

Realism in the Study of International Relations in India

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ABSTRACT Attempts to arrive at a non-Western understanding of International Relations have often been made to counter the “hegemonising” influence of realism in the Indian milieu. This brief examines realist scholarship in India in recent years to understand what variants of realism have been given prominence. It also notes the absence of scholarship of the neoclassical realist variant and how this gap leads critics to arrive at an incomplete understanding of what realism could explain. The brief posits that for a proper appreciation of the limitations and possibilities that realism offers to understanding India's engagement with the wider world, the full spectrum of realist thinking needs to be engaged. Realist scholarship emerging from India has yet to adequately reflect the full spectrum, leading critics to identify realism essentially with neorealism.

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INTRODUCTION

International Relations (IR) scholarship in India is notable for its quest to question and challenge the dominance of Western theories. This has led to attempts to draw the attention towards the pitfalls of relying on Western approaches to understand IR. This, in fact, has been a recurrent theme in the work of many scholars. For example, with specific reference to the Indian diplomat-turned-scholar, Jayantanuja Bandopadhyaya's thinking on IR, Ian Hall notes

that for him, “Anglo-American IR was also deeply flawed in so far as it was the 'conscious or subconscious rationalization of the role played by the West, particularly the USA' in the modern world. Its preoccupation with the means by which states acquire and use power – especially military power – reflected the fact that IR was really just a 'functional ideology for the perpetuation of the dominance of the North over the South.’”¹

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While some view the dominance of the West (understood essentially as Anglo-American) within the discipline as problematic for arriving at a nuanced and rich understanding of the processes underpinning international relations, others regard IR as being an intrinsically Anglo-American discipline in itself. In his much cited article, “An American Social Science: International Relations,” Stanley Hoffman provides an account as to why modern IR has been so closely associated with the US.² He points to a host of reasons – from the role of individuals like Hans J. Morgenthau, to the desire of the US to move past its isolationist strand in its foreign policy, to the role of foundations, and the linkage between academia and policymaking that allowed the US to steal a march over others when it came to providing IR its basic contours.

IR IN INDIA: CHALLENGING THE “REALIST” APPROACH

For those troubled by the sway that Anglo-American thinking has had on IR in relation to India, the “realist” approach has been viewed as being especially problematic. It has been observed that realism, with its focus on the state, has led to the “...disciplinary inclination to seek patronage from the dominant actor in the discipline.”³ While some argue that the end of the Cold War led to a profound setback to realism's standing within the discipline, others argue the opposite. It has been noted that the end of the Cold War “...did not...result in an abdication of realism's pre-eminent status in the field” and that realism “still finds a number of adherents and is accepted particularly in policy circles as persuasive in evaluating outcomes.” While Morgenthau continues to inform IR

thinking, “...the more dominant contemporary voice within this lineage, [is] that of Kenneth Waltz.”⁴ In fact, it is believed that realism has been so pronounced in shaping scholarship in the context of India and also South Asia, that some argue that the region has been viewed largely through the concepts employed by neorealists. This has led to the eclipsing of the “nuances of the region in IR scholarship.”⁵ Further, it has been observed that “the theoretical poverty of IR in the region is not only due to the geopolitical conditioning of the discipline, but also overlapping surrender to the predominant methodological (precisely epistemological) surrender to (*neo*)realism [emphasis original], positivism - and to top it all scientism.”⁶ The fact that realism has played a significant role in shaping IR thinking in India is attested by the observations of two well-regarded scholars, A.P. Rana and K. P. Misra. According to them, Indian writing on IR has a “submerged theoretical base,” an important element of which is the “intensive but inchoate institutionalisation of the tenets of state-centric realism, in several of its manifold forms.”⁷ Shibashis Chatterjee further underlines the problems associated with realism when he comments: “The realist case...conceives itself in universal terms, and therefore engenders a form of subjectivity where history and geography are both irrelevant and inconsequential.”⁸ In his analysis of the essential postulates of realism, Chatterjee analyses the intramural debates within structural realism such as offensive versus defensive realism, and balancing versus band-wagoning. In doing so, he engages with the works of Kenneth Waltz, Stephen Walt, and John Mearsheimer.

If realism, indeed, has had an impact on the minds of many a scholar of IR with regard to

India, it is worth assessing the nature of recent scholarship that is being produced as a result. What kind of realist scholarship is being produced and what does that tell us about the quest to challenge the dominance of realism, and identify (as well as generate) more indigenous ways of thinking about IR in India? While this brief does not attempt a comprehensive analysis, some tentative observations could be made on the basis of an initial probe. Four peer-reviewed journals on international relations published in India – *India Quarterly*, *International Studies*, *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations*, and *South Asian Survey* – have been examined for articles that have referred to realism or some realist formulation in their titles.⁹ The timeline is a decade starting from 2008. A perusal of the articles makes it clear that realism has been invoked in three broad ways. The first is in relation to observations that, with the end of the Cold War, realism is passé. With non-state actors becoming ever-more impactful, and the role of ideational factors assuming importance, the state-centric and materialist orientation of neorealism is incapable of explaining present-day developments and that constructivism has upended neorealism. The articles push back against the argument that with the increased salience and impact of globalisation, nation-states have lost their grip on sovereignty, especially keeping in mind the security domain. These articles adopt an adversarial posture in relation to scholarship that suggest the eclipsing of realism, essentially in its neorealist avatar, either through real-world developments or by the emergence of theoretical approaches that capture the essence of contemporary IR better.¹⁰

The second manner in which realism has been invoked is in its application to India's

foreign policy and the country's international relations in general. Such articles have used the neorealist lens to explain how India and its attributes have shaped the foreign policies of its neighbours such as Bangladesh¹¹ and Ceylon.¹² Specific theories such as Walt's on "balance of threat", for example, have been used in such an endeavour. The prism of capabilities and the balance of power have also been used to understand the development of relations between Japan and India.¹³ Neorealism has also been used to analyse India's relations with the great powers.¹⁴ Thus, in this category of articles, neorealism has been "applied" to empirical cases.

The third way in which realism has been invoked in IR scholarship is in terms of reflecting on its theoretical foundation and also proposing theoretical modifications. While one scholar has critically analysed Thomas Hobbes' thinking to argue that a close reading of his work leads one to conclude that his formulation of anarchy actually is suggestive of greater cooperation (and not conflict),¹⁵ another scholar calls for a "refined" neoclassical realist approach which, by "...focusing on the relationship between degrees of interdependence and the role of structure, identifies the scope for optimal policy choice in different settings."¹⁶ To that end, these articles peer within realist formulations and engage with its basic postulates.

A survey of books or book chapters written by some prominent realists in India over the years reveals that they have used the classical and neorealist lenses to make sense of India's engagements. One prominent line of inquiry has been the attempt to show that relative capabilities matter and that being materially more capable than its neighbours, India's attempt to establish its sway in the region is

along expected lines. C. Raja Mohan has been a prominent voice in this regard and his work demonstrates an engagement with history.¹⁷ Others have challenged the assertion that morality has been a central pillar in independent India's foreign policy. Bharat Karnad has claimed that M.K. Gandhi's assertion of non-violence was strategic in nature and that, "In his more candid moments, he revealed his true self as ultimately a run-of-the-mill realist."¹⁸ In this regard, the term "moralpolitik" has been used to signify India's "aggressive use of morality to advance national interest."¹⁹ K. Subrahmanyam takes this line of reasoning further when he argues that India's non-alignment policy was not based on morality. Instead, it was based on national interest calculations.²⁰ It becomes apparent that for some, the realist lens has been used to question the moral foundations of Indian foreign policy. For others, the focus has been on analysing the effects of Indian material capabilities either in terms of seeking to gain ascendancy in the region or employing the balance of power logic in its dealings with regional and extra-regional powers. The overall picture that is created is one of India not being an "outlier" as regards state behaviour.

"NEOCLASSICAL REALISM" AND A STATE'S EXERCISE OF CHOICE

Based on this brief review of various journals and books, it appears that within the broader realist approach, neorealism is indeed a popular lens in understanding the dynamics associated with India's relations with other countries. However, classical realism also features in the scholarship especially when discussing the role of morality in India's foreign policy. It is thus a bit surprising when the attention seems to be

towards neorealism. Rajesh M. Basrur writes in his article in the *South Asian Survey*, "the very sparseness and tightness of Waltz's theory, which relegates everything but structure (viewed as anarchy and power distribution among states) to the realm of process and therefore beyond the pale of scientific theorising, leaves very little scope for explaining the vast majority of events that occur in international politics."²¹ Could it be that the narrow scope of neorealism and its quest for parsimony has drawn to it maximum attention within the larger realist scholarship in India and has led others to view it as an inadequate lens that is ahistorical, reduces the salience of context, denies actors their agency, and refuses to engage with some of the foundational elements of international relations like morality? What strikes the observer is that the discussion between scholars regarding the merits or demerits of applying realism to the study of IR in the Indian context is a rather narrow one. Realism seems to equal neorealism and critics of realism are left engaging essentially with neorealism. However, realism is not a monolithic entity.²² It has variants such as classical realism, neorealism, and neoclassical realism. To imply that neorealism is no different from classical or neoclassical realism would be an exercise in scholarly indifference.

It needs to be appreciated that, aware of the limitations of neorealism as well as classical realism, in the 1990s realists reworked certain aspects of their theoretical framework. They also broadened its ambit to adapt to new dynamics and challenges posed to realism. This "adaptive" realism has been termed as "neoclassical realism."²³ As Basrur points out, "Without abandoning its now strong social science grounding, and while accepting the significance

of structure in establishing systemic constraints, an adaptive realism now styled as 'neoclassical' has begun to assert the critical role of policy selection in determining international outcomes...Its central position is that while structure sets limits on what states can do, they can respond in diverse ways through the exercise of choice. These may be determined by the rational choices of decision makers, their perceptions and personal proclivities, domestic politics and so on."²⁴ In fact, a perusal of the literature produced by neoclassical realists shows that an impressive range of issues have been engaged by them. A notable feature has been their ability to engage with dynamics associated with society, economy, and politics at the domestic level and arrive at insights related to foreign policy. Whether it is Fareed Zakaria's "state-centred realism,"²⁵ or Jeffrey W. Taliaferro's formulation of the "resource extractive state",²⁶ their scholarship opens the black box that is the state and assesses the complex relationship that exists between the state and society and what it means for foreign policy.

The role of domestic interest groups and their role in the conduct of foreign policy has also been examined by scholars of neoclassical realism.²⁷ In an interesting case study of Iran, Thomas Juneau includes factors such as status, regime identity, and factional politics to explain the country's "suboptimal" performance on foreign policy in the first decade of the 21st century.²⁸ Others have sought to grapple with difficult concepts such as perception when it comes to identifying threats which in turn shapes a state's balancing strategy vis-à-vis others.²⁹ It is notable that in the article, "After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of US Decline," Randall

Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu, though moving away from a strict neoclassical realist schema, use James Scott's insights pertaining to resistance by subordinate groups under conditions of hegemony, to understand the de-legitimisation of US hegemony by China.³⁰

The brief outline of realist scholarship points out that engaging with domestic dynamics of states is very much part of the realist agenda in its neoclassical realist avatar. In fact, the rich and fascinating insights provided by Comparative Politics has found its way into this scholarship as is evident by the engagement of the ideas of scholars such as Theda Skocpol and James Scott by realists like Zakaria and Schweller. Concepts like "prestige", "status", and "legitimacy"—which used to find utterance in the works of classical realists, only to be side-lined by neorealists—have found their way into recent realist scholarship. Of course, this does not mean that realists have abandoned the state as one of the central pillars of their inquiry. However, the focus on the state has been enriched through a greater scrutiny of intra-state dynamics. Given that society and institutions – often engaged by neoclassical realists in their scholarship—are products of history and context, one can see that accusations of being "ahistorical" cannot stick as easily to neoclassical realism as it can to neorealism. Furthermore, critics point out that given the reduced salience of the state owing to globalisation, the focus of realists on the state is of limited utility. Such a charge may also be levelled at neoclassical realism. However, scholars such as Rajen Harshe who have studied the political economy of India and the non-West point out that "...despite diverse existential challenges, the nation state has proved remarkably resilient. It continues to survive as


the primary *de jure* anchor/actor that provides major communication channels to work out projects of cooperation/coalitions, including alliances and treaties. Hence, it is the most reliable entity towards management and even resolution of issues of global concerns as also intra- and inter-state conflicts in contemporary world politics.”³¹ Indeed, the state remains relevant amidst the interplay of new forces and dynamics. As such, neoclassical realism—with its commitment to the state yet with the ability to bring within its analytical ambit various domestic factors—may be a relevant lens to understand India's engagement with the world.

Calls for an Indian approach to IR are at times made as a reaction to the dominance that Anglo-American theories, especially realism, has had on IR scholarship. While a course correction and a more balanced theoretical repertoire is absolutely necessary, one needs to take cognizance of the fact that a great deal of self-conscious realist scholarship in Indian journals is of the neorealist variant, and to some extent, classical realist, too. It is interesting to note that articles falling within the rubric of neoclassical realism are few and far between. By minimally engaging with classical realism, scholars with interest in realism are foregoing the chance to open the door for history to better inform their understanding of events. As Siddharth Mallavarapu notes, Morgenthau, the “iconic classical realist” took history seriously in his scholarship.³² Similarly, one is struck by the absence of neoclassical realist scholarship. Furthermore, critics of realism, too, appear focused a lot on neorealism. In fact, the application of neoclassical realist theory could illuminate interesting aspects of IR related to India and its interactions regionally and globally. As Amitav Acharya notes, “New variants of

realism—subaltern realism, neo-classical realism, defensive realism—have rendered realism more relevant to the *non-Western world* [emphasis original]. Increasing trends towards economic interdependence, multilateral institutions and democratisation—pathways to order that liberalism identifies and prescribes—make that theory potentially more applicable in the *non-Western world* [emphasis given].”³³ Given that realism has been seen as unsuitable to capture many aspects of IR related to India, why have scholars interested in realism not closely examined neoclassical realism's suitability to India and its engagement with the wider world? What prevents scholars from incorporating factors and variables peculiar to the country and seeing if these can be harmonised within a neoclassical realist framework? This does not mean that scholars have to uncritically “apply” neoclassical realism to the local context. Rather, scholars can reformulate important aspects of neoclassical realist thinking so as to speak to local dynamics. The innovative and relevant “Subaltern Realism” developed by Mohammed Ayoob, for instance, demonstrates that it is possible to combine the strengths of realism with factors peculiar to the non-Western world. In fact, he locates subaltern realism within the realist tradition.³⁴ Likewise, critics could cast their gaze towards neoclassical realism and judge it on its own merits, and perhaps identify elements within it that could allow them to enter into fruitful dialogue.

It should be recognised that there are variations in realist thinking and that they be judged accordingly. Neorealism is a prominent member of the realist approach but not the only one. For sound theoretical insights to emerge, it is essential that the process be collaborative and not always adversarial. The need to engage with

realist thinking is not without merits as it does shine the light on some salient dimensions of IR. For those truly interested in IR, the focus ought to be on finding richer insights. That can only

happen by means of meaningful dialogues among the various approaches. T.V. Paul is absolutely correct when he noted, “good theories cannot develop in isolation from each other.” 

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ENDNOTES

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