

# The mirror that wasn't held up: India missed making a civilisational argument in Oslo

Hindol Sengupta • May 20, 2026  
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*The Norwegian journalist asked why India should be trusted. The civilisational answer was sitting right there, unharvested: trust a civilisation that has never started a world war, never built a slave empire, and never enriched itself by selling the fuels that now threaten the poorest nations on earth*



*India's civilisational argument should move from defensive history to a firm challenge of Western moral authority.*

Faced with a belligerent Norwegian commentator asking why India should be trusted, and questioning the country's human rights record, the spokesperson for the Indian Ministry of External Affairs reached for India's history as a civilisational state.

But in the responses talking about the discovery of zero and yoga, among other things, the point did not land. The defence was not without merit. But it was strategically incomplete, tonally defensive, and squandered what was, in fact, a rare and powerful opportunity.

There were many strong points, derived from the civilisational argument, that could have been made. And here are some of them.

First, the question itself should have been reversed. India is not a supplicant. It does not seek to present its 'credentials' to Norway, a country that has barely a fraction of the population of Delhi NCR. The question should have been redirected precisely at the premise of the question. The issue was not whether India is perfect. The issue was who Norway was to ask, and more precisely, what standards of 'trustworthiness' the questioner herself represents.

India's civilisational history teaches us that in at least 5,000 years of history, it has never developed a comparable overseas colonial empire to those of Europe, did not build its modern wealth on settler-colonial extermination abroad, nor exterminate indigenous populations. It never operated a transatlantic slave trade. It never carved up other countries at a conference table. It was, in fact, the colonised, not the coloniser, drained of trillions of dollars in wealth by the British Empire.

Norway, on the other hand, has a different history. Denmark-Norway operated one of the earliest slave trades in the Caribbean between the 17th and 19th centuries. The very prosperity that gives Norwegians their confident moral perch — the sovereign wealth fund, the social safety net, the press freedom rankings — was partly constructed on centuries of resource extraction, colonial administration, and the systematic suppression of the Sámi people, Norway's own indigenous population, whose language, religion and land were stripped from them by state policy well into the 20th century. As recently as 1997, it emerged that Norway had operated a coercive sterilisation programme targeting "social undesirables" — overwhelmingly the Roma and the Sámi — until 1977.

A civilisation-state argument in Oslo should have begun here: India knows what it is to be judged and subjugated by people who did not first examine themselves.

Norway manages the world's largest sovereign wealth fund, now valued at over \$2 trillion, seeded almost entirely by North Sea oil and gas revenues. It positions itself as a global champion of climate action and environmental sustainability, yet oil and gas account for around 60 per cent of Norway's total goods exports. Norway is the world's third-largest natural gas exporter. The country gets rich selling the very fossil fuels that are submerging low-lying countries like India's neighbour Bangladesh, threatening Indian monsoons, and forcing Pacific Island nations towards extinction

— and then dispatches journalists and NGOs to interrogate the democratic credentials of the countries most exposed to climate consequences.

India, by contrast, has committed to 500 GW of renewable energy by 2030, is the world's third-largest solar market, and is bearing the adaptation costs of a climate crisis it did not create. Per capita, India's emissions remain a fraction of Norway's. India's spokesperson should have asked, calmly and firmly: on the question of who can be trusted with the planet's future, which country's record warrants scrutiny?

Norway presents itself as a global peacemaker, home of the Nobel Peace Prize, the Oslo Accords, and the Nansen Passport. These are genuine contributions. But Norway is also a significant arms exporter, selling weapons to countries with documented human rights concerns through loopholes in its laws, and it has faced repeated criticism for approving export licences that its own ethics processes flagged as problematic. A country cannot simultaneously auction off the Peace Prize brand and arm combatants. The question of trustworthiness cuts in multiple directions.

Here lies the most pointed civilisational contrast. Norway, with its vast oil wealth, world-class public services, and near-total ethnic homogeneity until recently, has found it profoundly difficult to integrate immigrants of non-European origin. Its child welfare service, Barnevernet, has been condemned by the European Court of Human Rights in the majority of judgements against it, with documented bias against immigrant families, including Indian families, whose normal cultural practices were criminalised as 'improper parenting'.

India manages the coexistence of 22 officially recognised languages, hundreds of dialects, every major religion, and a democracy of nearly a billion registered voters, all while lifting more people out of poverty in a single generation than most countries have ever had as their entire population. It is not a perfect record. But it is not a civilisation that needs lectures from a country that has never governed anything remotely as diverse, as large, or as historically in need of development.

The mistake of the Indian spokesperson was not that he pushed back. It was that he pushed back defensively, as if India were a defendant in Norway's dock. The civilisational argument, properly deployed, does not defend India; it reframes the

entire premise. It asks the questioner to justify her own inheritance before auditing someone else's.

India's civilisational identity is not a museum of ancient achievements. It is an argument about strategic restraint: a civilisation with long traditions of commerce, absorption, and plural coexistence; one that was colonised; that absorbed even invaders and made them Indian; that has understood, in its deepest traditions, that diversity is not a problem to manage but the irreducible nature of a complex world.

The Norwegian journalist asked why India should be trusted. The civilisational answer was sitting right there, unharvested: trust a civilisation that has never started a world war, never built a slave empire, and never enriched itself by selling the fuels that now threaten the poorest nations on earth. The answer to 'why trust India?' is simply this — because India is the country that has been on the receiving end of every accusation it is now being asked to answer for, and is still here, still democratic, still standing. That is the response Oslo needed. It was not given. Next time, it should be.

*(Hindol Sengupta is a multiple award-winning historian and author of 13 books. His upcoming book is 'India as a Civilizational State'. Views expressed in the above piece are personal and solely those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect Firstpost's views.)*