

The Empire Cites Back: The Occlusion of Non-Western Histories of IR and the Case of India¹

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Abstract:

The call for a ‘global’ and ‘post-western’ International Relations discipline is rightly gathering momentum, yet arguably this research agenda contains presumptions as to the absence of an historical tradition of IR thinking in places such as India. Turning attention to marginalised histories of Indian International Relations this commentary piece on the global IR debate offers an historical corrective to these presumptions and calls for greater attention to extra-European disciplinary histories. In so doing important patterns of co-constitution reveal the connected histories of disciplinary development that challenge the analytical categories that often characterize the global IR and post-western IR literature. A more historicised global IR debate offers a fruitful research agenda that explores the multiple connected beginnings of IR as a global discipline

¹ Some of the empirical material in this commentary piece has deployed in support of other arguments elsewhere. See: Bayly, 2017; 2022; 2022; 2023)

responsive to a variety of intellectual lineages, encompassing a variety of political purposes, and revealing entanglements of imperial and anti-imperial knowledge.

What are the conditions that allow us to speak of ‘non-western’, ‘post-western’, or ‘global’ IR? If we take the conventional narrative, the ‘rise’ of non-west compels us to pay attention to alternative visions of world order. As Amitav Acharya puts it, IR must become more ‘global’ in recognition of the ‘increasingly global distribution of its subjects’, and the ‘schools, departments institutes, and conventions’ that ‘have mushroomed around the world’ (2014, pp. 649, 647). The narration of disciplinary history here is also clear. IR is a discipline born and raised in, and for, the West, but has diffused to the non-West to a greater or lesser degree requiring it to bring these alternative patterns of thought into the fold if it wishes to remain relevant.

This critique of western-centrism, and a search for disciplinary alternatives is a well-worn path. As early as 1968, Abdul Said, contributed to an edited volume featuring (among others) Karl Deutsch, Hans J. Morgenthau, and Kenneth Thompson. Writing on ‘The Impact of the Emergence of the Non-West Upon Theories of International Relations’, Said lamented the ‘unconsciously applied normative definitions’, and ‘value laden’ concepts such as ‘democracy’ and ‘political development’ that defined contemporary political science and International Relations. This ‘New Scientism’, he argued, rendered the study of international relations deeply ‘culture bound’, ‘coloured by the American experience’, and relying ‘overly on extrapolation from American norms’ (Said, 1968, p. 100). Stanley Hoffmann’s rather more celebrated article, published almost a decade later, in many ways repeated this argument, adding (although

often overlooked), that IR should turn away from the concerns of a US superpower, towards those of the ‘weak and the revolutionary’ (1977, p. 59). Kalevi Hoslti took up the theme in the mid 1980s, seeking to ascertain the international spread of core disciplinary paradigms and theories (1985). The 1990s also witnessed examples that foreshadowed the renaissance of ‘non-Western’ IR in the mid 2000s (Chan, 1994; Waever, 1998).

These periodic debates over the reach and vitality of the discipline have reinforced the notion that IR exists as a Eurocentric discipline with a bias against the ‘non-west’, and the evidence seems clear. ‘Mainstream’ IR continues to view the non-west as a site for ‘cameras’ rather than ‘thinkers’ (Acharya 2014, p. 648). The structural inhibitors to non-western IR have also been quantified. Waever’s 1998 study of IR journals as ‘the most direct measure of the discipline itself’ (p. 697) highlighted the fact that in the four leading North American IR journals over the period 1970-1995, North Americans accounted for 88.1 percent of article authorship. Amongst European journals the figure was closer to 40 percent, with another 40 percent being European authors, and the remainder from the rest of the world. Throughout this period three of the four leading American journals had failed to publish any articles written by a scholar from outside of Europe or North America.² It has been shown how the conceptual and intellectual histories of core disciplinary categories remain beholden to European histories and forms of knowledge (Hobson, 2012). And finally, the progeny of disciplinary histories, even at their more expansive, continue to focus on European and North American

² *International Organization*, *International Studies Quarterly*, and *International Security*. The figures for *International Security* cover only the period 1980-1995.

figureheads and institutions. The grand irony of ‘International’ Relations then is indeed that it is ‘‘international’ only in subject matter and name’ (Crawford, 2001, p. 1). This underscores the argument, made by Acharya and others, that IR western IR exerts a hegemonic power over non-western IR, and particularly non-western IR theory.³

As critics have pointed out however, this diagnosis and the antidote of ‘non-western’ IR that results, potentially raises as many concerns as it addresses (Shani, 2008; Shilliam, 2011; Tickner, 2013; Tickner and Waeber, 2009; Bilgin, 2008; 2016; Agathangelou and Ling, 2004). The implied spatiality within this disciplinary geography reinforces the notion of the West as the ‘centre of calculation’ (Tickner, 2013). As Navnita Behera (2007) points out, identifying non-western IR therefore becomes a process of searching for equivalents or derivatives, thus restricting the search to one of mimicry or emulation. Global IR is in danger of reinforcing its ‘self’ through the search for disciplinary ‘others’. The boundary policing surrounding ‘legitimate knowledge’ that is evident in parts of the literature demonstrates the dangers associated with this, where ‘non-western IR’ and IR theory only qualifies if it achieves certain criteria that reflect ‘Western’ standards of knowledge (Shilliam, 2011). As such, a (neo)colonial narrative of ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ is maintained, along with familiar

³ Acharya and Buzan (2007) offer a number of explanations for this bias against non-western IR theory, including the perception that ‘western’ theory is superior, the relative lack of interest in theory development in non-western IR disciplinary practices (in favour of more applied research), and the relative underinvestment in non-western IR schools compared to their western equivalents.

hierarchies of knowledge: theoretical/atheoretical; scholarly/utilitarian; universalist/particularist.

The reverse of this is a more critical retreat wherein non-western IR becomes a project that deliberately evades ‘Western’ epistemic and ontological traditions. This search for pristine ‘indigenous’ traditions of knowledge can, in extreme cases, resemble a process of ‘self-orientalism’ (Dirlik, 1996) or methodological nationalism that potentially leaves ‘non-western IR’ open to the same critiques of ethnocentricity that gave rise to its pursuit in the first place. Furthermore, this pursuit of the pristine frequently overlooks the intimate connection between the archives of ‘non-western’ knowledge, and projects of empire and colonial rule. Very often such knowledge was recovered and ordered through global encounters brought about by imperial relations (Shilliam, 2011; Jahn, 2017). In short, conventional global IR approaches, as well as more critical alternatives, both lead to intractable positions over the ‘purity’ and purpose of disciplinary knowledge (Barnett and Zarakol, 2023). The indispensable yet inadequate corpus of ‘Western IR’ is faced with the unavoidable but perilous intellectual terrain of the non-west (Chakrabarty, 2008; Shilliam, 2011).

What is missing, at least in any substantial form, within both of these accounts are detailed intellectual histories of non-western international thought. Whilst postcolonial studies and increasingly intellectual historians have occupied the ‘terrain’ of non-western international thought for some time now, rarely have these histories been placed in dialogue with the genesis of what might be loosely termed ‘thinking the international’. Whilst IR has generally been poor at investigating its own disciplinary history – it has been woefully inadequate when it comes to investigating the non-

western histories of the discipline (Shilliam, 2011; Bilgin, 2016). Yet attention to these histories reveals important insights. Firstly, rather than delineating ‘western’ and ‘non-western’ approaches, attention to non-western or ‘Asian’ histories of IR and international thought reveals the problematic nature of such a division demonstrating important patterns of co-constitution, dialogue, and resistance (Bayly, 2023; Boseman, 1994; Bisht 2019; Liebig and Mishra, 2017; Thakur and Smith, 2021).⁴ Secondly, to the extent that we can speak of local or regional patterns of international thought and disciplinary IR, critiques of empire and existing patterns of world order are shown to play a formative role in the origins of South Asian international thought in particular. This further highlights the co-implication of ‘western’ and ‘non-western’ IR. Thirdly, attention to the *political* motivations of these early disciplinary endeavours, which often drew upon ‘indigenous’ patterns of thought and practice, introduces a note of caution into the attempt to draw upon ‘cultural resources’ as a means of staking out a more contemporary ‘Asian IR’. In what remains of this short contribution, I will draw upon the example of early international studies in late colonial India as a means of highlighting how a greater degree of (disciplinary) historical literacy helps to reformulate the global IR debate in a more progressive manner.

Stanley Hoffmann’s 1977 article may have found IR to be an American Social Science, but that was only in the limited terms with which he described IR, as a ‘non-utopian’,

⁴ These patterns bring to mind the concept of hybridity stressed by postcolonial theorists (Bhabha, 2012; Bilgin, 2008). I prefer the constructivist-derived concept of co-constitution since it captures patterns of hybridity without implying a prior ‘purity’ of knowledge. Co-constitution implies that all knowledge is in some form co-produced.

empiricist pursuit of questions of war and peace. At the time his paper was published, political science departments were operating across the globe, in South America, South Africa, South Asia, and East Asia. The Chinese *Social and Political Science Review* began publishing as early as 1916, and the Indian Political Science Association convened its first conference of scholars from across South Asian Political Science departments in 1938, followed by its first journal in 1939. The chronology of IR's disciplinary spread implied by diffusionist accounts from the 'West' to the 'rest' is therefore often mistaken. The notion that IR became more relevant once newly independent states emerged after WWII or even after decolonization merely deploys a western yardstick for political development and assumes this was a marker of intellectual development. Attention to non-European disciplinary development reveals the Eurocentrism of disciplinary histories.

Yet it is also a mistake to focus solely on academic, formal scholarly institutions as a means of detecting disciplinary presence. Indian scholars such as the Bengali Sociologist, Benoy Kumar Sarkar, were publishing on the 'Hindu Theory of International Relations' in the *American Political Science Review* as early as 1919 (Sarkar, 1919b). Sarkar's work, which also appeared such journals as the *American Journal of Race Development* (the forerunner to *Foreign Affairs*) and *Political Science Quarterly*, was far from unique (Sarkar 1918; 1919a; 1921). Others such as the Columbia University-based political exile Taraknath Das, and the nationalist publisher S. Bharmachari also featured in the *Journal of Race*

Development (JRD) at this time (Bharmachari, 1910; Das, 1921).⁵ As their affiliations suggest, these individuals were often presenting ‘non-western’ perspectives on global order that were motivated by anti-colonial struggles. M. N. Chatterjee’s 1916 *JRD* paper on the ‘Eastern’ perspective on the European cataclysms of 1914 was typical of this form of critique. Citing Norman Angell, Victor Hugo, John Bright, Cobden and Kant, Chatterjee turned the corpus of Western ‘peace studies’ against the warring European states. Inverting European orientalist sentiment that denigrated the ‘East’, he instead called attention to the hypocrisy of ‘Western civilization’, riddled by class hierarchies, and unable to provide even for their own populations (Chatterjee, 1916). Chatterjee’s transnational solidarity with the working classes of Glasgow’s slums – the example he deployed in the paper – reminds us that through global intellectual exchange and mobility, non-western scholarship could use western scholarship as a counter-hegemonic tool: as ‘counter-knowledge’ (Bhambra and de Sousa Santos, 2017; de Sousa Santos, 2014).

Early communities of Indian political science therefore resonated with anti-imperial critiques. As the opening speaker at the 1938 Indian Political Science Association conference in Benaras (Varanasi) argued, ‘science’ (including political science) had become a ‘monstrous engine of oppression’, and that ‘throwing into the Ganges ... many of the text books on political science ... will lay the foundation of a real working basis for political realization’ (Pant, 1939). Yet Indian international studies was not merely a reactionary pursuit; it also elicited alternative themes, histories, and concepts,

⁵ Taraknath Das published under the journal’s brief spell as *The Journal of International Relations*.

thereby stretching the historical ontology of the ‘international’, often within forums beyond the academy. Founded in 1943, the Indian Council on World Affairs (ICWA) for instance, provided India’s first international affairs think tank, one which according to its own founding principles provided an ‘unofficial and non-political body ... to encourage and facilitate the scientific study of Indian and International questions’ (Contents, 1945, p. 1). The membership of ICWA cut across the sites of academia, government, and civil society. Its founding members for instance, Prakash Narain Sapru and Hridya Nath Kunzru, held connections with independence movements, including the educationalist movement, *Servants of India Society*, hence their formative role in the establishing of the Indian School of International Studies now at Delhi’s Jawaharlal Nehru University (Rajan, 1978). However, the topics that fell under the ICWA’s remit went beyond conventional matters of diplomacy and foreign policy, incorporating subjects such as the status of the Indian diaspora and processes of state formation underway in Burma and China. A regular section on ‘Indians Overseas’ tracked the long-standing issue of the treatment of the Indian diaspora in colonial territories and beyond, where, as the section editor put it, ‘economic competition and racial juxtaposition among the Indian, native and European communities, coupled with the political domination of a small racial minority ... resulted in numerous humiliating restrictions on their civic and political rights’. (Kondapi, 1945: 71). The treatment of these communities, and the questions this raised over political representation, citizenship, and rights, had been a prominent feature of the independence campaign. Now, as India moved towards independence, new debates emerged over the repatriation of these peoples, and their new status as Indian citizens, sometimes within other decolonizing states.

Yet it was the ICWA's involvement in the 1947 Asian Relations Conference that perhaps best showcased the emancipatory visions that pre-independence international thought in India offered (Thakur, 2019). Delegates invited to the conference were asked to prepare submissions on such themes as, 'national movements for freedom in Asia'; 'racial problems with special reference to racial conflicts'; 'inter-Asian migration and the status and treatment of immigrants'; and added to the final conference themes were considerations of 'women's problems'.⁶ Conference debates on these topics showed that shared experiences of colonialism provided common foreign policy priorities that linked regional states together constituted through enduring imperial hierarchies. For instance, a consensus that 'non-indigenous minorities' – including labour communities from overseas countries - should be afforded fair treatment served to circumvent the tensions that decolonization prompted, as reflected in the Indians Overseas section of *India Quarterly*.⁷ In these debates, questions of race and class intersected in discussions on the economic drivers of racial discrimination. Delegates acknowledged the economic factors that exacerbated tensions between 'immigrant' communities, and indigenous groups fearful of 'economic submergence'. The 'de facto' (as opposed to 'legal') racial discrimination that pervaded the spheres of administration and public life generated agreement on the long-term need for education and 'social contacts', showing how delegates sought to address the structural racism generated by colonial rule and its

⁶ British Library, London, India Office Records, 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', p.47-8.

⁷ IOR/L/1/152, 'Reports of Group Committees', 2 May 1947, p.1.

postcolonial afterlives.⁸ The Asian Relations Conference thus exhibited an alternative vision of international affairs, stretching the conventional concept of the ‘international’ long before ideas of globalism, postcolonialism, gender, and critical theory expanded the menu of choice in the formal discipline of IR.

These histories of non-western international thought and practice thus hold important insights not only for the chronologies of disciplinary development, but for the ontologies of the international too. The ‘first here then elsewhere’ logic of diffusion that inflects so much of the conventional global IR literature obscures these alternatives, and trades in the ‘denial of coevalness’ that Chakrabarty (2008, p. 7) identifies as central to the European historicist tradition. Disciplinary trends within IR did not emerge in one location and disseminate elsewhere, but rather were multiply realised as part of a global project of thinking the international, one that transcended simple binaries of ‘west’ and ‘non-west’. The origins of international thought in India therefore resonated with disciplinary practices elsewhere, but crucially they were present *at the same time* that IR began to emerge in the ‘west’.

Aside from these indicators of more modern disciplinary origins, these histories also give empirical form then to the deeper relationship that IR has with imperialism and colonialism, that some critical global IR and post-western IR scholars have begun to explore (Inayatullah and Blaney, 2004; Shani, 2008; Shilliam, 2011; Sabaratnam, 2011; Davis, Thakur, & Vale 2020). As a discipline that was forged in the pursuit of useful

⁸ IOR/L/1/152, ‘Inter Asian Migration: Report Adopted by Delhi Conference’, 27 March, 1947, p.1.

knowledge for empire, IR was necessarily ‘global’ at birth (Bayly, 2023), and as a consequence, patterns of thought and practice tied together metropole and colony in a deeply social relational whole (Buzan and Lawson, 2015; Steinmetz, 2016). Patterns of origin and destination are less important than the basic insight on the co-constitution of multiple political traditions, some developed and propounded by empire, some cultivated in resistance to it, and some as best conceived beyond this dualism. An example of this can be found in the forms of knowledge that emerged in the learned societies of late colonial India demonstrating how comparative traditions so foundational to the modern social sciences were a product of global interactions between scholarly communities in Europe and elsewhere (Burke, 2012, loc 1774). The comparative approach adopted by philology, for instance, in the Asiatic Societies of Bengal and elsewhere relied upon engagements and dialogues with extra-European intellectual movements such as those drawn from the Bengal renaissance. These productive relationships, always beset by patterns of inequality, subjugation, and exploitation, nonetheless forged new archives of ‘colonial knowledge’ that informed later articulations of place, space, and selfhood in South Asia - whether this was in the subliminal adoption of ideas of race, or other forms of social hierarchy, or in the deliberate rejection of these practices. To return to Benoy Kumar Sarkar (1919b), the project of emancipation that informed his notion of the ‘Hindu Theory of International Relations’ was rooted in the traditions of the *Vedas* and *Rajadharma* of ancient Indian political thought that so animated European orientalists, and yet at the same time, inspired by a proto-postcoloniality that resisted the ‘race-psychologies’ of Eur-America; tendencies that as he observed systematically denigrated the ‘East’ as the realm of ‘spirituality’ in contrast to the West as the realm of ‘science’ (Sarkar, 1922). At the same time, Sarkar’s emphasis on the transformative potential of the individual,

combined with his triumphalist recovery of Asian cultural vitality, placed him in the same intellectual *milieux* as European nationalist, imperialist, and fascist thinkers in Italy, Japan, and Germany (Prayer, 2010; Zachariah, 2010).

Attention to the histories of non-western international studies therefore complicates the ‘doubtful particularisms’ that often inform contemporary debates over global IR (Agnew, 2007, p. 138). This includes the ideas of ‘west’ and ‘non-west’, revealing the two are implicated in each other, being produced *through time* and across multiple transnational links. Historicizing global IR allows a conversation that goes beyond one that is governed by sameness and difference (Hutchings, 2011 p. 645), instead enquiring into the deep histories of connectivity that allowed social science as a product of imperial and colonial encounters to emerge in the first place.

Attention to the histories of Indian IR also offers lessons on contemporary questions over the usefulness of IR to present policy debates. This includes the question of how IR can better reflect a world of rising and risen great powers no longer dominated by western states. Although it is tempting to suggest that knowledge traditions emanating from these regions are more suited to understanding the visions of world order through which these ascendent powers operate, attention to the histories of disciplinary knowledge in countries such as India cautions us against the inadvertent reactivation of a colonial archive in pursuit of an emancipated social science. As these extra-European disciplinary histories show, ‘Indian’ IR was perpetually entangled in complex relationships of assimilation, mimicry, and resistance with multiple knowledge complexes elsewhere.

That said, we can also identify in the nascent study of world affairs from the Indian perspective a suite of empirical and theoretical concerns that animate contemporary debates on (for example) migration, race, inequality, and indeed the politics of knowledge production. The observation that contemporary Indian IR has become dominated by realism, with a subordinate role for critical and Marxist approaches (Behera, 2009; Wemheuer-Vogelaar, 2016), underscores the close relationship between India's world role and the forms of knowledge produced within its IR traditions with the dominance of realism reflecting the need for applied knowledge in the pursuit of Indian foreign policy objectives. As India's role in multilateral fora, and as its globally dispersed population continues to shape its foreign policy in prominent ways, these histories of early Indian international studies will come once again to the fore.

Nonetheless, an awareness of the *histories* of different forms of knowledge that contribute to contemporary 'non-western' IR, alerts us to the pitfalls of recovering this knowledge in an uncritical manner. Global IR should encourage awareness of global history, global intellectual history, and global disciplinary history, if it is to avoid merely restating the hierarchies of knowledge that prompted its emergence in the first place.

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