact that in the new atmosphere of Hindutva reigning in India, filmmakers did not know what to do with this Muslim emperor (Dwyer recalls that Muslims are the primary target, the chosen enemy of Hindutva [21]), who was widely considered nonconforming to the image of the Muslim that emerged in the cinema of that era – terrorist and religious fanatic (or agent of Pakistan).

Moreover, the 1990s and the beginning of the twenty-first century were marked by numerous cases of extreme intercommunal violence [22]. In this context, Ashutosh Gowariker created a film that, on the one hand, seems to aim to promote Nehru's secular and syncretic vision, traditionally symbolized by the figure of Akbar, but on the other hand does not escape the omnipresent pro-Hindu (or even pro-Hindutva) discourse.

Jodhaa Akbar, which can be seen as a spiritual prequel to Mughal-e-Azam (its story ending shortly before that of Asif's film begins), focuses on the early years of Akbar's reign and his marriage (and budding love story) with Jodha [23].

Unlike Mughal-e-Azam, Jodhaa Akbar presents religious differences as a major difficulty that the protagonists must overcome in order to be together. Their marriage, proposed by Jodha's father to Akbar in order to secure the protection of the powerful emperor, is initially a political alliance that displeases the princess.

Upon learning of her father's decision, she openly asks how she could allow a man to mark her hair parting with vermilion if that man ignores the meaning of the gesture [24]. When, on their wedding night, Akbar notices the coldness of his new wife, he informs her that in Islam a woman can divorce her husband, to which Jodha responds that in Hinduism a marriage lasts seven lifetimes.

Through these lines, the director quickly establishes the central issue of the film and makes the audience understand that as long as they are not in harmony on religious and cultural levels, Jodha and Akbar will not truly be able to fall in love and be happy.

Subsequently, it is Akbar who moves toward Jodha and gradually adopts her customs. He accepts the conditions set by Jodha before the marriage (she will not convert to Islam and will be able to build a small temple dedicated to Krishna within the Mughal imperial palace) and willingly participates in the prayers led by his wife.

Moreover, when Akbar comes for the first time to Jodha's apartments to listen to the prayer she is chanting and joins her, one notices the difference in his attitude compared to that of his counterpart in Mughal-e-Azam. Whereas the Akbar of Mughal-e-Azam (older and more experienced) knew exactly how to behave during prayers dedicated to Krishna, that of Jodhaa Akbar seems lost, and it is his wife who must guide him step by step. Akbar's so-called "tolerance" policies (such as the abolition of a discriminatory tax on Hindus) are also shown as being prompted by his wife. Indeed, the film presents Akbar as gradually becoming "Hinduized" under his wife's influence, which ultimately allows him to win her heart.

This vision differs from what is known from historical sources and history books, which describe Akbar as a man in search of a certain spiritual truth, guided, admittedly, by representatives of various beliefs (not only Hindus) whom he invited to participate in debates organized at his court, but autonomous and mature in his reflections.

Portraying his interest in Hinduism as the result of his passion for a woman seems to remove some of his agency and overly simplify the complex character. Akbar becomes, at the end of the film, the good monarch loved by his people, but the path he takes to get there makes spectators understand that he can only be accepted by his wife and his people if he gradually abandons Islam in favor of Hinduism – the religion of the majority.

Increasingly "Hinduized" in his practices, Akbar is presented as the "good Muslim" and opposed to certain members of his court, "bad" Muslims (more orthodox), who seek to undermine the religious harmony he pursues and who disapprove of his marriage to a Hindu woman [25].

This Manichean vision is not new – in works devoted to Akbar it can already be found (at least) from the 1970s onward in comic books. Indeed, comic series published by two publishing houses – Amar Chitra Katha and Diamond Comics – and focused on the adventures of Akbar and his Hindu minister and friend Birbal, highlighted the same dichotomy. Akbar, preferring Birbal over all his other courtiers and regularly needing to be educated in proper conduct by his Hindu friend, was shown as a character not without flaws but nonetheless positive.

The other Muslim characters in these comics (the emperor's vain wives, jealous courtiers plotting to kill Birbal, or others simply foolish and mocked by the Hindu minister) were generally presented as antagonists and always lost to Birbal.

Inspired by older oral folklore, these stories reemerged and gained popularity in comic form in the 1970s–1980s, one of the first major moments of popular disenchantment with the model proposed by the Congress Party and of victories by the Hindu nationalist right.

The analysis of the representation of the figure of Emperor Akbar in Indian fiction, particularly in Hindi cinema (one of the country's most important industries), shows the close links between artistic discourse and the sociopolitical context in which works are created.

A symbol of a glorious past, of a syncretic culture in which each religion is equal or, later,

still illustrious but this time in need of progressive "Hinduization," the fictional Akbar reflects the changes that have taken place in Indian society and politics since at least the 1940s. Even though he must be adapted to a changing (increasingly pro-Hindutva) context, Akbar remains a national hero in works of fiction [26].

The rise to power of the Bharatiya Janata Party (a party claiming Hindutva ideology) since 2014 has given rise to numerous politically engaged films promoting a new vision of Indian identity (assimilated to Hindu identity). While films such as Tanhaji: The Unsung Warrior (dir. Om Raut, 2020) and Chhaava (dir. Laxman Utekar, 2025) depict the battles of Hindu kings (Marathas in both films) against the Mughal Empire, they choose as their villain Emperor Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707), who in the collective imagination of Indians has always been opposed to Akbar and criticized as intolerant and responsible for the decline of his predecessor's ideals.

The figure of Akbar, constructed as a national hero by historians' writings, political discourse, and fictional narratives, still seems to hold firm, at least in fiction, in the face of the denigration of Indo-Muslim rulers of past centuries.

[1] Drawing his heritage on one side from Genghis Khan, and on the other from Tamerlane.

[2] The first Indian feature film, Raja Harishchandra (dir. Dhundiraj Govind Phalke), was released in 1913.

[3] Today: Mumbai.

[4] Which scholars Ira Bhaskar and Richard

[5] Allen call the "Muslim Historicals."
Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen, Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2009), 5–7. Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel, Cinema India: the visual culture of Hindi film (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 140–143.

[6] Future emperor Jahangir (r. 1605–1627).

[7] Leader of the Congress Party (Indian National Congress) and the first Prime Minister of the Indian Republic after independence.

[8] Jawaharlal Nehru, Glimpses of World History, Being Further Letters to His Daughter, Written in Prison, and Containing a Rambling Account of History for Young People (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1962), 316.

[9] Ibid., 317

[10] Loc. cit.

[11] Loc. cit.

[12] One of the first Indian biographers of Akbar, whose work long remained the standard reference on the subject.

[13] Ashirbadi Lal Srivastava, Akbar the Great. Volume I: Political History, 1542–1605 A.D., vol. I (Agra; Delhi; Jaipur: Shiva Lal Agarwala, 1962), 530.
[14] The director had the idea for this film as early as the 1940s, but, notably due to the departure of his first producer to Pakistan after Partition, production was delayed.

[15] Her identity – whether a servant or imperial courtesan, one of Salim's wives or even one of his father's – remains an enigma, and the story of her love for the Mughal prince is purely legendary.

[16] Today in Pakistan.
Swarnavel Eswaran, "Humayun and Mughal-E-Azam: History and the Contemporary," in Historicizing Myths in Contemporary India, ed.

[17] Swapna Gopinath and Rutuja Deshmukh (New York: Routledge, 2023), 41–63, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003363149-3.

[18] For example, the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party), currently in power (since 2014).

[19] Ideology of the Hindu nationalist right promoting the idea that Indian identity should be built on Hindu values.

[20] Rachel Dwyer, "The saffron Screen? Hindu Nationalism and the Hindi Film," in Religion, media, and the public sphere, ed. Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 274.

[21] Ibid., 276.

[22] Riots in Bombay in 1992/1993 and those in Gujarat in 2002 in which many Muslims were killed, as well as the terrorist attacks in Mumbai in 2008 carried out by a jihadist group.

[23] Historians generally agree that this princess could not have been called "Jodha," which would have been a nickname given to a princess from Jodhpur rather than Amber, but this is the name that first became known through North Indian oral folklore and later through cinema.

[24] Married Hindu women apply vermilion in their hair partings as a sign of marriage.

[25] Shahnaz Khan, "recovering the past in 'Jodhaa Akbar': masculinities, femininities and cultural politics in Bombay cinema," Feminist Review, no. 99 (2011): 131–146, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41288880.

[26] This is not the case in political discourse: in recent years the Mughals, including Akbar, have been denounced as colonizers, and there are increasing attempts to rewrite history, notably through school textbooks.

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Ada Lipman earned her PhD in Arts from INALCO (National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations) in Paris in 2025. Trained as an Indologist, her research focuses on Indian arts, particularly cinema and Hindi-language comics, the representation of Indian history in fiction, and the mutual links and influences between Indian and Western cultures. She also works as a lecturer at INALCO, where she teaches South Asian cinema and Indian comics.

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