

The Forgotten History of Indian International Relations

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ABSTRACT What does it mean to speak of an ‘Indian’ approach to international affairs? Indian International Relations (IR) is commonly presented as merely a derivative of ‘western’ disciplinary traditions in Europe and North America. This obscures the vast body of work on political science and international thought that emerged from the beginning of the 20th century amongst South Asian intellectuals, scholars, and activists. This forgotten history forces a reappraisal of the origins, purpose, and vitality of IR in South Asia at this time, revealing a discipline that expanded the purview of IR, offering powerful anti-imperial visions of world order after empire, and establishing the foundations for an independent Indian foreign policy. Contemporary scholars and analysts of Indian international affairs should take note.

INTRODUCTION

“The academic world outside India is really anxious to know a great deal about Indian systems of social and political organisation. Research in political science ... will become a possibility only when a larger provision is made in our studies for subjects Indian.”

- M. Venkatarangaiya,

‘Courses of Studies in Political Science’, 1944

The possibility of an ‘Indian’ conception of international affairs presents a vexed, and often highly politicised debate. Unsurprisingly, the discussion is often framed in terms of India’s ‘rising’ status, mirroring developments in China and elsewhere, and raising deeper questions over the autonomy and purpose of the social sciences as a whole. Indeed, the quest

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for an ‘Indian’ contribution to International Relations (IR) foregrounds a wider debate now taking place in the discipline over the need for a ‘global IR’, heralded by the South Asian scholar Amitav Acharya, at his 2014 Presidential Address to the International Studies Association (ISA). Acharya’s conception of ‘global IR’ serves the purpose of engaging with new departments of International Relations that have “mushroomed around the world” in recent decades, broadening the scope of the field and offering new articulations of regionalism, new dialogues between IR and area studies, and reformulations of predominant theoretical traditions.¹

This attempt to “globalise” the International Relations discipline is welcomed by many. Yet as Acharya’s comments suggest, within this debate exists an underlying chronology over the development of international thought in India and elsewhere. For advocates of “global IR”, and for many advocates of South Asian international studies, the tendency has been to present Indian IR in a state of perpetual “catching up”. There is a strong narrative of “absence” in relation to Indian IR, including amongst South Asian scholars now located in the United States.² Whilst key figures such as Nehru, Tagore, and Gandhi have received due attention as totemic in South Asian international thought, the discipline itself is often presented as non-existent prior to 1947. With some valiant exceptions therefore, for many, Indian IR falls back on the paradigms and theories of ‘western’ IR – constructivism, realism, and liberalism, perhaps with a marginal position for postcolonial thought.³

This history is in need of revision. Throughout the early decades of the 20th century, Indian scholars from across the

disciplines of sociology, history, and political science were vocal in their efforts to articulate post-imperial visions of international order. This was not merely a scholarly enterprise. The intellectual seedbed for ideas of internationalism grew increasingly fertile in the interwar period, motivated by the brutality of the First World War, and galvanising around anti-colonial freedom movements, including (but not limited to) those advocating ‘nationalist’ projects. Occupying a diverse political and intellectual terrain, this archive cuts across early Indian scholarly societies such as the Indian Political Science Association, the pamphlets and newsletters of diasporic communities in North America, and global networks of intellectual exchange within which South Asian scholars moved. This broad intellectual movement offers a deep, and largely forgotten history of Indian International Relations, and is rich in its insights for recovering Indian international thought, theory, and practice today.

MODERN IR THOUGHT: PIONEERS IN INDIA

One of the early leading figureheads of modern international thought in India was the Bengali sociologist and political theorist Benoy Kumar Sarkar. Publishing in numerous outlets, including leading American political science journals such as *The American Political Science Review*, *Political Studies Quarterly*, and *The Journal of Race Development* (later to become *Foreign Affairs*), Sarkar’s work merged South Asian intellectualism with the nascent disciplines of political science in America and Europe. His 1919 article in APSR, titled ‘Hindu Theory of International Relations’, weaved the

teachings of Kautilya and Kamandakiya Nitisara into a rearticulation of the doctrine of *mandala* (later appropriated by Nehru), which he described as underlying the “Hindu idea of the ‘balance of power’”. This willingness to interpret Vedic texts in terms of the canon of western international thought also came through in his description of the *sarva-bhauma*, as a Hindu variant on Kantian notions of ‘permanent [sic] peace’, and contemporary ideas of imperial federations and the League of Nations.⁴

Sarkar’s work was rich with references to the ‘western’ canon—ideas that he encountered in his time in the United States and Europe. But his scholarship was far from a simple process of emulation. Through the global intellectual encounters that his travels fostered he offered an ‘epistemic’ challenge to ‘western’ knowledge of international affairs. His 1919 essay, ‘The Futurism of Young Asia’ for instance, launched a “critique of occidental reason” and its insistent denial of the historical achievements of the east. This ‘orientalism’, as he termed it (thereby prefiguring by several decades the postcolonialism of Edward Said) systematically denigrated the east as the realm of stasis and ‘sublime’ spiritualism. Sarkar instead inverted this logic, showing how European international politics was in thrall to ‘unrealistic’ notions of nationalist pride, a particular form of idealism that papered over the ‘polyglot and multiracial’ character of Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and Poland.⁵ In *The Politics of Boundaries and Tendencies in International Relations* (1926) – perhaps his most systematic vision of international affairs – he advocated an “emancipation from the theory of nationality ... from the mystical association forced upon it by the ardour of patriots and idealists ... to

counteract the ‘romantic’ conception of nationalism as a cult.”⁶ In short, this was an effort to turn ‘western’ knowledge against itself; a form of ‘counter-knowledge’ that simultaneously recovered South Asian identity and intellectual vibrancy, whilst highlighting the hypocrisy of western international thought. Rather than representing a vehicle for metropolitan international thought diffused to the ‘colonies’, Sarkar therefore contributed a valiant intellectual critique of the new social science emerging from the ruins of the First World War in Europe. This was a key contribution in non-western international thought that has been almost completely submerged by the likes of E. H. Carr, Norman Angel, and the post-WWI creation myth of Aberystwyth University and the Woodrow Wilson Chair in Wales, designed to prevent the horrors of the Great War.

Sarkar was not alone in this project. Writing in *The Journal of Race Development* in the midst of horrors of the First World War, M. N. Chatterjee offered a premonition of future world conflict along racial lines, predicting that the failure of imperial powers to grant independence to their colonies would inevitably lead to conflict. As Cemil Aydin has shown, this attitude reflected wider anti-western intellectual movements thriving across Asia at the time.⁷ Chatterjee’s prediction was rooted in the contradictions and hypocrisies of western ‘civilisation’, which sought to ‘civilise’ the east whilst fighting a barbarous war of mutual annihilation in Europe; a war that was rooted in the exploitation of the lower classes by the upper classes, and one which made a mockery of the works of Norman Angell, Victor Hugo, John Bright, and the entire ‘western’ corpus of peace studies.

This critique of the western-centrism of early 20th-century social sciences was wide-ranging. V. S. Ram and P. N. Masaldan of Lucknow University were equally scathing of European “doctrines of peace”, based on “the immoral assumption that parts of the world will continue, for a long time, to be exploited as colonies and empires, which are to be treated as mere pawns in the game of Western diplomacy.” As they argued, “looking at the problem of peace from a purely European angle” obscured the basic truism that war and conflict resulted from imperial urges.⁸ Their colleague B.M. Sharma, of the same university, was similarly critical of the fallacy of “European peace being synonymous with the real world security”, responding in turn to leading English theorists, notably the Marxist-inspired ideas of London School of Economics lecturer Harold Laski and the democratic federalism of journalist Clarence Streit.⁹

This move to “provincialise” European notions of world order – even those proposing new ideas – often contained a more syncretic approach, where South Asian intellectual traditions were blended with those of Europe and North America. The work of B. M. Sharma and Dev Raj of Christ Church College, Cawnpore (today's Kanpur) were typical of this approach.¹⁰ Gandhian notions of moral rearmament and non-violence in international affairs were offered as a means of dissolving the continuance of colonial and imperial control though the failed ideas and institutions of inter-war great power management. Yet this sat alongside engagement with texts such as E. H. Carr’s *Twenty Year’s Crisis*, ideas of Wilsonian internationalism, and the political writings of H. G. Wells.¹¹ In short, these pioneers offered a

more decentred vision of the ‘international,’ taking us away from an origin story rooted in European visions of history and international affairs, yet nonetheless in dialogue with them.

PROJECTS

Pioneers of early 20th-century Indian international thought thus carried with them emancipatory anti-colonial visions of world order, and alongside their scholarly pursuits many held links with political organisations agitating for an end to imperial rule. For instance, the political scientist and exile Taraknath Das was able to forge a successful academic career in the United States, graduating from the School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, and lecturing at both New York University and Columbia University, whilst also playing a prominent role in the west coast-based, anti-colonial Ghadar movement. Das, who had been recruited at an early age to the Bengal revolutionary movement, the Anushilan Samiti, was a sometime collaborator of Benoy Kumar Sarkar, whose brother Dhiren Sarkar was also a key Ghadar member. His wife Mary Keatinge Morse, meanwhile, was a co-founder of the US-based National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People. Sarkar’s former student M. N. Roy (also known as Narendranath Battacharya) would go on to become a Comintern activist throughout the 1920s and an interlocutor for Lenin, spending time in exile with Mexican revolutionaries.

These political activities were not all revolutionary in nature, however, and it would also be a mistake to equate early Indian political science and international relations with projects of ‘nationalism’. Nonetheless, a

strong current of nation-building ran through their work and activities. Key here were those who contributed to the founding of international studies in India. Established in 1938, the Indian Political Science Association (IPSA) and its journal the *Indian Journal of Political Science* provided a forum for Indian scholars writing on political theory, constitutionalism, and international affairs. Its membership was drawn from universities across India, including luminaries such as B. K. Sarkar, P. N. Saprú, and A. Appadorai. The first IPSA conference, held in Benares (Varanasi) in 1939 heard papers on such topics as ‘The Nature of Sovereignty’; ‘Indians in Ceylon’; and ‘The Organisation of International Peace Through Technical Cooperation Between Nations’. Giving the keynote address, then Prime Minister of the United Provinces, Govind Ballabh Pant spoke of an emancipatory political science for a ‘moral purpose’ in the service of ‘self-realisation’ in India, a clear national project for ‘independence and Swaraj’.¹²

The IPSA gave a voice to the then young discipline of political science and international studies in India. IPSA members, Appadorai, Saprú, and Hriday Nath Kunzru would go on to found the Indian School of International Studies at Delhi University in 1955 (later moving to Jawaharlal Nehru University), as well as the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), India’s first independent international affairs think tank. With a membership that cut across the sites of academia, government, and civil society, the ICWA offered an “unofficial and non-political body ... to encourage and facilitate the scientific study of Indian and International questions”.¹³ It was within institutions such as

the ICWA that the scholarly outputs of the nascent political science movement in India found some resonances with contemporary policy debates, yet this movement from the ivory tower to the corridors of power was uneven and incomplete. Figures such as V. K. N Menon and A. Appadorai were able to straddle this divide, contributing to both the IPSA as well as *India Quarterly*, the journal of the ICWA,¹⁴ although many retained a purely scholarly focus.

Yet the thematic emphasis of *India Quarterly* is itself revealing for what it shows of the practical side of early Indian international relations. ICWA frequently enjoyed observer status at the major international conferences of the time, documented in a regular section in *India Quarterly* on ‘India and the World’. These included the Bretton Woods conferences (which led to the creation of the International Monetary Fund and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development), and Dumbarton Oaks, at which the arrangements for the UN Security Council were agreed. The vocal yet often marginalised role of Indian representatives at these conferences prior to independence reveals much on the concerns of India’s nascent diplomatic corps. These concerns included the status of regional actors such as Burma, Indonesia, and China, which were undergoing violent civil wars and decolonisation struggles. But arguably the more pressing diplomatic concern was the status of the Indian diaspora across the colonies of the declining British empire. In a regular section on ‘Indians Overseas’, Assistant Editor of *India Quarterly*, C. Kondapi, reported on diaspora issues in Burma, Malaya, Ceylon, East Africa, South Africa, Mauritius and beyond. As he noted,

“Economic competition and racial juxtaposition among the Indian, native and European communities, coupled with the political domination of a small racial minority, have resulted in numerous humiliating restrictions on their civic and political rights ranging from those on the right of cremation to those on parliamentary representation.”¹⁵ Within this vexed policy issue alone an expansive transnational community of Indians emerged, a vision of ‘Greater India’ made manifest, one which evoked the injustices of imperial rule and its racial, legal, and political hierarchies.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

As the opening quote to this article demonstrates, attempts to excavate an Indian dimension to the International Relations discipline are not new. Attention to the history of international thought and the origins of political science in India reveals a sustained effort by scholars across India to articulate a South Asian vision of international affairs at a critical moment in the history of the Indian nation. These histories reveal that the prevention of great power war did not, and does not, have a monopoly over the definition of the discipline. International thought was not the privilege of Europe and North America. Rather, it emerged in multiple locations as part of a global dialogue forged amidst the interests and experiences of empire, anti-imperial resistance, nationalist movements, and global intellectual networks. Indian scholars played an active role in this re-energised attempt to understand and document the ‘international’, presenting a stretched notion of disciplinary thought, one that incorporated emancipatory

themes of race, anti-imperialism, transnational solidarity, and a re-imagined vision of post-imperial world order.

Whilst there is understandably an interest in recovering these visions of South Asian internationalism in light of India’s contemporary role in world politics, in some ways this recovery of international thought for a national purpose misses the benefit of such a study. Regardless of their political or intellectual position, these intellectuals and activists served as vehicles in the global traffic of international thought. Their connections to scholarly networks spanning China, Japan, and East Asia as well as Europe and North America, left them well placed to act not only as envoys for South Asian visions of the future of world order, but also as translators for political developments underway in India. Yet it is important to caution against a reading of these texts that present them as uniquely ‘Indian’, or that seeks to present them as examples of a pristine ‘non-western’ social science. The value of attention to such an archive is in its capacity to reveal the alternative roots to world order that were present at this moment of international change. This was a process of global intellectual dialogue, an unequal dialogue perhaps, but one which nonetheless set the stage for post-imperial South Asian internationalism. Just as Indian International Relations was conceived in large part through opposition to empire, so ‘western’ IR was conceived against the backdrop of non-western political emancipation. A question that should be asked therefore is how the latter became so effectively subsumed by the former. This archive offers much for those who seek to understand the origins of South

Asian international relations, and it should also serve as a prompt for those who presume that IR was a discipline forged uniquely in the 'west'. This was a global dialogue, and 'global IR' would do well to heed its outputs.

Whilst many South Asian scholars of the early 20th century and the early independence period held their own implicit and often explicit opinions on the future of India in the world, their scholarship indicates perhaps something that has been lost along the way. The Nehruvian reforms of the 1950s which turned Indian international studies into a tool of national power – as a form of 'useful

knowledge'—seems to have done significant damage to the political autonomy of the discipline that preceded this period. The post-independence emphasis on relations with regional states, the adoption of Cold War style area studies, an aversion to abstract theorising or methodological debate, and perhaps above all, the discontinuation of sustained historical research into India's own international pasts, was at least part of the story of the decline of Indian IR. A huge gap can be filled when this archive of early Indian IR pioneers is recovered. The history of Indian international relations is not absent; it is simply forgotten. [ORF](#)

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ENDNOTES

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