

Global at Birth:

A Relational Sociology of Disciplinary Knowledge in IR and the Case of India

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In August 1919, the *American Political Science Review* (APSR) published an article by Indian sociologist and political theorist Benoy Kumar Sarkar. Offering a ‘Hindu Theory of International Relations’, the paper drew upon a wealth of ancient texts (the *Vedas*) and treaties of statecraft outlining a doctrine of *mandala* or ‘sphere of influence’. Sarkar presented this ‘Hindu idea of the “balance of power”’, as central to the long-standing tradition of ‘Hindu speculation on the subject of international relations’,¹ including the fourth century BCE political writings of Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*.²

Sarkar was not alone. Early editions of APSR, *Political Science Quarterly*, the *American Journal of International Law*, the *International Journal of Ethics*, and the *Journal of Race Development* – the forerunner to *Foreign Affairs* – featured articles by multiple South Asian scholars.³ A transnational community of Indian political writers flourished at this time, some based at American universities, others embarking on lecture tours in Europe, America, and East Asia. The birth of the Indian Political Science Association (IPSA) in 1938, *The Indian Journal of Political Science* (IJPS) in 1939, and India’s first independent international affairs think tank in 1943 all helped to institutionalize Indian international studies. Nor was India an outlier in its development of an infrastructure to support international studies, as recent scholarship on the multiple beginnings of IR is revealing.⁴ Despite perennial debates over its reach and diversity,⁵ IR has often perpetuated an ahistorical disciplinary self-image of an ‘American social science’ that is only now beginning to globalize.⁶ As these examples show, however, in a sense, IR was global at birth.

Recent calls for a more expansive vision of ‘global IR’ provide a vehicle to explore these

¹ In this context ‘Hindu’ was a term used interchangeably with ‘Indian’, rather than a follower of Hinduism. Sarkar’s later adoption by Hindu nationalists is worth noting however.

² Sarkar 1919.

³ Bharmachari 1910; Chatterjee 1916; Sarkar 1918a; Sarkar 1918b; Sarkar 1919; Das 1947; Das 1949; Singh 1917.

⁴ Tiekou 2021; Thakur and Smith 2021; Acharya and Buzan 2019.

⁵ Said 1968; Hoffmann 1977; Wæver 1998; Acharya and Buzan 2007; Bilgin 2008; Shani 2008; Shilliam 2010; Acharya 2014.

⁶ For example, Acharya’s acknowledgement of the IR departments that have recently ‘mushroomed’ around the world – the ‘late-developers of IRT’ – and the ‘increasingly global distribution of its subjects’. Acharya 2014, 647, 649; Acharya and Buzan 2017, 351.

histories.⁷ Yet in its treatment of disciplinary history, global IR scholarship has often favoured a substantialist ontology, preventing a more expansive understanding of the global entanglements that produced disciplinary knowledge. Essentialist narratives of national ‘schools’ of IR (British, American, Japanese, Indian, Chinese etc) present a methodologically nationalist framework that encourages ‘epistemic mapping’ and orientalist tropes of epistemic difference.⁸ Where global connections are explored, these have often revolved around analytical bifurcations between ‘west’ and ‘non-west’, ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’, or ‘metropolitan’ and ‘colonial’ spaces. These categories are not, in essence, ‘wrong’; they serve an analytical and heuristic purpose.⁹ Yet when essentialist tropes such as national signifiers, cultural zones, or regions become reified or homogenised, they cultivate the idea that categories of knowledge operate in silos, impermeable to traditions elsewhere. Where these traditions do travel, substantialist ontologies encourage a diffusionist account of knowledge percolating from a ‘knowing’ place of origin to an ‘unknowing’ destination (and failing to do so in reverse). Frequently, the ‘core’ (generally the ‘west’) is represented the originator of disciplinary practice now spreading to the ‘periphery’ (i.e. the ‘non-west’). The west becomes a ‘centre of calculation’, producing ‘enlightened’ rational knowledge, with the non-west a purveyor of esoteric traditions and sacral forms, or otherwise in a state of ‘catching up’.¹⁰

Substantialist analysis also permits intellectual *boundary policing* entailing limitations over what counts as acceptable disciplinary knowledge – including *theoretical* knowledge¹¹ – obscuring alternative traditions and separating out knowledge practices contained within the field. Useful here is Duncan Bell’s heuristic (as opposed to ontological) distinction between knowledge *practices* and knowledge *complexes*.¹² Understanding the modern social sciences, Bell reminds us, requires attention to both. Hard distinctions drawn between international thought and the formal discipline of IR, or between scholarly practices and the ‘real world’ of international relations, naturalize and render transhistorical the historically evolving set of knowledge practices that constitute the field, overlooking their assemblage within wider knowledge *complexes*.

International thought, and the pursuit of international studies, emerged through connections between diverse political and intellectual projects articulated in multiple sites,

⁷ Acharya and Buzan 2019.

⁸ Hurrell 2016; Murray 2019.

⁹ Accordingly, this article uses the terms ‘Indian’ international thought/International Relations whilst acknowledging their inadequacy and assuming (as the paper argues) that they should be understood from a relational epistemological standpoint.

¹⁰ Chakrabarty 2009, 8; Tickner 2013; Dabashi 2015.

¹¹ Shani 2008; Bilgin 2008; Acharya and Buzan 2007, 292.

¹² Bell 2009, 12.

cultivated through global scholarly networks, fostered by social movements, state power, and private philanthropy. Some were a reaction to imperialism - both its political and epistemic violence - carrying with them anti-imperial visions of world order and a rejection of the ideas and histories of empire.¹³ Yet these visions were born out of a global dialogue through knowledge complexes that often transcended essentialist categories.¹⁴ Disciplinary histories have shown how the social sciences – including theory - often fed upon the utilitarian ends of state power, and were frequently constituted *through* state-backed projects of ‘useful knowledge’ production, blurring the boundaries between theory and practice.¹⁵ Analytical bifurcations and essentialist analyses of knowledge formations present a fixed story of knowledge-production, neglecting the histories through which these categories became naturalized and subsequently rendered transhistorical.

Categorical or binary analytics do not exhaust the possibilities in writing and theorizing global histories of knowledge formation. Attention to knowledge communities beyond Europe disrupts a linear narrative of disciplinary spread from the west to the non-west, presenting disciplinary history as a complex set of relational entanglements, and challenging the notion that ‘non-western’ IR has been atheoretical, utilitarian, or simply non-existent.¹⁶ These histories of ‘global IR’ are currently overlooked and under-theorized. As a result, ‘non-western’ IR is frequently presented as new, exotic, or marked in terms of its equivalence to an already-established western disciplinary mainstream, rather than an active (albeit marginalized) participant in it. As the introduction to this symposium explores, disciplinary histories under the banner of global IR stumble into an ‘essentialism trap’. Avoiding this trap requires not only a process of recovering lost disciplinary histories, but a shift in the way we theorize the history of the discipline. What’s needed for the global IR project is an historically literate relational sociology of disciplinary knowledge. This paper is a contribution to this task.

A Relational Sociology of Disciplinary Knowledge

Relational sociology is not new to International Relations,¹⁷ and the sociology of knowledge has been used to interrogate IR’s disciplinary pasts and presents.¹⁸ Such a step generates a theoretical

¹³ Getachew 2019; Shilliam 2010.

¹⁴ Aydın 2007; Steinmetz 2013.

¹⁵ Kuklick 2013; Bell 2009; Parmar 2012; Vitalis 2015; Davis, Thakur, and Vale 2020.

¹⁶ Behera 2009; Paul 2009; Acharya and Buzan 2007.

¹⁷ Jackson and Nexon 1999; Kurki 2020; Qin 2018.

¹⁸ Holsti 1985; Tickner 2013; Wæver 1998.

language with which to go beyond connected histories and address patterns of transboundary entanglements. In contrast to seeing knowledge traditions as siloed, a relational approach sees intellectual traditions as ‘impure, promiscuous, and hybrid’,¹⁹ forged through a series of encounters, connections, and interactions; and in response to multiple political agendas.²⁰

Such an approach correlates with transnational and transboundary histories of the social sciences and social theory.²¹ Crucial here, however, is to exceed conventional cartographies. Existing studies have often failed to connect developments within Euro-American social sciences with the extra-European world.²² Similarly, despite vital work on the imperial roots of International Relations,²³ attention might be drawn to the interpenetration of imperial knowledge circulations with a variety of ‘para-colonial’ and sub-imperial networks that operated within and beyond imperial frames.²⁴ The objective here, in Dewey’s oft-quoted phrasing, is the ‘seeing together ... of what before had been seen in separations’.²⁵

A relational sociology of knowledge also makes a stronger claim, stressing the *configurational* relations between entities that are predicated on these relationships and their ongoing reformulation.²⁶ For the purposes of this paper, configurational analysis addresses a diffusionist account of knowledge development that privileges a linear origin-to-destination narrative, from (for instance) ‘west’ to ‘east’. Configurational relationality addresses this in three ways. Firstly, the ‘ontic wager’ placed on relations undermines substantialist analytical priors.²⁷ These priors feed what Margaret Somers terms an ‘epistemology of absence’,²⁸ manifesting in this case in the idea that knowledge originating from one place fills an empty void rather than the more historically sympathetic story of knowledge entrepreneurs seeking alliances and building upon what is already present.

Second, as this suggests, configurational analysis broadens the possible stories we can envisage about how knowledge spreads. Rather than diffusion from origin to destination, we can postulate multi-linearity through multiple co-acting correlating sites: ‘seeing the global as emerging

¹⁹ Hobson 2007, 420.

²⁰ Emirbayer 1997; Jackson and Nexon 1999; Somers 1989.

²¹ Heilbron, Guilhot, and Jeanpierre 2008; Barkawi and Lawson 2017.

²² Heilbron, Guilhot, and Jeanpierre 2008; Wæver 1998.

²³ Davis, Thakur, and Vale 2020; Schmidt 2016; Vitalis 2005.

²⁴ Bose 2009.

²⁵ Emirbayer 1997, 287.

²⁶ Jackson and Nexon 1999.

²⁷ Jackson 2010.

²⁸ Somers 1989, 14.

from decentered interactions rather than as the *result* of the reified logic of the metropole'.²⁹ These transactional relationships may include relations of animosity or 'counter-knowledge',³⁰ in which knowledge communities seek to evade or disrupt perceived corrupting knowledge forms – as with the anti-colonial critique of 'epistemic imperialism' for example. But concurrent with this, more collaborative, strategic dialogues can also be envisaged, including 'cosmopolitan thought zones': sites that 'emerge from the aspiration to build conceptual and linguistic bridges, through acts of translation and interpretation, often between highly different and politically unequal social communities'.³¹

As these examples suggest, configurational analysis complicates a linear, monodirectional, diffusionist narrative, seeing instead multiple relations of adaptation and co-dependence. However, this is not to say that such relations were 'flat'. Configurational analysis also allows for differential power relations, ranging from the relationship between power and knowledge to the symbolic resources that emerge from social positions within a given field of power. Both find correlates in the politics of disciplinary knowledge in IR. In this paper, I am mostly concerned with the relational production of hierarchy. As Mustafa Emirbayer puts it:

Inequality comes largely from the solutions that elite and nonelite actors improvise in the face of recurrent organizational problems – challenges centering around control over symbolic, positional, or emotional resources. These solutions, which involve the implementation of invidious categorical distinctions, resemble "moves" in a game, or perhaps even attempts to change the *rules* of a game.³²

Resources may be hoarded, access to particular networks policed, or practices perpetuated that regulate access to those resources or networks. Through such practices, categorical distinctions become naturalized and reaffirmed.³³

These power-laden relational accounts of knowledge formation allow us to see hierarchies of knowledge. These hierarchies come from *somewhere*; they emerge and develop through practices of reaffirmation and subversion. This understanding offers an alternative to a boundary-policing

²⁹ Go and Lawson 2017, 25.

³⁰ Bhambra and Santos 2017.

³¹ Manjapra 2010, 3; Bhushan and Garfield 2017.

³² Emirbayer 1997, 292.

³³ *Ibid.*, 293.

view of concepts such as the ‘international’, seeing them not as consisting of fixed essences, but rather as multiply realized within particular times and spaces, corresponding to particular agents, their claims to epistemic authority, and the historical contexts within which they are embedded.³⁴ In what follows I apply these approaches to the development of the International Relations discipline in India.

Empire, Knowledge, and Counter-Knowledge

One of the major insights of recent revisionist disciplinary histories of IR has been the centering of imperial and colonial knowledge-gathering in the creation of early disciplinary formations.³⁵ These forms of knowledge guided the conduct of imperial statecraft and the administration of colonial states, helping to forge the early social sciences as a project of colonial modernity. If IR began in part as a discipline tasked with informing practices of colonial administration, then colonial knowledge was one of its principle empirical referents.

Generating such knowledge were both public and private actors. In the case of India, learned societies such as the Asiatic Society of Bengal (ASB) played a key role. These institutions exhibited heterogeneous disciplinary practices. Within the ASB, history, philology, anthropology, ethnography, linguistics, numismatics (the study of coins) and the study of ancient texts helped to deduce the composition of South Asian polities, their cultural histories, societal practices, and relations with neighbouring polities: a form of colonial-era area studies *avant la lettre*. This was not simply detached scholarship. Many European members held positions within the East India Company and colonial civil service, some using their official duties as a research opportunity. Institutions such as the Royal Geographical Society and the United Services Institute of India produced ‘useful knowledge’ in a more obvious fashion for the military and foreign departments of the colonial state.³⁶ These societies also operated within an expanding *global* network of intellectual connectivity. The ASB exchanged publications with over 60 societies across the globe, including London, Vienna, Washington, Buenos Aires, Batavia (Jakarta), and St Petersburg.³⁷ Similar societies were established in Japan, China, and elsewhere highlighting the connected beginnings of early disciplinary pursuits, part of a global complex of imperial knowledge

³⁴ Ibid., 287.

³⁵ Schmidt 2016; Vitalis 2005; Davis, Thakur, and Vale 2020.

³⁶ Hevia 2012.

³⁷ Asiatic Society of Bengal 1874, 37–9.

production.³⁸

Exchanges between these institutions demonstrate relational configurations productive of emergent institutional and social forms. The growing specialization of knowledge gave rise to the term ‘expert’ in the nineteenth century and more clearly defined disciplinary boundaries.³⁹ Comparative philology, for instance, was pioneered by the ASB through recognition of the similarities between Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit. This precipitated a wider growth in systematic comparison across multiple disciplines throughout the eighteenth century, laying the foundations for comparative social science.⁴⁰

Learned societies also provided a site for knowledge translation, as European knowledge communities meshed with South Asian intellectual movements. Although overwhelmingly dominated by Europeans, from the mid to late nineteenth century non-European scholars began to make their mark. Appointed in 1883, the first Indian President of the ASB, Rajendralala Mitra, was one of several non-European members rooted in the intellectual milieu of the ‘Bengal Renaissance’ – a longer-standing intellectual tradition through which European orientalists would translate (literally and figuratively) indigenous texts. This relationship worked both ways. A wider ‘Indian’ philosophical renaissance was observed at this time in which South Asian scholars took advantage of connections with transnational knowledge communities, a process also seen in reformist traditions of Indian economic and liberal thought.⁴¹ But this is not to downplay the hierarchies evident within these societies too. Many institutes were opposed to ‘native’ members. The ASB did not admit non-European members until 1829, whilst structural factors such as membership costs, time, and education provided important barriers.⁴² Hierarchies of knowledge were also produced. The decision, for example, in the mid 1850s to dispense with an emphasis on Arabic texts, shifted focus from the Islamic history of South Asia toward Hindu Sanskrit texts, severing a more expansive conception of shared politico-religious space.

Important non-European intellectual institutions and movements were also apparent, motivated in part by the dominance of European equivalents. Whilst colonial state-backed universities had grown throughout the nineteenth century, Indian-run private colleges also proliferated. Viceroy Nathaniel Curzon’s University Act in 1904, which ostensibly sought to

³⁸ Aydın 2007.

³⁹ Burke 2012, 4351.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 1776, 1780; Sarkar 1918b.

⁴¹ Bayly 2011, 4; Bhushan and Garfield 2017; Zastoupil 2010.

⁴² Mitra 1885.

improve the quality of Indian higher education, decertified many of these colleges. For the British, this held the additional benefit of disenfranchising nationalist-run colleges, an attempted move to establish a hierarchy of knowledge, yet one that added to the fury that met the partition of Bengal in 1905.⁴³

Partly in response, Indian learned institutions and societies expanded, pursuing the deliberate production of knowledge to counter European influence, in configuration with multiple European and extra-European knowledge communities. Although it is tempting to frame these initiatives as oppositional examples of ‘counter-knowledge’, the terminology of ‘transnational knowledge complexes’ is more fitting. Members of the Calcutta-based Greater India Society, for instance, through their collaborations with French anthropologists (hardly anti-imperial in their own outlooks), sought to rescue India’s position in world history through appealing to its longstanding contribution to the cultural and intellectual vitality of Asia.⁴⁴ Resistance to the hegemony of (particularly British) orientalist was clearly apparent. As the historian and figurehead of the Greater India Society, Kalidas Nag, argued, the advent of European imperialism had isolated India from its previous role as a civilizational entrepot and a leading force for ‘internationalism’, through its centuries of cultural contacts with neighboring civilizations.⁴⁵ ‘Greater India’ recovered the linguistic, religious, and cultural affinities between Asian states, presenting a post-imperial vision of a revitalized India in an international world order. ‘Greater India’ therefore contained an essentialist rhetoric, yet this was not simply an inward-looking enterprise but drew upon wider futurist geographical imaginaries relational to imperial and post-imperial visions elsewhere, including ‘Greater Syria’ (*la Syrie intégrale*); ‘Greater Germany’ (*Großdeutschland*); and even ‘Greater Britain’.⁴⁶ In the case of the Greater India Society, ‘internationalism’ and visions of world order took on a particular symbolism as a means of unseating the central role of European ideas and histories in narrating the ‘East’ and world order as a whole.

A prominent example of this was the work of the aforementioned sociologist and political scientist Benoy Kumar Sarkar. An affiliate of the Greater India Society, his 1918 essay ‘The Futurism of Young Asia’, exhibited a wide ranging anti-imperial epistemic critique of the ‘race-psychologies’ of ‘Eur-America’ lambasting their denial of Indian history and the systematic misapplication of the comparative method that repeatedly denigrated the cultural and intellectual

⁴³ Manjapra 2012.

⁴⁴ Bayly 2004.

⁴⁵ Nag 1926.

⁴⁶ Bayly 2004, 708.

achievements of the East. Targeting the hierarchies of knowledge cultivated within the ‘*orientalisme*’ of the West, Sarkar singled out the ‘Christian missionaries and ... scientists of research societies’ for taking ‘morbid delight in picking up the worst features of Oriental life and thought’, emphasizing the ‘immorality, sensuousness, ignorance, and superstition’ of the ‘East’.⁴⁷ Pointing to Max Müller’s *India What Can it Teach Us?*, he rejected the thesis ‘that India can teach nothing but ‘sublime’ speculations of an other-worldly character’,⁴⁸ drawing a parody of Occidental methodology by interpreting the Iliad as evidence for Europeans as ‘fractious; immoral ... [and] in thrall to despotic government and the rule of tyrants’.⁴⁹ There was a configurational logic to this. Sarkar targeted European knowledge, history, and philosophy to unsettle it but whilst being immersed within it too, partly as a means of benefitting from its symbolic power. This was neither mindless appropriation, nor reactionary opposition, but rather a decentering of European knowledge.

Sarkar lamented the ‘division of labour in the cultivation of science’ that led to overspecialisation.⁵⁰ In particular, he critiqued the study of history for limited national purposes and for supplying ‘special facts and materials’ to Political Science, which had ‘withdrawn the attention of scholars from the study of the hopes and aspirations of man ... and the ultimate gains and losses of humanity’.⁵¹ This was a vision of a more humanitarian Political Science in response to the hierarchical, fractured discipline that emerged as a consequence of imperial expansion and its need for ‘useful knowledge’. The holism that Sarkar advocated was an example of the relational co-production of knowledge. His tutelage under the neo-Hegelian Brajendranath Seal of Calcutta University highlighted the way that Hegel’s obsession with Asiatic society had consequences for the receptiveness of his ideas. In some ways, Sarkar’s intervention turned the tables on Hegel by highlighting the ‘*orientalisme*’ that his comparative method established. This agenda, adopted by other Bengali intellectuals, helped forge new cosmopolitan thought zones with German orientalist too.⁵² These configurations benefitted knowledge communities on both sides. For German orientalist, such alliances bolstered their own claim to intellectual vitality amidst competing

⁴⁷ Sarkar 1922, 12.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 4–6.

⁵⁰ Sarkar 1912, 8–10.

⁵¹ Ibid., 11.

⁵² Manjapra 2014.

European imperial states; for Indian intellectuals, they helped diversify their intellectual resources away from the dominance of British networks and institutions.⁵³

The institutes and intellectuals that sought to resist European hegemonies provided a forum for anti-colonial critique. They also supported the international travel of fellow nationalists precisely to produce new knowledge in the service of an anticipated post-colonial India. This ‘*swadeshi* internationalism’ sought new circuits of intellectual exchange with alternative hubs in Japan, Germany, the United States and elsewhere, transcending the British imperial frame and giving rise to new knowledge complexes.⁵⁴ Many of Sarkar’s writings were produced during his own travels to the United States, Europe, and East Asia, through a syncretic stance configured to the intellectual cultures he encountered on his trip. His 1919 article, ‘Hindu Theory of International Relations’, showed how ostensibly ‘non-western’ ideas of political theory featured in early disciplinary discussions. The re-use of these texts in the context of modern political science reflected the ‘applied enlightenment’ that Stanley Hoffmann described as unique to the US approach to IR.⁵⁵ The US-based orientalist and missionary Herbert H. Gowen pointed to this in his 1929 article in the leading American journal *Political Science Quarterly*, attempting to present Kautilya as a Machiavelli-esque example of the *realpolitik* of the ‘practical’ *Brahmin*,⁵⁶ an example later adopted by Kenneth Waltz,⁵⁷ countering the orientalist tendency to view Indian political writings as ‘mere philosophy’.

As these examples show, a diffusionist narrative of international thought from west to non-west obscures more complex histories of global entanglements; an archive that, as Robbie Shilliam notes, ‘has never really been absent from the Western Academy’ but has been constructed through intimate connections with ‘diverse imperial projects and colonial rule’.⁵⁸ This point can be expanded further. The gathering and sequestering of colonial knowledge in learned societies presents one such project, yet this took place amidst active and increasingly mobile politicized communities of indigenous intellectuals, some of whom were reacting against the hierarchies of imperial rule and knowledge-production. Colonial knowledge had afterlives in ‘anti-colonial’ thought configured in relation to other knowledge circuits. In the early twentieth century, these communities joined transnational circulations connecting South Asia, East Asia, Europe, and

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Manjapra 2012.

⁵⁵ Hoffmann 1977, 45.

⁵⁶ Gowen 1929, 174.

⁵⁷ Waltz 1979, 186.

⁵⁸ Shilliam 2010, 15, 18.

North America, producing new assemblages of post-Enlightenment and counter-enlightenment knowledge-making. It was these developments that *produced* a more insistent and categorical statement of cultural difference to mark the distinctiveness of non-European philosophy, history, and ‘culture’ whilst recovering it from the pejorative representations that certain strands of orientalist thinking had imposed. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century global intellectual connections, galvanized by proto-nationalist movements, thereby paradoxically fostered essentialist claims – an essentialist trap. The essentialisms that substantialist approaches take as an ontological prior were produced by and through transnational connections – it is to these connections that we must first pay attention. This was knowledge produced through global interactions within and beyond imperial frames. In this sense disciplinary beginnings were part of a shared modernist quest for social science in the service of, and relational to, imperial, national and political ends.

The Relational Historical Sociology of Early Indian IR

The mobility of scholars was critical in the development of early social science.⁵⁹ Circulations from Europe to North America, including those escaping Nazi persecution helped to forge American IR.⁶⁰ Yet other movements were also important, including diaspora networks resulting from colonialism and imperialism, and those energised by anti-colonial and anti-imperial solidarities. Imperial metropolises including Paris, Brussels, London, and Tokyo became intellectual hubs functioning as anti-colonial knowledge complexes through which solidarities were forged, shared political projects were born, and cosmopolitan thought zones explored.⁶¹ As noted above, from the early decades of the twentieth century, aided by advances in international travel and the receptiveness of American audiences, many Indian scholars travelled to North America. The 1909 Clark University ‘Conference upon the Far East’ for instance, which established the *Journal of Race Development*, included papers on Indian politics and the independence struggle.⁶² Delegates included S. Bharmachari of the Indian Social Democratic Party and editor of the militant nationalist paper *Jugantar*, whose paper offered a stinging critique of the extractive practices of British imperialism in India.⁶³

⁵⁹ Heilbron, Guilhot, and Jeanpierre 2008.

⁶⁰ Wæver 1998, 722; Heilbron, Guilhot, and Jeanpierre 2008.

⁶¹ Harper 2020; Wilder 2014; Goebel 2015.

⁶² Bharmachari 1910; Jones 1910; Dennis 1910.

⁶³ Bharmachari 1910.

Activists, scholars, and political exiles from India also found homes in the Americas, including those affiliated with the radical anti-colonial *Ghadar* movement.⁶⁴ One example was the political scientist Taraknath Das. Exiled from India in 1905 for his connections with revolutionary groups, Das spent time in Japan and Canada, completing his studies in Political Science at Washington University and Georgetown before teaching at Columbia, later residing in Europe.⁶⁵

Robert Vitalis shows how the beginnings of ‘protean’ realist themes in American International Relations began to emerge in the 1920s and 1930s,⁶⁶ but the writings of peripatetic exilic scholars such as Das and Sarkar expand these themes beyond Europe and America, highlighting the multilinearity of core disciplinary themes and challenging the epistemology of absence that sometimes defines extra-European international thought. Das’ realism was rooted in the belief that British imperial power rested upon its capacity to forge mutually beneficial alliances with other powers. The failure of the 1857 uprising against the British, he argued, could be attributed to the absence of Indian allies. Accordingly, India’s independence rested upon its ability to forge a foreign policy of its own.⁶⁷ His book publications, including *Is Japan a Menace to Asia?* (1917), which was banned in India and the Straits Settlements,⁶⁸ and *India’s Position in World Politics* (1922), adopted materialist explanations for great power competition, converging on realist themes through North American, Japanese, and European intellectual lineages, in advance of the arrival of the tradition within American IR.

A critique of the immanence of power made sense to anti-colonial thinkers, including those seeking to unsettle the dominance of European forms of knowledge. This convergence on realism was also apparent in the critiques that Sarkar made of certain aspects of modern European political theory. In *The Politics of Boundaries and Tendencies in International Relations* (1926) he targeted the ‘great discrepancy between the speculation of modern theorists and the practice evolved in actual history’. The ‘political mind of the whole world’, preoccupied with ‘the abstract idealism of Fichte, Hegel, Mazzini and John Stuart Mill’ had failed to square ‘theory with the facts of concrete political experience’.⁶⁹ Drawing upon a deeper ‘German’ tradition of the historical school that questioned a philosophical (as opposed to historical) root to political thought, and anticipating by over ten years E. H. Carr’s critique of the utopianism of liberal strands of Political Science in the *Twenty*

⁶⁴ Ramnath 2011.

⁶⁵ Mukherjee 1998; Harper 2020; Gould 2006.

⁶⁶ Vitalis 2015, 88.

⁶⁷ Das 1922, 69–70.

⁶⁸ Harper 2020, 347.

⁶⁹ Sarkar 1926, 5–6.

Years' Crisis, Sarkar argued for 'a realistic philosophy of the state' pursuing 'the emancipation of the theory of nationality ... from the mystical ardour of patriots and idealists, and ... the clean-cut logicity ... [of] political thinkers and philosophers'.⁷⁰ Once again, this was rooted in the colonial experience. The problem for Sarkar was not nationalism as such, but 'applied nationalism' and 'political engineering', particularly where it sought to mask the overriding of sovereign will in the colonial context.⁷¹

In contrast to 'core-periphery' diffusionist narratives these examples show how more complex configurations of knowledge were apparent. South Asian international thinkers were not simply dependent upon western knowledge communities. Contrary to the epistemology of absence that sometimes describes extra-European knowledge practices, professional bodies of political science were also apparent in India at this time – coeval with their European equivalents. In December 1938, the first Indian Political Science Conference was held at Benaras University (Varanasi) under the auspices of the newly-formed Indian Political Science Association (IPSA).⁷² Attendees did not simply regurgitate a diffused notion of mainstream IR in the 'west'. The Presidential Address by Govind Ballabh Pant, Prime Minister of the United Provinces, lambasted the sciences as part of an imperial project, advocating a new modernist, utilitarian political science in the service of independent India by 'throwing into the Ganges ... the text-books on political science ... [to] lay the foundation of a real working basis for political realization'.⁷³

Once again, nationalist sentiment foreshadowed a more essentialist 'Indian' political science, configured against the perceived intellectual hegemonies of Europe. Yet individual scholars within the IPSA betrayed the transnational knowledge complexes within which they were located. From 1939, the IPSA journal, *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, began publishing conference proceedings and articles on subjects including the problem of international peace, Sino-Japanese relations, the status of the Indian labor diaspora, and Muslim political theories.⁷⁴ Amongst them, Brij Mohan Sharma and Vangala Shiva Ram drew upon their experiences working within the League of Nations Secretariat to inform their work; a task that occasionally involved them in propaganda efforts to build support for the League through Indian-based League of Nations societies.⁷⁵ The relationship between the League of Nations' International Committee for

⁷⁰ Ibid., 7.

⁷¹ Ibid., 22–3.

⁷² Singh 1939.

⁷³ Pant 1939, 117.

⁷⁴ Raj 1940; Lautenschlager 1939; Menon 1939; Qadir 1939.

⁷⁵ Bayly 2022.

Intellectual Cooperation (ICIC) and the colonial state was also significant in explaining how knowledge circuits were being rewired within early disciplinary developments in International Relations. Efforts by the ICIC to develop teaching in the ‘science’ of International Relations and incorporate Indian scholars into League-backed activities to promote the early discipline were resisted by the Government of India on the grounds that 'at the present stage of educational development in this country, nothing of much value can be contributed.'⁷⁶ Despite a thriving community of Indian academics, access to this particular transnational knowledge network was policed by the state.

The content of these writings also refutes a diffusionist narrative in favour of more syncretic relations and defensive redefinitions. Writing on the eve of the Second World War, the Oxford-educated S. V. Puntambekar reflected on the shared role that mythological forms played in both European and non-European political thought. Delineating ‘realistic, idealistic, and utopian lines’, Puntambekar channeled ideas of utopianism and realism into a more expansive, cosmopolitan discourse on political theory incorporating Christian, Hindu, and Islamic ‘myths’ of political thought and their modern equivalents.⁷⁷ Dev Raj of Christchurch College, Kanpur (Cawnpore), took a more syncretic approach, laying the cause of world crisis in the quest for national and imperial prestige, as well as economic competition through colonial possessions. The solution, Raj offered, lay in the international administration of colonies and an almost Gandhian notion of ‘moral rearmament’ against the ‘have-nots’ of Germany and Italy, through the non-violent voluntary dissolution of empires.⁷⁸

Wider knowledge complexes and practices were also evident, including those connected with publicly funded think tanks such as the Indian Council on World Affairs (ICWA), established in 1943. Modeled on the Royal Institute of International Affairs (RIIA) in London, the ICWA sat within a broader transnational community of knowledge exchange holding institutional links to a global network of private philanthropy organizations and international affairs think tanks, including the Institute of Pacific Relations, the Council on Foreign Relations, the South African Institute of Race Relations, the RIIA, and the Australian Institute of Political Science.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ “Activities of institutions for the scientific study of international relations: Enquiry 1931-32.” LoN, R.4051.

⁷⁷ Puntambekar 1939.

⁷⁸ Raj 1940.

⁷⁹ IOR/L/I/1/116, “Annual Report on the Working of the Indian Council of World Affairs ... 1947”.

But this was not a simple case of the diffusion of knowledge practices. Nor did the ICWA fill an empty void. Emerging in part from a schism within the existing international affairs knowledge communities of India, in particular a reaction against the perceived bias of the RIIA-backed Indian International Affairs Institute,⁸⁰ the ICWA built upon pre-existing knowledge communities including those fostered by India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and other independence leaders who would later hold government positions.⁸¹ Indian Political Science Association members also played a role. ICWA's Managing Director, Angadipuram Appadorai, a prominent IPSA member, would become a key discipline-builder in Indian international studies playing a central role in the establishing of the Indian School of International Studies at Delhi University, India's first graduate college dedicated to International Relations teaching.⁸²

These international affairs think tanks provided a critical site in the reformulation of early International Relations, incentivizing policy-relevant research by the disbursement of grants and research agendas and regulating the knowledge practices of such organizations.⁸³ Early editions of the council's journal, *India Quarterly*, exhibit a utilitarian approach with a central theme the establishing of an Indian diplomatic corps, anticipating India's independence amid frequent frustration at India's marginalisation from major conferences.⁸⁴ These coalitions, or 'knowledge complexes', between state power, private philanthropy, and scholarly movements in the establishing of Indian International Relations echoed practices elsewhere, including the 1954 Rockefeller Foundation meeting to discuss the 'possibility, nature, and limits of theory in international relations' and the British Committee on the Theory of International Relations that gave rise to the 'English School' of international theory.⁸⁵ ICWA was located within this transnational network, sustained by private philanthropy and international organisations such as the nascent UNESCO, the successor to the ICIC. The 'utilitarian' style of post-war Indian IR marked a departure from previous scholarship (in some ways ongoing in the Indian Political Science Association), but also reflected a global shift in the perceived utility of the social sciences, away from the informing of colonial rule, toward sustaining newly independent state bureaucracies and 'rising powers' of the post-war era – a postcolonial essentialist trap. Indian international affairs specialists were participants in this late-modern shift in the priorities of social science knowledge.

⁸⁰ Davis, Thakur, and Vale 2020.

⁸¹ For example, Sarojini Naidu, K. M. Pannikar; P. N. Saprú, and H. N. Kunzru.

⁸² Rajan 2005.

⁸³ Vitalis 2015; Parmar 2012.

⁸⁴ Rao 1945; Sastry 1947.

⁸⁵ Heilbron, Guilhot, and Jeanpierre 2008, 157; Bell 2009b, 8.

The close relationship that the ICWA cultivated with administrative power was clear in the role it played in organizing the 1947 Asian Relations Conference (ARC). Funded by the Tata group of Indian industrialists, the conference involved delegates from across Asia, including representatives of learned societies from the RIIA in London to the Burma Council on World Affairs, and activist movements including the Egyptian Feminist movement and black liberation movements in East Africa.⁸⁶ Offering the inaugural address, Jawaharlal Nehru articulated an emancipatory vision of reconnected Asian countries overcoming the isolation brought by European imperialism, and articulating the spatial imaginaries of Pan-Asianism and ‘World Federation’.⁸⁷ This vision was matched by conference topics, which included ‘racial problems with special reference to racial conflicts’, ‘national movements for freedom in Asia’, and ‘women’s problems’.⁸⁸ Kalidas Nag of the Greater India Society submitted a paper on ‘Cultural Problems’, advocating the ‘nationalisation’ of scientific research to ‘put an end to the period of domination by western scientists’.⁸⁹ The agreement made at the conference to establish the Asian Relations Organization contributed to the more celebrated 1955 Bandung Conference, which inaugurated the non-aligned movement.

The proceedings of the ARC therefore reflected Asianist expressions of cultural essentialism, familiar to those adopted by some recent advocates of global IR. But this was not an organic movement evolving from a siloed geography of knowledge, but a product of transnational entanglements, including a statement of differentiation from imperial geographical imaginaries, and a celebration of regional connections. Crucially, these expressions were partly a product of organizational solutions to power inequalities. The deliberate avoidance by Nehru of ‘political’ questions, and the stress upon ‘cultural contact’ was, in part, a means of avoiding antagonising the retreating colonial state. The conference itself took place amidst Indian partition and an environment of suspicion persisted amongst British officials who feared the ‘dangerous possibilities’ of the conference giving an ‘opportunity to “anti-Imperialists” ... to vilify us in regard to controversial subjects.’⁹⁰ Here again, ‘anti-imperial’ knowledge was configured within and beyond declining imperial worlds.

⁸⁶ IOR/L/I/1/156, “Asian Relations Conference”.

⁸⁷ IOR/Q/26/1/5 Jawaharlal Nehru's inaugural address at the Asian Conference, New Delhi, 23 March 1947

⁸⁸ IOR/L/I/1/116, “Annual Report on the working of the Indian Council of World Affairs, from 1 January 1947 to 31 December 1947”, 47-48.

⁸⁹ IOR/Q/26/3/44.

⁹⁰ IOR/L/I/1/155.

Conclusion

As the introduction to this symposium argues, Global IR contains two solutions to the Eurocentrism of the discipline: a reformist/accommodationist solution of bringing in previously marginalized scholarly communities, and a radical solution that proposes epistemic flight from intrinsically colonised forms of IR knowledge towards indigenous others. These solutions rest upon a substantialist sociology of disciplinary knowledge and an overlooking of the entanglements of global intellectual histories. In contrast to a substantialist sociology of disciplinary knowledge, a relational approach offers a lens with which to apprehend and interrogate empirical instances of intellectual connection, dialogue, and responsiveness. IR knowledge formations are revealed as globally determined through transnational knowledge communities and their configurational relations. This allows us to reorientate the debate on the story of IR as a disciplinary project, centering the analytical prior of relations before substances, offering an ontology with which to conduct a global survey of disciplinary knowledge – a global IR worthy of the name. Recovering disciplinary histories from elsewhere is vital in addressing silences, but this can only take us so far if we favour essentialising analytics. Knowledge of the international was, and is, co-produced.

This study also reveals how our contemporary essentialist trap is not historically unprecedented. The energising of anti-imperialism in the opening decades of the twentieth century operated within, and was responsive to, an apparent reform and resurgence of imperial power. The ideas, movements, and thinkers traced in this article show how this period fostered an ‘opening up’ in the ways that the international was being conceived. Multiple world order imaginaries competed for attention and were responsive to each other. In the South Asian context, ideas of Indian cultural resurgence, exemplified by the ‘Greater India’ movement and emboldened by critiques of imperial knowledge, were energised by expanding networks of anti-colonial solidarities. Although the emergence of a more insistent Indian nationalism helped nurture this, these ideas did not only point to the nation. Regional essentialisms were apparent in ideas of Pan-Asianism and cultural renaissance. ‘Culture’, here, emerged from an attempt on the part of counter-hegemonic movements to articulate themselves. Although these may be read as ideas of counter-knowledge and west-east binaries – indeed their adherents often narrated them as such – the point is that we *cannot* understand this story if we take these essentialisms at face value, if we only have an essentialist account, or an essentialist ontology. They came from interactions and configurations of knowledge that were not simply binary but were multiply realised in ongoing processes of mutual redefinition.

The politics behind such knowledge production must also be acknowledged. The drive towards an Indian-centric conception of international relations knowledge in cases such as the ICWA was an understandable response to the bureaucratic needs of a newly independent nation-state, yet this tendency was observable elsewhere. The repatriation of scholarly knowledge in Britain, for instance, paralleled an empire in decline. International Relations in the UK required a purpose beyond the colonial administrative needs through which it had first arisen. In the United States, a different purpose was underway in which IR knowledge became instrumentalised for the post-war management of American power. This puts a different spin on Stanley Hoffmann's famous description of 'an American social science' as one emerging from a post-war essentialism trap. We might conclude then, that the first half of the twentieth century witnessed a period of 'opening up' for early disciplinary formations – IR as global at birth – and that this was enabled by imperial and extra-imperial knowledge circuits. Empire and resistance to it fostered a global network of transnational knowledge communities that subsequently became captured by nation-states.

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