Interview – Deepshikha Shahi

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Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

So far as the possibilities of research innovations in the field of International Relations (IR) are concerned, we are certainly living through exciting times. Since the contemporary world order appears to be ridden with delivery deficits when it comes to dealing with global crisis-situations (as evident from recent performances of the UNSC vis-à-vis the Russia-Ukraine war, or the WHO in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic), the debates about the need to create a new world order are gaining momentum. This, in turn, has added fresh impetus to the ongoing discussions on "worlding", that is, the academic agenda of drawing insights from Western as well as non-Western philosophies/narratives/cosmovisions/worldviews/actors with a view to fulfill a twofold objective: first, theoretically recognize the existence of the multiple worlds that remain differently defined by diverse peoples scattered across the globe (*world-making*); and, second, practically prescribe the mechanisms to nurture cooperative relations between these multiple worlds (*world-ordering*).

For me, what is particularly intriguing about these world-making and world-ordering exercises is the fact that they deviate from the orthodox Kantian Western-centric mannerisms. Going beyond the (neo-)Kantian Western-centric mannerisms of doing IR that maintain an unbridgeable duality (or separation) between science and metaphysics, subject and object, self and other, West and non-West, theory and practice etc., several de-Kantian world-making and world-ordering exercises – especially the ones that subscribe to Global IR – have begun to explore a variety of alternative research trajectories that propagate "non-dualism" or "monism". The non-dualism of the recent Global IR interventions (as exemplified through Tianxia, Advaita, Sufism, Buddhism, and Ubuntu) has initiated ingenious inquiries of "science-metaphysics conflation", "subject-object collapse", "self-other merger", "West–non-West complementarity", and "theory-practice interface", thereby seeking to alter the customary presuppositions of social sciences by way of foregrounding the suppressed knowledge-forms of the multiple worlds that collectively shape global realities.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

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The three key realizations that summarize the decisive shifts in the way I understand the world are: (i) *realism is not realistic*; (ii) *myth is real*; and (iii) *ideal is practical*. I was made to believe that the theoretical insights and policy proposals emerging from realism were based on an accurate vision of reality "as it is" (not "as it ought to be"). But systematic studies of numerous lived political experiences over time have confirmed that realism can neither explain nor resolve certain persisting problems. John M. Hobson, Vineet Thakur and Peter Vale narrate how realism fails to offer a historical explanation of the advent of sovereign-states in Europe as it does not take into account the political impact of the exchanges between Europe, the Middle East and Asia, or the interstices of race, empire and science in South Africa. Besides, Seth A. Johnston clarifies how realism is unable to respond to transnational catastrophes such as the Covid-19 pandemic that refute the calculations of "relative gains" or "zero-sum logic" as applied to security- or market-related competitive scenarios; he, thus, emphasizes the need to look for alternative theories that could engender feasible policy plans to do a more "realistic IR".

I was taught that the rationalist theories (e.g., neoliberalism) that endorsed the one world of globalizing capitalism centered on a single hegemonic power were "real", whereas the reflectivist theories (e.g., postmodernism) that acknowledged the realities of the multiple worlds containing multiple voices, including the anti-hegemonic voices of indigenous people, somewhat belonged to the sphere of "myths". Nevertheless, the re-readings of IR's canonical texts expose the inherent myths of even rationalist theories. As a rule, it is realized that IR myths function as narratives that tell us who we are and what we are supposed to be concerned with, thereby giving us blueprints for policy choices. Because IR myths bend our thoughts and lived-realities, Halvard Leira and Benjamin de Carvalho opine that it is crucial to critically engage with such myths so as to destabilize what is taken for granted, and to allow the hitherto excluded conceptions of "the real", some "more desirable myths", to enable an all-inclusive expansion of IR.

I was under the impression that the empirical problem-solving theories practically tried to fix the deficits of existing world, whereas the normative critical theories ideally aspired to form alternative worlds. Notwithstanding the subsequent realization that a synthesis of both empirical and normative approaches (or analytical eclecticism) was needed for effective policy planning, it was lamented that the policymakers considered a theory as misleading when it did not correspond to practical knowledge of the world and redundant when it did, thereby compelling IR scholars to chase a certain kind of empirical-practical theory that resisted normative-ideal self-reflection. Curiously, the Global IR theories combine the "empirical-practical" and "normative-ideal" aspects of realities while recommending policies for transforming crisis-situations. While the Tianxia, Advaita and Buddhism-inspired Japanese Global IR theories activate a non-dual approach to look for solutions to protracted border disputes and ecological disasters, the Sufi methods formulate spiritual tactics for conflict resolution, and the Amazonian rituals suggest schemes to counter colonizing attitudes. A growing body of literature demonstrates varied policy experimentations emanating from an array of under-theorised indigenous concepts: for instance, *dharma* as it directs the "righteous policy actions" of the Indian diplomats, *aikido* as it guides the Japanese practitioners in handling the attacks while emphatically "caring for the attackers", *ubuntu* as it motivates a "humanist soft power project" in the African subcontinent, and *runa* as it "unites the human and non-human constituents of realities" to inculcate empathetic praxeological capacities.

The shifts in one's thinking involve a long-drawn-out process of psychic churning instigated by unpredictable forces of time. But this psychic churning picks up steam when it comes into contact with some rare gems. In my case, these gems have been the ones who personify a perfect blend of wisdom and innocence! I have enjoyed and hugely benefitted from spontaneous conversations with John M. Hobson, Beate Jahn, Patrick Olivelle, Roger T. Ames, Amitav Acharya, Zhao Tingyang, L.H.M. Ling, Arlene B. Tickner, David L. Blaney, Ali Balci, Shannon Brincat, Ersel Aydinli, Gennaro Ascione, Atsuko Watanabe, Peter M. Kristensen, Helen L. Turton, Nora Fisher Onar, Emilian Kavalski, Beatrix Futák-Campbell, Achin Vanaik, Navnita C. Behera, Pradeep K. Gautam, Purushottama Bilimoria, Inanna Hamati-Ataya, and Vasileios Syros among others.

What prompted you to research the theoretical frameworks of Global IR?

For as long as I can remember, I had a philosophical-analytical-emotional bent of mind-heart which made me naturally curious to explore wide-ranging expressions of truth/s as they became accessible to me via "formal learning" (a product of wrestling with the curricula taught in school) and "informal learning" (a byproduct of

rendezvous with random literature, music, films, paintings, peoples, places, dreams and what not!). There came a point when I sensed that the expanse of my informal learning exceeded the reservoir of my formal learning. Thereafter, I began to infuse my informal learning to broaden the horizons of the knowledge I had painstakingly acquired through formal learning. The net outcome of this intellectual enterprise was popularly received as my contributions to the theoretical frameworks of Global IR. Nevertheless, as far as my engagement with my "self" is concerned, this intellectual enterprise means much more than Global IR to me.

You evoke Kautilya's *Arthashastra* to theorise non-Western IR but the philosophies of Advaita and Sufism to theorise post-Western IR. Can you explain why?

The philosophical substructures of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* – Sāṃkhya, Yoga and Lokāyata (literally meaning "numbers", "aggregate", and "worldly ones" respectively) – resemble the Western-centric epistemological dualism that accepts the separate existence of two kinds of reality, namely, material/object and ideational/subject. Accordingly, Kautilya's Arthashastra can serve as "a non-Western resource to enrich Western-centric IR": I call it non-Western IR. By contrast, the philosophical frameworks of Advaita and Sufism embrace an extra-Western-centric epistemological nondualism/monism that emphasizes the oneness of reality hidden beneath the many-ness of material/object and ideational/subject aspects of reality. Hence, Advaita and Sufism can qualify as a "non-Western resource to outdo Western-centric IR": I call it post-Western IR.

Does post-Western IR include postcolonial and decolonial approaches?

The postcolonial and decolonial approaches are more inclined toward non-Western IR traditions rather than post-Western IR traditions. To be sure, both these traditions stand firm in their determination to overcome the limits of Western IR and thereby contribute to the Global IR agenda. However, the failure to distinguish between these two traditions continues to generate ambiguity. Even though this ambiguity emanated from the initial obscurity in forming a general definition of "non-Western" and "post-Western", I think a careful scrutiny of the recent Global IR literature clarifies that the "non-Western worlding" is thought to be constrictive as it ends up seeing the world from a particular perspective based on a Western Kantian epistemology, thereby projecting the world as imagined by a Western eye, whereas the "post-Western re-worlding" is redemptive as it permits the ever-changing and differing meanings of IR to be released from the monopolistic grasp by one exclusionary epistemology, i.e., the exclusionary epistemology of Kantian dualism, so that the agency can be rediscovered at non-Western sites for adaptation, feedback and reconstruction of the Western influences. While the non-Western worlding imbibes a "perspectival predisposition", the post-Western re-worlding is more open to epistemological rebuilding in IR and, thus, carries a "theoretical thrust".

Since the postcolonial and decolonial approaches, in their effort to restore the non-Western agency as "self" (or subject), problematize the mainstream Western-centric IR as "other" (or object), they tend to embrace the same Western Kantian style of dualist perspectival knowledge-production that reinforces self-other or subject-object separation. This is the why Richard Ned Lebow recently argued that "…even post[/de]-colonialism are Western in origin, Western concerns, Western ways of thinking, and Western-conceived projects." Unfortunately, some IR scholars are not attentive to these nuances and, therefore, they add to the prevailing confusions by making statements such as "post-Western IR…encompasses both postcolonial and decolonial accounts of IR but…questions the pluralistic universality upon which Global IR is based preferring a pluriversal framework based on…the co-existence of multiple and interlocking conceptions of universality rather than a single conception of universality." In fact, Global IR never authorized a single epistemology or theory or conception of universality. As I argue in a 2019 journal article: "In its bid to oppose universal horizons, the pluriversalist de-colonial imagination of a Global IR is helplessly inclined toward favoring 'multiple loosely hanging local exceptionalisms' (not 'multiple closely interconnected global universalisms')…By extension, this implies that de-colonial IR aims at retaining the distinctions between the West and the Rest (read exceptionalisms), whereas Global IR is keen to dissolve them." Yet, I am surprised to observe how some IR scholars continue to turn a blind eye to the non-essentialist proclivities of the vast body of Global IR texts and misleadingly argue that Global IR suffers from an "essentialist trap." As a matter of fact, the Global IR agenda has risen above the essentialist limits of the outwardly literal forms of diverse Chinese, Indian and Japanese texts (having their own distinct epistemologies/theories/conceptions) to demonstrate how the

synergised theoretical and praxeological insinuations of these plural geographically and historically distant texts have reconvened themselves as an integrated Lakatosian "research programme" for the study of contemporary world politics.

Please tell us about your recently published book. What future trajectories does it propose for Global IR?

My recent book *Global IR Research Programme: The Futuristic Foundation of 'One and Many'* promulgates a borderless ecology of cultures that reinvents the human condition as perpetually interconnected at the level of consciousness. While Western-centric IR theories hinge on Kantian philosophies to stress the time-space bounded identities of human beings living in divided phenomenal worlds, the de-Kantian philosophies of the Global IR research programme – exemplified by the Tianxia, Advaita, and Buddhism-inspired theories – come together to recover the temporally-spatially indivisible phenomenal-noumenal flow of human consciousness, thereby facilitating back-and-forth movement between the West-dominated "one world" and the non-West-embodied "many worlds". This back-and-forth movement offers opportunities to conceive and found a new world order that realizes the temporally-spatially indivisible human condition on earth. The book delineates a set of interrelated guiding principles for innovative theory-building and policy-making that can transcend the essentialist geo-centric limitations of knowledge-production and knowledge-application, thereby establishing the futuristic foundation of the Global IR research programme. These guiding principles are as follows:

1. Knowledge (scientific/spiritual) is not only a 'provincial power-maximizing exercise' but also a 'de-provincial truth-maximizing exercise';
2. Knowledge (theoretical/praxeological) is not always 'territorially trapped'; it may be 'territorially transient'; therefore, all knowledge-forms originating from the non-West or Global South need not be post-colonial or de-colonial;
3. Knowledge (e.g., theoretical agendas) may be always for someone and some purpose, but there is always a possibility for readjustments in that someone and that purpose;
4. Knowledge (e.g., policy proposals) may be systematically theorised but not applied, or proficiently applied but not theorised; in both cases, knowledge remains valid;
5. Knowledge (e.g., theoretical agenda or policy proposal) is bound to come across anomalies; these anomalies may be instigations for innovations, not signs of setbacks.

What could be the methodological techniques to pursue the Global IR research programme?

I think the methodological techniques to pursue the Global IR research programme must move along the following three pieces of advice: first, taking cognizance of "covariance"; second, showing readiness for "recontextualisation"; and third, upholding the attitude of "andragogy". The analytical apparatus of co-variance discloses that genetically interrelated ideas/practices can emerge at temporally and spatially distant places. Therefore, the researchers located at any temporal-spatial point can inspect/implement the freely floating ideas/practices which are provincially neither Western nor non-Western. That is to say, the strategic interests of the researchers must be titled toward non-provincializing (not provincializing) a given idea/practice. The researchers must realize the inventive potential of recontextualisation which implies that the idea/practice that originates at one place can be integrated, adapted and reused at another place. The relocation and reassembly of an idea/practice from its original-form to an adapted-form leaves a discursive gap that invites the researchers to use their own views/values/beliefs while engineering their schemes for developing the research programme. The researchers must also recognize the importance of andragogy which highlights the need to get out of the intellectual-comfort-zones of established experts and launch collaborative research projects that could borrow inspiration from the prior lived-experiences and socio-cultural roles of fresh learners.

What is the most important advice you could give to fresh scholars of International Relations?

I think it is prudent to operate on the basis of one's own intuition rather than someone else's advice. Having said that, I can share the pragmatic lessons I have derived so far as I endeavored to navigate academia. It is important to admit

that all influential research revolutions demand fearless and frank experiments with truth/s, not lazy and convenient refuge in conventions. We must make conscious attempts to employ our hearts/emotions (not merely minds/rationalities) while carrying out scholarly experiments with truth/s. These scholarly experiments with truth/s often demolish our rational predeterminations, which, in turn, may lead to emotional unrests. But then, the process of (un)learning is expected to be painful; we must not quit. We must make every effort to live our mind-and-heart-based self-learnings of truth/s in our veins; the high-sounding principles about separating the "professional" and "personal" domains of our existence are often fraught with both self-deception and self-defeat. We must try to ensure that the modus operandi that propels our professional pursuits (e.g., publishing research, winning fellowships, or securing employment) remains aligned with our personal self-learnings of truth/s; we must not rush. We must not dump our work ethics to acquire quick success as it does harm our long-term professional-personal goals. Finally, it is crucial to decode the difference between confidence and overconfidence; we must be open to revisit, readjust, and, if necessary, surpass our momentary personal self-learnings of truth/s.