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IR in India- Causes of Concern, Reasons to Celebrate and the Question of the Future

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Abstract:

While India is rapidly integrating with the global economic and political order, is recognized as an 'emerging' power and is vying for a leadership role at the regional and global level, the state of the discipline of IR in India remains in ruins. Given the historically close nexus between power and the production of IR knowledge, why has IR scholarship in India not received international recognition? In this paper I look at India's past to explain its present so that informed choices can be made in the future.

1. Introduction

The discipline of International Relations (IR) has been characterized as West-centric by both western and non-western scholars (Amitav Acharya, 2007)(Acharya, 2011; Arlene B. Tickner, 2009; Siddharth Mallavarapu, 2012). Such a realization is a welcome development and should be recognized as an opportunity to correct the historical wrongs that have bedeviled the discipline since its inception. But the question of how to make the necessary corrections is fraught with difficulties. While some argue for the refinement and expansion of existing theories, others make the case for fresh theories informed by specific experiences. How we chart out the future depends to a large extent on what we recognize as the lacunae in the existing literature. What do we mean by making IR more inclusive? Do we want mainstream theories to adapt themselves to different contexts? Or do we require entirely new alternatives that are more 'indigenous'? What kind of interventions is possible for the non-West? Can these alternatives escape becoming mere 'local variations' of western theories? Do we want national or regional schools of IR? These questions are far from settled and every possible path has potential pitfalls.

In the more recent past we have witnessed adaptations of mainstream strands of IR theories (eg Ayoob's Subaltern Realism), as well as the flourishing of alternatives in the form of Constructivism, Feminism, Neo-Marxism, Post-Colonialism, Post-Structuralism and other variants of critical theory. Their sensitivity towards culture and the question of difference make them particularly suitable for Third World context. As Tickner and Waever point out, 'On the one hand, the discipline has been exposed to various forms of interrogation, including post-positivist critique, sociology of science-based explanations, and historiographic questioning of its self-narration. On the other hand, the study of various 'third world' contexts has led to claims that key IR concepts, including the state, self-help, power, and security, do not 'fit' third world realities and may not be as relevant as others for thinking about the specific problems of such parts of the world'(Arlene B. Tickner, 2009). It is an exciting time for the discipline of IR.

India is going through an equally exciting phase. Owing to its perceived 'emergence' at the world stage, India has generated a lot of interest in terms of its take on various issues of global concern. India herself is vying for a larger global and regional role of leadership. Its integration into the global economic and political order, especially since the 1990s, has compelled it to think beyond mundane concerns of a typical state. Questions of order, justice, and power are as relevant for India as for other 'major states' of the international system. Given the 'historically close nexus between power and the production of IR knowledge' the rise of India's stature at the global stage has raised expectations (both within and without) of Indian contributions to the discipline of IR(Acharya, 2011). One would assume that such a scenario would create a conducive environment for development of IR scholarship in India (as has been the case with China). But there exists a 'fundamental paradox'. As Paul points out, 'While India is searching for a major power status in the international system, the study of IR remains somewhat rudimentary and the professions of IR scholarship is one of the least valued enterprises in Indian society'(Paul, 2009). There exists a severe discrepancy between India's global ambitions and achievements viz-a-viz the state of IR discipline in India.

The purpose of my paper is to look at India's past to explain its present so that informed choices can be made in the future. In the first section, I look at the development of the discipline in India since its independence in 1947. The second section deals with the present and identifies strengths and weaknesses of the discipline in India. In the last section I make an attempt to identify areas where future research can focus to make valuable additions to the discipline of IR. Though I concede that the ways in which Indian International Relations can enrich the discipline of IR is neither singular nor identical, some areas for future research can be identified.

Since my concern is with 'Indian' 'contributions' (or lack thereof) to the study of IR, it is important to clarify what that would constitute. 'Indian' scholars are those 'living and working in the field of international relations in India'¹(Siddharth Mallavarapu, 2012). As far as the question of 'contributions' is concerned, scholars have used similar criteria while taking stock of the discipline in India. Bajpai describes good work as 'good published writings' and this is the criteria I will follow as well (Bajpai, 2009).

2. Past

International Relations in India had an early start. India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's 'sense of global history and his vision for India' led to a favorable environment that was conducive to an early institutionalization of the discipline (Alagappa, 2009). The Indian Council for World Affairs was established in 1943, which was followed by the Indian School of International Studies² in 1955. In the 1950s IR departments and area studies centres mushroomed all over the country. The B. Shiva Rao committee (1960s) followed by the Kothari Commission (1967) gave further impetus to area studies in India (Siddharth Mallavarapu, 2012). Till the late 1980s, India led the developing world both at the world stage via forums like NAM and in the discipline of IR. 'India's academic life was the envy of Asia and Africa in the early years after independence'. But since then our Asian neighbors- especially China, but also Korea and Japan- have surged ahead of us. Though significant changes took place in the 1990s, the pace of change in other countries was faster(Bajpai, 2009). Furthermore, 'Indian exceptionalism, fears and exuberance turned the country away from the west'. This insulation from academic life could have proved interesting had it not turned into 'banalization of independence into parochialism'(Bajpai, 2009).

India's resistance to theory, which arose from 'general post-colonial desire to distance India from the west' and its belief that 'theory was a form of armchair intellectualism divorced from the realities of Indian society', did not bear well for the academic inquiry in India (Bajpai, 2009). On top of that the theoretic literature of the time had little, if any, relevance for India (Bajpai, 2009)(Siddharth Mallavarapu, 2012). The unwillingness to call a spade a spade precluded critical thinking. Hence, uncritical acceptance of state policies due to the role envisaged for the academia in the project of nation-building, Nehru's larger than life image and the resultant shadowing of other's contributions, aversion to theory, focus on area studies at the expense of other forms of theorizations, all contributed to the stunted development of the discipline of IR India. The influence of its formative years can be felt even till today.

3. Present

Today IR courses are taught in about 150 universities, both at undergraduate and graduate level(Alagappa, 2009). But in Indian academia 'IR is still thought of as a poor country cousin of political science and other social sciences(Bajpai, 2009). Furthermore, due to a lack of serious 'research programs', absence of research puzzle-driven more of thinking and underdeveloped nature of theory and methodology courses in India, existing institutions do not produce quality IR scholars(Alagappa, 2009). Socio-cultural attitudes in India have also played a role in the stunted development of the discipline. As a society we have a 'disparaging attitude towards social science disciplines'(Paul, 2009). The relationship of the discipline with the state has proved to be a constraint as well. IR does not garner respect from state officials as it is believed that officials and politicians know better than academics. This problem is not peculiar to India, academics world over are engaged in the battle for making theory seem relevant to officials. But the problem is more acute in India.

Paul argues for 'linking IR in India with the global IR scholarship' to break the isolation of IR scholarship community from the west. Right after independence, and all throughout the Cold War, Indian scholars remained ambivalent to IR theorizing originating from the west for reasons both ideological and pragmatic. Though things have changed since the end of the Cold War and the opening up of India's economy, 'IR in India is yet to make use of this window of opportunity produced by structural changes in the international system' (Paul, 2009).

Identifying good work as 'good published writings'³, Bajpai identifies five key obstacles to good work in India-

3.1. Neglect of Theory

Neglect of theory (reasons for which have already been mentioned) led to the drift towards area studies and stymied the development of the discipline in India. The hereto forth focus on 'relational studies' also retarded theory building. Where there has been any engagement with theory, the focus has been on 'high politics'. The 'tendency to privilege the realist lens in order to be policy relevant' is a remnant of the formative years of the discipline wherein theory for the sake of theorization was frowned upon. Realism itself, however, has been used differently by different scholars. Those 'arguing from a nationalist standpoint tend to conflate their stance with realism'. Appropriation of classics like Kautilya's Arthashastra within the realist paradigm has been rather premature and begs the question whether it is possible to study classic works in their own right or whether all we can hope for are 'local variations' of western traditions. Though the hold of the dominant paradigm on the minds of IR scholars in India is undeniable, there are those doing pioneering work in other strands of IR theory- be it Constructivism, Feminism, Marxism or critical theory. But they remain the exception rather than the rule. The study of IR theory cannot be reduced to the understanding and application of theories developed in the west. Engagement with normative issues of global concern is also important.

¹ During a workshop in Singapore this had become a point of contention. Can only Indian born in India qualify to make a contribution to Indian IRT? Though then two opposing viewpoints had emerged, Indian scholars recognise only those living and working in India.

² Initially a part of University of Delhi, it was elevated to the status of a deemed university in 1961. It was integrated into Jawaharlal Nehru University in 1970 as its School of International Studies

³ For Bajpai 'good published writings' means referred journal articles, book chapters and books

3.2. *The Three Ps*

Without the three Ps- puzzles, problematiques and problem solving agendas- theory in India has lacked focus.

3.3. *Lack of Methodological Skills*

Methodological skills are crucial for conducting quality research, its underdevelopment hasn't borne well for the discipline.

3.4. *Inadequate Teaching*

In many places courses haven't kept up with developments in the field. Though with the expansion of the subject matter of the discipline of IR a commensurate expansion of courses has taken place in India, its expanse remains limited. Very few schools or centres focus on International law; political economy of India and the global political economy have been ceded to the field of economics; and energy, environment, regional and global governance are given scant attention. Despite disproportionate focus on 'Guns and Bombs', especially in the think tank community, strategic studies degrees or research programs remain few in number and weak in substance (Alagappa, 2009). This is ironic considering the dominance of realism in the discipline both within and without India. Courses on international institutions and norms are absent, so are those on normative issues. Even ethnic conflicts, a perennial concern for the state of India since its inception, are not dealt with sufficiently. Accessibility of books remains a concern. Since language is an issue for many students, translations of classic works in local languages would go a long way in making material accessible to the students.

3.5. *(Mis) Management of the Profession*

There is no professional association of IR scholars. Efforts towards it failed in the past as there was no meeting of minds between JNU and other universities. In the absence of such a forum IR scholars in various departments remain isolated from each other. Avenues for publishing quality work remain few in number. International Studies, South Asian Survey and Strategic Analysis are the only journals that are published routinely.

There are positive signs as well. If we move beyond the discipline's narrow focus on state, power and anarchy and broaden our horizon to include normative concerns, there is much that India has said and has to say. Siddharth Mallavarapu reminds us that 'International Relations theory is not a purely 'received discourse'' in India (Mallavarapu, 2009). 'Reconstruction' projects based on domestic strands of thinking draw from a long tradition of engagement with normative issues like justice and order. IR as a field of study has been chastised for not paying enough attention to normative question (Frost, 1994). Hence, such interventions are a welcome development. Even on the mainstream front many scholars in India are doing pioneering work and applying such theories to the Indian context. In the last decade or so, serious attempts have been made to highlight the existence of a serious IR community in the country and to bring to the fore works by them. The purpose is to make the work being done in India more visible. This augurs well for the future of the discipline in India as it underlines the rich tradition and vigor of IR scholarship in India.

4. Future

Many scholars have made recommendations for policy changes to make India a 'leading centre of knowledge and education in international studies' (Alagappa, 2009). Since enough has been said (but sadly not done) on that front, I will not concern myself with such issues. I will focus on areas where theorization in India can focus, especially by drawing from its pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial experience.

The moment of crisis in the discipline of IR in India calls for deep introspection instead of resignation. We should take this opportunity to ask ourselves what kind of contribution we want to make. Am I arguing for an Indian School of International Relations? Certainly not. An 'Indian way' of doing IR can fall into the trap of nationalism and parochialism. As Acharya points out, 'national or regional schools can become intellectual and methodological (if not ideological) straitjackets, creating barriers to pluralisation'. They can even become 'rationalizations of a country's shifting fortunes' (Acharya, 2011). Such an approach will not do. But the need for informing the discipline with the help of Indian experience cannot be denied.

Scholars have identified areas where scholarly attention should be devoted. Paul argues that regional cooperation is one such area where Indian scholars have much to contribute (Paul, 2009). Since India is seen as a major player in world politics today, its take on power transition and international order is another such area. Civilizational IR is another area where Indian IR scholarship can contribute. As Paul points out, 'One is wonderstruck at the tolerance and eclecticism shown by some of India's Islamic rulers, especially Akbar the Great, who had great appreciation for ideas drawn from other religions' (Paul, 2009).

The discipline of IR is becoming more receptive of culture and religion and is seeking explanations outside traditional disciplinary boundaries (Huntington, 2011) (Lawson, 2007) (Yosef Lapid, 1996) (Naeem Inayatullah, 2004). This gives India scope to contribute by drawing from its rich domestic tradition. As the discipline of IR tries to make sense of the so called 'resurgence of religion', and as mainstream paradigms and Westphalia concepts prove inadequate for the task, India can contribute by drawing from its unique experience of housing multi-religious communities. A lot of academic energy has been spent on secularism in India, which can prove helpful as the discipline breaks its traditional boundaries and ventures into uncharted territory.

There have been few attempts to 're-discover classic Indian thinking' (Siddharth Mallavarapu, 2012). To give just one example we can consider the Father of our nation- Gandhi. Gandhian tradition of conflict resolution has received more attention outside than inside India. With its emphasis on tolerance, empathy and non-violence, it can be instructive in today's conflicts that more mostly intra-state and where the enemy is not an alien from a different country but one of our own.

Many scholars have identified India's experience with that of Global South in general. Such a sensibility has informed their work as well. In International Law, a sub-field of IR, especially scholars have championed the cause of the 'Third World' by articulating a Third World Approach to International Law (Siddharth Mallavarapu, 2012). Recognizing the need to decolonize IR, scholars have interrogated taken-for-granted concepts like anarchy, sovereignty, power and argued for the inclusion of concepts like race, colonialism, gender, class and normative concerns like global justice. Future attempts in IR scholarship must build on such works. Though Indian state is vying for recognition as a 'major power' in the future, India's colonial past remains.

5. Conclusion

The discipline of IR in general, and Indian International Relations in particular, is going through an exciting phase. The widespread recognition of IR as West-centric has fuelled a lively debate on how non-Western IR theory can make the field more inclusive. Indian IR has the institutional set-up to cease this moment and enrich the discipline with its unique experiences. Though lacking on many fronts, Indian IR is also well placed due to the interest India's 'emergence' has created. The point is not to brood over the past, leave future as an open-ended question, and utilise the present. As they say 'past is history, future is a mystery, but today is a gift'.

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