

Introducing the Article Series 'Indian IR Meets Global IR'

Written by Deepshikha Shahi and Raghav Dua

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DEEPSHIKHA SHAHI AND RAGHAV DUA, AUG 17 2023

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The ever-shifting shapes, sizes, and colours of the clouds of our earthly existence have remained marked with a solid silver lining – which reaffirms that those birds that are not sceptical about their ability to fly do so defying all temporal-spatial bondages. This series of articles showcases a glimpse of the nonchalant glide of one such ‘golden bird’ in an ‘open sky’: the golden bird is none other than ‘India’ (conserving the intellectual foundations of Indian IR) and the open sky is what we have come to acknowledge as the scholarly vistas of ‘Global IR’ (which seeks to reconcile the West-non-West binaries in theory-building and policy-making).

When the feathers of the Indian golden bird were cut during British imperial rule, it led to not only the plunder of its political economy but also its deeper intellectual foundations – that is, “indigenous interests, values, norms, knowledge systems, and practices” (Rieck 2017, 15). The premeditated denigration of these intellectual foundations by spreading the “twin myths of Indian isolationism and oriental despotism” by British imperialists (Hobson 2004, 79), and, even more regrettably, the thoughtless absorption of these British-imposed twin myths by the self-enslaved Indians who were “so much beset by the disease of civilization that [they could] not altogether do without English education” (Gandhi 2008, 284), manifested as a protracted *post-colonial hangover*. Even though British imperial rule came to an end before too long, the post-colonial hangover of the still self-enslaved Indians continued to reinforce scepticism toward the validity of the Indian intellectual heritage. As expected, this scepticism prohibited the re-growth of the diverse multilayered feathers of the golden bird.

As far as the academic discipline of International Relations (IR) was concerned, the idea of reclaiming the validity of the Indian intellectual heritage unleashed myriad forms of scepticism. Most of the Indian IR scholars – whose cerebral roots were buried deep in Western education (or Western theoretical and praxeological frameworks) – expressed uncertainty toward the prospects of formulating an ‘Indian IR theory’ or institutionalising an ‘Indian IR school’. They preconceived these potential initiatives as a narrow exercise in the direction of propagating nativism, methodological nationalism, essentialism, ethnocentrism, and self-centrism (Behera 2010, Acharya 2011, Mallavarapu 2014). They wondered if the unsighted dependency on Western education caused Western-centrism, then how could the revival of the denigrated Indian intellectual heritage, not contribute to the consolidation of Indian-centrism?

The show of scepticism on the part of Indian IR scholars was mirrored by Western IR scholars. While some of them suspected that the orientation to theorise was an exception rather than a rule in Indian IR (Hansel, Khan and Levailant 2017), others alleged that the entire enterprise of the revival of the Indian intellectual heritage – or say, the appeal to boost “India’s self-image as a knowledge-producer” and “integrate Indian IR with Global IR” (Mehta 2009) for the purpose of “building an eclectic and inclusive Global IR” (Paul 2022) – was nothing more than a strategy to propagate ‘ethno IR’: Audrey Alejandro (2018) misleadingly contended that the quest to integrate Indian IR with Global IR essentialised and legitimised certain selective philosophical positions as being ‘the national’ – i.e., ‘the Indian’ – tradition, thereby enforcing a monolithic conception of Indianness upon the Indian scholars and falling into the same trap as ethnologists who developed ethnosciences.

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Due to these clouds of scepticism, there was much less interest in India in developing an IR school. This risk was foreseen by Kanti Bajpai, before anyone took note of India's rise, when he warned that efforts to develop an IR theory out of India might carry the perils of lapsing into unsuspecting nativism or pursuing some essentialist Indian prophecy (Acharya 2011). However, the awareness of these potential dangers did not undervalue the promises of indigenous knowledge as a tool to integrate Indian IR with Global IR. Navnita C. Behera (2010, 92) declared that the task to re-imagine IR in India was not about creating an Indian IR school but redefining IR itself. She problematized the basic formulation and idiom of the enquiry "Why there is no non-Western IR theory in India?" by highlighting its implicit binary character: namely, the "dominant West" and the "dominated non-West" (read India). From this standpoint, Behera observed that even if Indian IR scholars were to succeed in creating an Indian IR school, it would earn a "compartmentalized space" within the master narrative of Western-centric IR; the challenge, therefore, was "not to discover or produce non-Western IR theory in India but for the Indian IR community to work towards fashioning a post-Western IR." And in the process of formulating this post-Western IR, Siddharth Mallavarapu (2014, 8) emphasized the need to "avoid a monolithic conception of IR that emerges from India." Amitav Acharya (2011, 636) further suggested that there were lots of,

...alien ways of producing knowledge...including the wisdoms of other civilisations...which were wonderfully and creatively unscientific... [Western-centric] IR [could] ignore them at its own peril, especially in its moment of liberation from the disciplining hands of an American social science now being resisted from within.

The optimistic undercurrents of these deliberations inspired a few Indian IR scholars to chase the light beyond the clouds of scepticism. When these scholars opened the Pandora's Box of 'Indian philosophy' for the purpose of enabling 'Indian IR to meet Global IR', they tried to ensure that the research ventures undertaken by them aligned with a threefold principle: first, the Global IR theories/concepts/analyses derived from Indian philosophy need not presume an essential methodological discontinuity between science and metaphysics; rather, they may seek to *blend science and metaphysics* in the process of knowledge-production; second, the Global IR theories/concepts/analyses based on Indian philosophy must not attempt to reproduce binaries by inflating the dissimilarities between the West and the non-West; instead, they must highlight both the dissimilarities and similarities between various Western and non-Western knowledge-forms with an aim to *de-center IR knowledge* and to *reconcile the cognitive gaps between the West and the non-West*; third, the Global IR theories/concepts/analyses influenced by Indian philosophy may appear less factual (scientific) and more abstract (metaphysical), but they need not be predisposed to policy-irrelevance; in fact, they must be driven by an intent to create a *theory-practice interface* that can be applied to deal with the challenges of not just Indian politics but also global politics.

Explaining how Indian philosophy can serve as a rich scientific-metaphysical repository to bridge the West-non-West cognitive gaps, Jitendra N. Mohanty (2023) writes:

Indian philosophy [includes] the systems of thought and reflection that were developed by the civilizations of the Indian subcontinent. They include both orthodox (*astika*) systems, namely, the Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Samkhya, Yoga, Purva-Mimamsa... and Vedanta schools of philosophy, and unorthodox (*nastika*) systems, such as Buddhism and Jainism. [These orthodox and unorthodox systems are] concerned with various philosophical problems...the nature of the world (cosmology), the nature of reality (metaphysics), logic, the nature of knowledge (epistemology), ethics, and the philosophy of religion...In relation to Western philosophical thought, Indian philosophy offers both surprising points of affinity and illuminating differences. The differences highlight certain fundamentally new questions that the Indian philosophers asked...Problems that the Indian philosophers raised for consideration, but that their Western counterparts never did, include such matters as the origin (*utpatti*) and apprehension (*jnapti*) of truth (*pramanya*)...The similarities reveal that, even when philosophers in India and the West were grappling with the same problems and sometimes even suggesting similar theories, Indian thinkers were advancing novel formulations and argumentations...A study of Indian thought, then, reveals certain inadequacies of Western philosophical thought and makes clear that some concepts and distinctions may not be as inevitable as they may otherwise seem (for a comprehensive illustration of different traditions of Indian philosophy, see Mohanty 2023).

Applying the aforementioned characteristics of Indian philosophy, the Indian IR scholars have employed a range of Indian textual traditions to enrich the expanding body of literature on Global IR. To demonstrate this kind of a critical

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engagement of Indian IR with Global IR, this series presents a collection of articles that draw insights from the ancient Indian textual traditions of the Vedas, Upanishads, Advaita, Epics (e.g., Ramayana and Mahabharata), Arthashastra, Kural, Buddhism, Jainism, the medieval tradition of Sikhism and syncretic approaches that merge the elements of Hinduism and Islamism (e.g., Mughal experimentation with Sufism), and the ideas of a few modern Indian thinkers (e.g., Gandhi and Tagore). To be sure, the choice and treatment of these textual traditions is not exhaustive. Given the vastness of the Indian philosophical landscape, there are opportunities for further explorations. Nevertheless, the select articles of this series confirm that the myriad streams of Indian philosophy are very much capable of informing the intellectual procedures of both theory-building and policy-making, thereby generating a 'theory-practice interface'.

In line with the agenda of the 'Global IR research programme', the theory-practice interface created by Indian IR revolves around the following political considerations (Shahi 2023): (i) *extra-territorialism*: surpassing the state-based barriers of territorial boundaries (see Deepshikha Shahi and Pradip Kumar Datta); (ii) *post-humanism*: accommodating the extra-human ambiances of nature, earth's processes, plant and animal structures, technospheres, viruses etc. (see Purushottama Bilimoria); (iii) *essential emotionalism*: encompassing the heart-based sensations of love and hatred (see Deep K. Datta-ray and Vasileios Syros); (iv) *existential ephemeralism*: recognizing the fleeting nature of phenomenal existence (see Kosuke Shimizu and Seerat Arora); and (v) *sustainability-for-survival*: keeping in mind the long-term visions of a sustainable global order while seeking to secure the short-term survival of life-forms on earth (see Ravi Dutt Bajpai, and Pradeep Kumar Gautam and Saurabh Misra).

The articles in the series are surely indicative of the return of the Indian golden bird. However, this return must not be celebrated as a miscalculated symbol of fallen nativism. As Ramchandra Gandhi (1984, 464-465) warns:

Self-conscious Indian nativism cannot...be any of the narrow things possible to it in ignorance of itself, in fallenness...[T]here is always a greater hope for the fallen and abused than the secure and unharmed in language as in spiritual life! [Thus, Indian IR acclaims an] unfallen regenerative nativism...[here] nativity becomes Resurrection!

It is only a sustained spirit of non-scepticism that can empower IR scholars (Indian or foreign) to resurrect the untapped Indian intellectual heritage and add more feathers to this bird so that its glide goes beyond its native locality and reaches the wider skylines of globality, a globality that is not split across the geocentric borderlines of the West and the non-West, a globality that the contemporary Global IR research programme stands for in theory and practice.

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