

Deciphering the World: International Relations and History in India

SIDDHARTH MALLAVARAPU

ABSTRACT The disciplines of International Relations (IR) and History could be natural allies as both have much to gain from engaging with each other. A historically informed IR could provide a deeper understanding of the motivations of world politics, while 'international history' could offer a much needed comparative perspective to the manner in which history is approached. Focusing on what students of IR can learn about and from the study of history, this brief draws on the work of political scientist, Marc Trachtenberg, and historians, Romila Thapar and Upinder Singh, to derive lessons on how history may be studied by non-historians, strategies of textual exegesis as well as a richer appreciation of the diverse sources of Indian political thought.

INTRODUCTION

International Relations (IR) scholars and historians in India have much to gain from a shared interdisciplinary conversation. While this is not an entirely novel claim, the challenge is to get more scholars from within both these disciplinary persuasions to address questions of mutual interest. There are two dimensions this piece explores: First, this brief will ponder why a conversation between the disciplines has

not transpired so far in a systematic and institutionalised manner in the Indian milieu. Second, it examines three recent interventions—the first by a political scientist, followed by those of two historians—aimed at distilling some worthwhile propositions (by way of counsel and illustration), especially for IR scholars working in India. None of the concerns articulated here purport to exhaust

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the range of interdisciplinary possibilities within these domains. However, for heuristic purposes, it provides an initial basis for thinking about productive interdisciplinarity. While the focus is on India, there exists the possibility of similar conversations in other geographical milieus, especially within the Global South, as scholars come to acknowledge their plural intellectual inheritances and seek further traction on how the past continues to impinge on the present in subtle and not-so-subtle ways.¹

IMPEDIMENTS TO A CONVERSATION

In India, historians are rarely included in IR conversations.² Similarly, IR scholars are not frequently asked to weigh in and contribute to a discussion of the interpretation of a particular historical episode in conferences organised by historians living and working in India. A fundamental tension between the historian and the IR theorist is that while the former pays attention to granular detail and resides in a historical moment, the latter aims at a degree of generalisation.³ This is the result of the respective trajectories of socialisation within their own disciplines. History and IR incentivise distinct modes of inquiry (which, for reasons of brevity, this paper does not pursue) and rigour often entails different ways of addressing their identified problematics.⁴ It is not merely how questions are posed but also the provisional responses that are likely to differ in some instances and overlap in others. Quite evidently, it is safe to advance a claim that no one size fits all.

There are two other possible reasons why this specific interdisciplinary conversation has

been a struggle in the Indian context. First, as a discipline, History enjoys a more exalted status within the social sciences. Historians in India tend to look (if at all) at their counterparts in IR as dealing more with contemporary episodes and given to a suspect “presentism.”⁵ At its worst, IR scholars are seen as too pivoted on topicality and stylistically taking refuge in journalese. From the perspective of IR, a substantial number of historians focused on Indian history have not always shown an enthusiasm for comparative slices of “international history.”⁶ There are, of course, some honourable exceptions but, by and large, “methodological nationalism” has tended to be the norm in at least some visible chunks of historical scholarship premised entirely in India, often viewed at best in subcontinental terms.⁷ Establishing and fleshing out global interconnections has not always been greeted with enthusiasm. The “global history” movement may have changed this tendency in some fundamental ways, but it is likely to still take time for it to become the reigning *zeitgeist* and affect the terms of analytics and scale employed generally to study history.⁸ Global history, too, is not without its critics as some still believe that earlier modes of historical rendition continue to retain their original value and prove more reliable than more recent trends in historiography when it comes to decoding the past.⁹ There also appear to be interesting debates distinguishing global history from world history.¹⁰

IR, too, is culpable in not stimulating this conversation, but for a different set of reasons. First, many IR scholars in India and elsewhere tend to approach history to confirm a particular thesis of theirs.¹¹ This selective invocation of history does not add to their

sheen as IR scholars, and it makes historians suspicious of IR, a discipline often viewed as a strange amalgamation lacking in sufficient depth. Strategic commentators particularly lend themselves to the charge of ‘instrumental’ use, although ironically, they are among the most active when it comes to demonstrating lively historical interest in relation to both figures and texts from the past. Again, while they are notable exceptions to this norm, what we are grappling with here is the big picture.¹²

The questions posed in this paper function more as thought experiments: Can we alter this state of affairs? How can historians develop a more abiding curiosity about IR scholarship, and likewise, how can IR scholars begin to treat historians as indispensable allies in clarifying the influence of the past on the present, at the meso-, macro- and micro-levels of world politics? To reiterate, the paper seeks to find out what one could learn from the perspective of anybody doing IR in India, premised here on three reflections on writing history, one from outside India and two from within. One of these accounts provides a concrete illustration of historical scholarship emerging from India vis-à-vis a particular theme, namely political violence.

A useful point of departure in this process is to begin by summarising the key claims for an interested audience of how ‘international history’ is a ‘craft’ that can be learnt even by scholars in the field of IR. As Marc Trachtenberg claims in *The Craft of International History*, the avowed objective is not to nudge all IR scholars to reinvent themselves as historians but, more crucially, to develop a ‘sense’ for history that could potentially become an integral facet of the

critical armature of any IR scholar inclined to go down this path.¹³ Other pieces of counsel are also available from the broader corpus of scholarship in this domain. Historian Edward Hallet Carr is, for most IR scholars, a classical realist.¹⁴ Hans Morgenthau, the other iconic classical realist, also took a strong interest in history.¹⁵ In more recent years, historian Paul Schroeder carefully demonstrated how ‘balance of power’ itself merited being viewed as a ‘historical variable’ and not as a static, unchanging concept or practice.¹⁶ These illustrations can be multiplied and reveal the many ways in which sound historical scholarship can provide a useful corrective to mainstream IR scholarship.

CAUTIONARY COUNSEL FOR IR SCHOLARS EMBARKING ON HISTORICAL PROJECTS

There is a great deal of wisdom in Marc Trachtenberg’s claim towards the end of his book, *The Craft of International History*, where he suggests, “History is a craft, and a craft is something you can learn.”¹⁷ He offers excellent pragmatic advice to any student of IR keen to “do historical work.”¹⁸ This paper distils some pieces of counsel from the book for any IR student keen to take a closer look at historical material in India for their own research.

Recounting the scholarship of Sheldon Wollin, Trachtenberg observes, “...that at the heart of every great work of history lies a certain political theory, a certain conception of how politics works.”¹⁹ To begin with, alertness to this dimension provides an opening to approach a work of serious historical scholarship. Further, it is important to see if the historian has come clean on their ‘biases’.²⁰

It provides a useful tool of navigation to the interested reader. The essence is to acknowledge that “making the past intelligible” is at “the heart of the historical enterprise.”²¹ In terms of historical interpretation, one “...must be careful not to read more structure into historical reality that is actually there.”²² Crucial is also the ability to “develop a sense for an ‘architecture’ of the historical problem” at hand.²³

Theory is omnipresent to the extent that one must “understand the *logic* that underlies the course of events.”²⁴ It can be tested vis-à-vis historical realities. In other words, “[t]he basic technique is take some major theoretical claim, bring it down to earth by thinking about what it would mean in specific historical contexts, and then study those historical episodes with those basic conceptual issues in mind.”²⁵ Historical evidence can be built assiduously, detail by detail. Thus “[e]very brushstroke makes a difference and gradually a larger picture emerges.”²⁶

Finally, archival work needs to be demystified. IR scholars must be willing to examine archives with an open mind and follow the general principles of careful citation. As Trachtenberg argues, “[n]o arcane set of skills is needed” for this kind of work.²⁷ The general rigour that greets tracking historical sources also informs archival work, and this too can be systematically acquired.

STRATEGIES OF READING: ROMILA THAPAR'S COUNSEL

In a clear statement of her animating motivations in pursuing history, Romila Thapar suggests (in a book-length interview

with Ramin Jehanbegloo and Neeladri Bhattacharya) that there have been some guiding questions that she has grappled with throughout her career.²⁸ These include, “[w]hat kind of society are we going to build for ourselves, and who are we?” and, not unconnected, “[w]hat is our identity?”²⁹ She argues that a preliminary challenge for Indian historians of her generation was to overcome a limited “colonial view of history that did not have the answers.”³⁰ The exemplars who led them away from this limited view of history were K.M. Pannikar, A.L. Basham and D.D. Kosambi. There were several other original voices, including H.C. Raychaudhuri, U.N. Ghoshal, K.A. Nilkanta Shastri, R.C. Majumdar and D.C. Sircar.³¹

Departing from a “golden age” understanding of ancient Indian history, Thapar argues that when we regard “normative texts as descriptions of reality,” it generates misleading accounts of what genuinely transpired at a particular historical moment.³² Thus, her first piece of counsel would be to avoid conflating normative descriptions with the real.

Next, there is much that robust social science can contribute to sound historiography. Particularly relevant questions would include the following:

“...what were the resources used by the society under study; who had control over them; and who actually laboured to produce what was required from these resources? How was the relationship between these two groups defined? In what ways did the social norms help to

create, continue, and contribute to, or alternately obstruct, the pattern of living at varying levels of the society? Were there belief systems that arose from these patterns; were they distinct, and sometimes perhaps carrying over the beliefs of earlier patterns and reformulating them? ...The important lesson here is that none of these questions could be treated as chronos-free and without a location. They have to be rooted in space and time.”³³

Further, historians must be wary of exaggerating their accounts. As Thapar states unequivocally, “[t]he historian would have to cut out the flab of fantasy no matter how attractive and comforting it may be.”³⁴ Re-emphasising the significance of anchoring history, she argues, “[a] historical fact could refer to an event in the past. It must read and put into a context. Readings may differ in terms of explaining what an event means. The ‘why’ and ‘how’ also has to be considered in a discussion of historical fact and this makes it complicated.”³⁵ IR scholars must also recognise that “no text can be taken at face value by the historian, not because texts are dishonest or any such thing, but because texts have a context and a purpose, and knowing the context is crucial to understanding what the text purports to be saying.”³⁶ It is important to acknowledge that “the reading of evidence in a new way can sometimes be revelatory.”³⁷

It might indeed be worthwhile probing when “...a narrative is repeatedly retold in different forms with some embellishments right through the centuries, then whose are the many voices that they are recreating that

narrative and why?”³⁸ Thus, “...history cannot be the history from a single voice. They are other voices, and they have to be heard.”³⁹ With regard to sources, Thapar is of the view that “[n]ew questions and sensitivity to new issues allow us to read the same source in new ways.”⁴⁰ The final point of relevance here relates to the ‘historical consciousness’ of different societies. Thapar argues, “[w]e can say that various cultures, such as the Indian, saw as their history varied over time and varied in perspective in accordance with their world view. They were not concerned with writing a history of the past as we would do now, but with representing the past as they saw it and giving it priorities that they felt were legitimate. In trying to understand this we today have to explain why they saw the past as they did and why they wrote about it in diverse genres. Why did this representation change in accordance with the nature of the society and its ideological orientation?”⁴¹ Most significantly, Thapar suggests that it is not merely “...that evidence alone matters when making a historical generalization. The questions that are asked of the evidence and the manner in which it is used in reconstructing the past have equal importance.”⁴²

A RICH ILLUSTRATION: INDIAN THINKING ON POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Upinder Singh’s *Political Violence in Ancient India* is one recent book by a historian that all scholars of International Relations (IR) in India must read.⁴³ Singh musters a wide range of texts and historical evidence to suggest that thinking about violence has been an integral part of Indian reflection. While violence is

frequently discussed in relation to non-violence, Singh corrects the misperception that India has had an untrammelled history of non-violence both as an idea and as practice. On the contrary, she argues that the emphasis on *longue durée* (to borrow a Braudelian phrase) non-violence was a conscious national construct espoused by the first generation of postcolonial statesmen.⁴⁴ It had a hagiographic and reductionist dimension in the Indian perception of self and was part of the myth-making that all states embark on at the inception of their national projects.⁴⁵

From the perspective of IR, there is much to be gleaned from Singh's rich narrative. It makes an initial gesture in its preface to "...the need for histories of India that looked beyond India."⁴⁶ It places an emphasis on a "comparative historical framework in order to build larger arguments."⁴⁷ Elsewhere in the text, Singh suggests that conceptions of ancient Indian violence can be viewed in relation to "... other ancient cultures such as those of Persia, China, and Greece."⁴⁸ Most significantly, her work mines "...a rich repository of political ideas," drawing several interesting comparisons even within this inherited intellectual legacy.⁴⁹ A good illustration is the attempt to compare Kamandaka with Kautilya via some key texts.⁵⁰

On a more didactic note, Singh has an interesting strategy for approaching Indian texts. She reminds us that "[m]any ancient Indian texts are polysemic...".⁵¹ This implies "...multiple ideas, sometimes contradictory ones, jostle with each other within a single text."⁵² Singh also makes a point that many scholars working on non-Eurocentric

intellectual traditions would appreciate. She has a concrete piece of counsel when she exhorts her readers to look "...for new ways of understanding issues [that] involves rejecting the privileging of the modern and the western in histories of ideas and institutions, and an attentiveness towards their premodern, non-western trajectories."⁵³ Singh rejects the simple binary of "statist" and "non-statist." She argues that her quest goes beyond this binary. It "...means recognizing the existence of 'autonomous spaces' within state structures."⁵⁴ She acknowledges the salience of political history and argues, "...political thought cannot be understood unless it is anchored to its historical context."⁵⁵ This is a point that many in IR are aware of but often ignore, much to their own detriment.

Singh raises another pertinent issue for students of IR, regarding the use of concepts and terminology that sometimes emerge from distinct milieus but lend themselves somewhat simplistically to unimaginative grafting. She exemplifies this using the notion of "just war." She suggests that there are two sides to the argument, some belying the existence of any such "equivalence," while others suggesting that there is a strong "just war" tradition outside the Judeo-Christian traditions. Former Vice-President of the International Court of Justice, Christopher Gregory Weeramantry, was a strong advocate of the latter position. In his long "Dissenting Opinion" to the ICJ Advisory Opinion on the legality of the threat or use of nuclear weapons rendered in July 1996, Weeramantry demonstrates the 'multicultural' bases of human rights as well as the widespread existence of just war traditions in Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and other

faiths, going beyond the Judeo-Christian tradition.⁵⁶ Singh argues: “[W]hile comparative analyses can provide interesting insights into cross-cultural perspectives, situating the ethics and approaches towards war in premodern Asian cultures using vocabularies and frameworks drawn from late medieval or early modern Europe can actually hamper the investigation.”⁵⁷

Singh’s book has interesting lessons for those theoretically interested in IR. One aspect of studying ancient Indian political traditions is an inevitable encounter with the concept and practice of “kingship.”⁵⁸ It is through kingship that political obligations, compliance and non-compliance are best understood. However, Singh resists the temptation to suggest that there is a single quintessentially “Indian theory of kingship.”⁵⁹ On the contrary, she suggests that “[...]here are several ideas that emerged from an intense dialogue across intellectual and religious traditions and as responses to the realities and challenges of political praxis, framed within demands and conventions of different genres. But these generated a variety of models, including hybrid ones, all of which ultimately upheld the need for the king to use necessary force to maintain and strengthen his position.”⁶⁰

There is an interesting segment in the book subtitled “[T]he wider travels of Indic Political Ideas.”⁶¹ Here, Singh documents several ideas and their circulation across the world. She argues, “...the travel of ideas were part of multiple, intersecting and interacting cultural spheres, and they often resulted in surprising metamorphoses.”⁶² In this regard, the impact

of Indian ideas has resonated in “Southeast Asian legal traditions,” “Burmese legal texts” as well as the “Javanese-Balinese law code.”⁶³ One must return to Singh’s book to discern which ideas, texts and figures from India found their way in these subsequent legal formulations.

Ultimately, she raises a provocative question that should bother all Indians. Singh asks, “[d]oes India possess the ability to recognize and confront the realities of her violent past and present, and to carry forward the debate on political violence with which her intellectuals initiated it over two thousand years ago?”⁶⁴

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

Two provisional responses reveal something about IR theorists’ diffidence or confidence with regard to Indian intellectual inheritances. The first is the claim that revisiting the past exposes us, warts and all. Therefore, it is better eschewed. The second response is the suggestion that revisiting the past reveals not merely weaknesses but also strengths. It is a way of confidently surging forward, and students of IR must embrace it while acknowledging simultaneously both its virtues and its frailties. The first stance may reveal intellectual diffidence while the second reveals confidence. The choice is for every scholar of history or IR to make judiciously. What they certainly must avoid is recourse to the idea of a “great civilisation” merely to bail themselves out rhetorically from all current glaring inadequacies. It is necessary to recover the celebration of a genuine plurality of peoples, ideas and legacies within Indian political

thought and intellectual history. This might be a welcome first step to decolonising IR from within the Indian milieu and a good way of then proceeding to participate in a larger

global conversation both within and between disciplines. Theory from the Global South cannot be far behind in any such collective scholarly endeavour. [ORF](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Siddharth Mallavarapu is Professor, Department of International Relations and Governance Studies at Shiv Nadar University. He thanks Kanti Bajpai for his insightful comments on an earlier iteration of this piece and Vinia Datinguino Mukherjee for her editorial finesse.

ENDNOTES

1. In the Indian context, Kanti Bajpai makes an explicit case for historically pursuing “the 'international society' of the subcontinent...”. See Bajpai “International Relations in India: Bringing Theory Back Home” in a co-edited book by the same title by Bajpai and Siddharth Mallavarapu (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan first impression, 2009), 17–38, esp. 32. See also Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Amitav Acharya, “International Relations Theory and the 'Rise of Asia',” in Saadia M. Pekkanen, John Ravenhill and Rosemary Foot, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the International Relations of Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp.120-137. Another vocal advocate of the view that Indian IR scholars must take history far more seriously is C. Raja Mohan. He was emphatic about this in his remarks as a discussant at the release of the *Oxford Handbook on India's National Security* at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library on 26 April 2018.
2. A recent conference in Bangkok, held from 28–31 January 2018 on “Classical Indian and Chinese World Views on Global Order: A Comparison,” organised by the Berggruen Institute and the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies bucked the general trend and brought Indian IR scholars and historians together, as well as their Chinese counterparts.
3. For a rich account of the tensions and possibilities of interdisciplinary synthesis, see Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, eds., *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Study of International Relations* (Massachusetts: Harvard University, 2001). See also especially, chapter 2 titled “Diplomatic History and International Relations Theory,” in *The Craft of International History*, ed. Marc Trachtenberg (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006).
4. For a fine illustration of accents in the American variant, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
5. On “presentism,” see Brian Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).
6. For the term “international history,” see Marc Trachtenberg, ed., *The Craft of International History*.
7. For the term “methodological nationalism,” see Ulrich Beck, “The Cosmopolitan Condition: Why Methodological Nationalism Fails,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 24, no. 7–8: 286–290.
8. Sven Beckert and Dominic Sachsenmaier, eds., *Global History, Globally: Research and Practice around the World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).
9. Sven Beckert and Dominic Sachsenmaier's book listed in endnote 8 has an entire section titled “Problems in the Practice of Global History” with contributions from David Simo, Jye-Hyun-Lim, Marnie Hughes-Warrington and Shigeru Akita.

10. Bruce Mazlish, "Comparing Global History to World History," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 28, no. 3 (Winter 1998): 385–395.
11. Paul Schroeder, "History and International Relations Theory: Not Use or Abuse, but Fit or Misfit," *International Security* 22, no.1, (Summer 1997): 64–74. See also Schroeder, "Historical Reality versus Neo-realist Theory," *International Security* 19, no.1 (Summer 1994): 108–148.
12. Exceptions to the general trend include Kanti Bajpai, Saira Basit, V. Krishnappa eds., *India's Grand Strategy: History, Theory, Cases* (Delhi: Routledge, 2014). See also, Srinath Raghavan, *India's War: World War II and the Making of Modern South Asia 1939-1945* (Delhi: Penguin Random House India, 2017); Rudra Chaudhuri, *Forged in Crisis: India and the United States Since 1947* (Delhi: Harper Collins, 2014); Swapna Kona Nayadu, *When the Elephant Swallowed the Hedgehog: The Prague Spring and Indo-Soviet Relations, 1968*. Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, Working Paper, #83; Jayashree Vivekanandan, *Interrogating International Relations: India's Strategic Practice and the Return of History* (Delhi: Routledge, 2011).
13. Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History*, 182.
14. Edward Hallet Carr, *What is History?* (Toronto: Random House, 1961). See also, Carr's, *The Twenty Years Crisis, 1919–1939* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, Reissue 2016).
15. Michael Williams, ed., *Realism Reconsidered: The Legacy of Hans Morgenthau* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
16. Paul Schroeder, "The Nineteenth Century System: Balance of Power or Political Equilibrium?" in *Systems, Stability, and Statecraft: Essays on the International History of Modern Europe*, D. Wetzel, R. Jervis, J.S. Levy, eds., (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2004), 223–242. See also, Schroeder, "Historical Reality versus Neo-realist Theory," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (Summer 1994): 108–148 and Schroeder, "Quantitative Studies in the Balance of Power: An Historian's Reaction," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 21, no. 1 (1 March 1977): 3–22.
17. Trachtenberg, op. cit., 197.
18. Trachtenberg, op. cit., vii.
19. Trachtenberg, op. cit., vii.
20. Trachtenberg, op. cit., 11.
21. Trachtenberg, op. cit., 23.
22. Trachtenberg, op. cit., 29.
23. Trachtenberg, op. cit., 32.
24. Trachtenberg, op. cit., 33.
25. Trachtenberg, op. cit., 45.

26. Trachtenberg, op. cit., 131.
27. Trachtenberg, op. cit., 166.
28. Romila Thapar in conversation with Ramin Jahanbegloo with the participation of Neeladri Bhattacharya, *Talking History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017).
29. Ibid., 26.
30. Ibid., 49.
31. Ibid., 47–56.
32. Ibid., 70.
33. Ibid., 75–76.
34. Ibid., 76.
35. Ibid., 79.
36. Ibid., 83.
37. Ibid., 84.
38. Ibid., 89–90.
39. Ibid., 90.
40. Ibid., 91.
41. Ibid., 104.
42. Ibid., 119–120.
43. Upinder Singh, *Political Violence in Ancient India* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, Second Printing, 2017).
44. Ibid., 481–482.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid., x.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid., 10.
49. Ibid., ix.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., 9.

52. Ibid.
53. Ibid., 11.
54. Ibid., 13.
55. Ibid., 15.
56. *ILM* 809 (1996), Dissenting Opinion of Judge Christopher Gregory Weeramantry, pp. 879-924. For a more detailed account, see 'The Dissent of Judge Weeramantry' in my earlier book titled *Banning the Bomb: The Politics of Norm Creation* (New Delhi: Pearson Longman, 2007), pp.106-139.
57. Ibid., 365.
58. Ibid., 11.
59. Ibid., 463.
60. Ibid..
61. Ibid., 473–480.
62. Ibid., 473.
63. Ibid., 473–474.
64. Ibid., 482.



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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area, New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-43520020, 30220020. Fax : +91-11-43520003, 23210773.
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org