Interview – Amrita Narlikar

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Professor Amrita Narlikar's research expertise lies in the areas of international negotiation, World Trade Organization, multilateralism, and India's foreign policy & strategic thought. Amrita moved to Germany in 2014 to take up the Presidency of the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA) from the University of Cambridge, where she had held a fully tenured "Readership" (regularized to "Professorship" under the university's internationally aligned system). She read for her M.Phil. and D.Phil. at Balliol, Oxford, and also held a Junior Research Fellowship at St John's College, Oxford. Some of Amrita's books include (co-authored with Aruna Narlikar and Amitabh Mattoo) *Strategic Choices, Ethical Dilemmas: Stories from the Mahabharat*, Penguin Random House, 2023; (guest-edited with Daniel Drezner) *The How Not To Guide for International Relations*, International Affairs, Centenary Special Issue, 2022; *Poverty Narratives and Power Paradoxes in International Trade Negotiations and Beyond*, Cambridge University Press, 2020; and (co-authored with Aruna Narlikar) *Bargaining with a Rising India: Lessons from the Mahabharat*, Oxford University Press, 2014.

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

For me, the most exciting research is at the interface of different fields – work that literally pushes the boundaries of sub-disciplines and disciplines, and helps break down intellectual silos, while still being grounded in the rigours of at least one discipline/sub-discipline. An example is the work that is happening in geoeconomics, or what my colleagues Henry Farrell and Abe Newman have called the "Weaponisation of Interdependence". This work requires scholars of International Political Economy and Security Studies to leave their comfort zones and collaborate with each other. More of this type of work is needed, for instance in the area of multilateralism and global economic governance (both for scholars and for policy-makers) – as I've argued in a recent article.

Another example, I would argue – and not enough of this is being done yet – is to bring together questions of international politics and animal rights. There is important and interesting scholarship on the issue of animal rights in the fields of Philosophy and Law, but unfortunately, this does not often translate easily into the realms of foreign policy and IR. One reason for the paucity of this type of scholarship in a *praxis*-oriented field like ours could be that people have assumed that these are questions of "mere" theory that make for interesting armchair thinking and "philosophical" deliberations but are assumed to be far-removed from real-world impact. Whereas in fact, these are questions of life and death – absolutely so, in terms of the extreme suffering and killing of individual animals or the extinction of entire species. And even if we want a take based on human self-interest, these are questions of existential importance for the human race, for instance, if we want to reduce the occurrence of pandemics.

Another reason perhaps why much of Political Science and IR adopts a predominantly anthropocentric lens to most questions that we seek to answer – justice, distribution, war, survival – probably has to do with the fact that our disciplines have been dominated by Western theoretical and historical perspectives. Were Political Science and IR willing to engage more with alternative traditions from the Global South, they might be less blinkered. This is something that I have tried to show in my most recent, co-authored book on the Mahabharat, as well as in various interviews (e.g. in German or English versions). Plus, I have long been arguing for the importance of mainstreaming intellectual ideas from the "Global South."

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most

significant shifts in your thinking?

One significant shift for me was on the issue of trade multilateralism, and the urgent need to broaden this agenda for both scholars and practitioners (and in ways that are significantly different from the old trade-and-labour-standards or trade-and-environmental-standards debates). I engaged in a self-reflection on this topic in an article that was published in a centenary issue of *International Affairs* last year – so rather than repeat the points I highlighted there, let me share the link.

A point that I did not, however, make in that article, and which I would like the opportunity to make today is that a part of my research agenda on globalisation and governance has shifted in another important way. In much of my previous work, I had argued for the cause of developing countries or the "Global South" – but I too was guilty then of the anthropocentrism that I now critique many fellow-academics for. It is now clear to me that we cannot and should not have a globalisation – or resulting prosperity from trade liberalisation – that is built on the suffering of our fellow more-than-human beings. Just as national security has come to feature prominently in the work that I have been doing on trade politics, so also animal rights have entered my research on narratives, multilateralism and global order.

To whom do I attribute this expanded vision? Well, our traditional Indian texts (like the Mahabharat) had always shaped my world-view, and I have become more aware of this legacy in recent years. I have also benefited from interactions with animal rights activists on social media, a few like-minded scholars, but above all my dog, Don. I had always loved animals, even as a child, but Donny taught me that our more-than-human friends are deserving not only of love, but also respect and dignity. You can read more about how he changed my life in a piece that was published by *Global Policy* (and another piece, in German, with some cute clickable pics and funny captions that try to capture his unique sense of humour).

Please tell us about your new co-authored book *Strategic Choices, Ethical Dilemmas: Stories from the Mahabharat*. How does this book differ from your previous Mahabharat-focused work?

My first book on the Mahabharat *Bargaining with a Rising India: Lessons from the Mahabharat* , co-authored with Dr Aruna Narlikar, was published by Oxford University Press in 2014. In this book, we used the Mahabharat as a lens to better understand India's negotiation culture. While there are several other such books and papers in the context of other negotiation cultures such as those of China or Japan, I am proud to say that this book was a first of its kind with reference to India and grateful to OUP for publishing it. A major driver for us then was to recognize the role that India's ancient texts have played in shaping the country's negotiation behaviour – and indeed, its strategic thought. It was frustrating to see that while there were plenty such works with respect to the Western thinkers (from Aristotle and Plato to Machiavelli and Clausewitz) and also with reference to other cultures such as China, there was a real paucity of such analyses in relation to India. We wanted to fill this gap. We wanted to do this because it was intellectually fascinating. But also, because we thought it important to have greater self-awareness within India of the country's long-standing negotiation traditions and strategic narratives. We were also convinced that knowledge of and interest in these approaches would help India's partners negotiate more effectively and constructively with it.

The response to this book was very encouraging. This is reflected in the several other books that have followed ours on this topic, as well as the appreciative reviews that the book continues to receive. Just as great was the positive feedback from policy-makers from different countries, who told us that the book had enriched their understanding as well as their negotiation efficacy. Both Aruna and I felt that we should communicate the relevance of some of India's ancient wisdom to a wider audience. So, Aruna wrote articles for *The Times of India* in its *Speaking Tr*ee column, and I started doing little videos on Twitter where I would recite, explain, and apply the relevance of some of my favourite Sanskrit shloks (verses). The public reaction was enthusiastic, and we started toying with the idea of doing a new book that would apply the lessons of the Mahabharat to questions of foreign policy and strategy, as well as the dilemmas that we face in our everyday lives. And we knew this new book would be written not from a perspective of understanding India for both insiders and outsiders (which is what the first book had done), but instead would apply this treasure trove of Indian wisdom to questions of global significance and reach.

We found a wonderful partner in crime in Professor Amitabh Mattoo, whom we have always admired for not only his vast knowledge, but also his wisdom. He had written a lovely review article on the Mahabharat, where he had also praised our work. So, we asked him if he might be interested in working with us and were delighted when he joined us. We brought our different expertise together – Aruna from Literature, Amitabh from Security Studies and Foreign Policy, me from International Political Economy and International Negotiation. We considered a range of angles that we could take – character analyses, specific themes, use the chapter ordering of the Mahabharat itself… But Aruna suggested that we use the medium of stories because ultimately, it is the stories that we remember, stories shape us and make us who we are. When Penguin Random House agreed to publish the book, this was quite the icing on the cake.

Could you share your personal favourite story from the Mahabharat and why it resonates with you?

While each and every story in this book is (or has become one in the course of doing research for this book) a favourite of at least one of the authors – and actually probably all three of us – if I could choose just one, it would have to be the one of Yudhishthir and the dog.

After the great war, and a long and peaceful reign, the Pandav brothers and their wife Draupadi decided that the time had come for them to depart on the journey towards heaven. The journey was arduous, in which they were allowed to take neither their riches and weapons, nor their retinue. But a dog started following them and chose to become their companion during the travels. One by one, for their sins and flaws, the Pandavs fell to their death; the rules required that the remaining members of the troupe continue their journey. Ultimately, only the eldest, Yudhishthir – the truest and the most virtuous – successfully reached the destination, still accompanied by the faithful dog. Indr, the king of the gods, arrived in his chariot to take Yudhishthir to heaven, promising him that he would be reunited with his brothers and family there. But Yudhishthir would have to leave the dog behind.

What follows is a remarkable discourse between Yudhishthir and Indr. We see Amartya Sen's "argumentative Indian" at its best here – Yudhishthir, a mortal, engaged fearlessly in bargaining with the king of the gods – each character systematically offering arguments and counter-arguments. Eventually, Yudhishthir wins the argument, and the dog reveals himself to be Yudhishthir's father – Dharm (the god of duty, truth, and values) – who has been testing him. By standing true to the faithful dog, Yudhishthir passes the test with flying colours, and is taken to heaven with great respect and fanfare.

Now there are people who will mansplain to you (as they do to me) that the story is an allegory, and the dog represents death (and its inevitability) rather than a dog *per se* etc etc etc. And it's true that the Mahabharat is a complex text, and this story too can be subject to complicated, anthropocentric interpretations. But at its most beautiful and simplest, this is a story of ecologism and animal rights. What is striking in Yudhishthir's responses to Indr is not only the love that he shows the dog in return for his loyalty, or the emphasis that he places on protecting any being who is helpless or has sought refuge with one. Rather, at no point does Yudhishthir make a distinction between the human and the non-human. In Yudhishthir's non-anthropocentric perspective, his canine companion enjoys as much *personhood* as a human companion might. The story offers us a powerful example of how we should treat the more-than-human beings who grace our lives. It also offers us novel ideas on how we can potentially build foreign policies and global governance that are genuinely more inclusive – something that we highlight in the final chapter of our book.

Writing about complex moral and ethical dilemmas, which story in the Mahabharat was the most challenging to explore?

The characters of the Mahabharat are seldom black or white – they are complex – as most people in real life are, and most of the stories reflect this complexity. Among the most interesting though perhaps, in the context of our book, is the one where we tell the story that underpins the sermon of the Bhagavad Gita. I have had people approach me in the West to express their shock that when Arjun is overcome with grief at Kurukshetra, Krishn does not use this moment for peace-making. Instead, he encourages and persuades Arjun to fight. Some observers then interpret the Bhagavad Gita to be a text that is jingoistic in its war-mongering. In fact, this is a gross misrepresentation of the

Bhagavad Gita – the "divine song".

In our book, we show how Krishn's advice to Arjun is a key part of a bigger context – and this includes a history of great provocations and misdeeds by the Kauravs against the Pandavs. Krishn encourages Arjun to fight only after multiple attempts at negotiation and mediation have failed. Several important insights follow from the discourse. At no point does Krishn suggest that war is to be taken lightly. Second, he reminds us that caution against going to war does not mean a fear of going to war. Third, when the need arises, the war must be fought with full commitment, with an eye on the action and only the action – rather than the fruits of action. What we have here is effectively a theory of just war, and also advice on war strategy. It was not easy to compress the philosophy, policy and poetry that is contained in the Bhagavad Gita into one small and accessible chapter. But we really enjoyed working on it.

In the context of foreign policy, what are three major takeaways that readers can gain from the wisdom of the Mahabharat?

First, the Mahabharat itself, and also the first story of our book, begins with the story of a powerful alliance – between Ganesh – the god of creativity and the first to be worshipped – and Ved Vyaas – the poet who composed the Mahabharat. This story, as well as several others in the book offer insights on the importance of alliances, failed alliances, the dangers of going-it-alone, how to negotiate even among friends, and both the how-tos and the how-not-tos of building alliances and partnerships. Given that my D.Phil. from Balliol, Oxford, was on coalitions of developing countries in international trade – and this is an area that I continue to work on – I must confess that I have a soft spot for all the insights that the Mahabharat offers on questions of alliances and collective action.

Second, in both scholarly and policy debates, we hear some analysts emphasising the importance of "value-based diplomacy" while others stress the prioritisation of interests. The Mahabharat shows us the redundancy of this dichotomy. Instead, it suggests that interests are rooted in values, and evolve accordingly. Applied to foreign policy, global governance and multilateralism, this insight is significant. It suggests that simply the pursuit of interests (e.g. via economic integration or trade liberalisation, as per the assumptions underpinning the post-war order) might not lead to peace. Instead, we get some very different prescriptions: not technocratic and economic drivers, but political and moral drivers for peace; not universal integration among diverse partners but deep integration among like-minded allies; not further opening of markets and freer flow of goods, but closer trade links with countries that share one's values.

Third, the Mahabharat also helps us address some seemingly modern problems. The story of the great teacher and mighty warrior, Dronaacharya, and how he is demobilised in the great war by the Pandavs reveals a lot about how disinformation and fake news are used, how the source makes a difference, what strategies are used to curtail verification – and thereby also offers us helpful insights on how some of these problems can be overcome. And isn't it remarkable that although most think of disinformation as a problem of the digital era, the Mahabharat manages to teach us something about this too? And there's plenty more: how to maintain resolve, when to show flexibility, the meaning of ecologism and more.

The Mahabharat is an ancient Indian epic. How do you think your book can appeal to readers from diverse backgrounds and walks of life beyond just Indian culture and history enthusiasts?

Insofar as scholars, policy-makers, and the public at large are interested in finding innovative solutions to the existential problems that the world faces today (be this the loss of biodiversity or climate change or pandemics), the Mahabharat – and interpretations such as ours of it – remains a largely untapped source. So, anyone interested in making more effective foreign policy, reforming global governance, or indeed navigating the trials and challenges of everyday life would find our book interesting, we hope. And frankly speaking, it's high time that people in the West started paying attention to our ancient texts. I used to always find it irritating – even as a child – when people would refer to Kalidaas as the Indian Shakespeare or ask me if Kautilya was the Indian Machiavelli! I also found it frustrating that in the syllabi of my old university (I read for my M.Phil. and D.Phil. in IR at Balliol, Oxford), we would read Thucydides, but we almost never engaged with the ancient scholarship from countries of the Global South.

I must add that in terms of Political Science and IR articles, scholars have at best engaged with the Arthashastra. This is fine – it's certainly better than nothing – but in my eyes, the two Indian epics are far more important if you want to access the living traditions of India. Ask a person on the street in India, or even the average university student, if they can tell you about the teachings of the Arthashastra, and you won't get very far. In contrast, almost everyone will have something to share with you about the Mahabharat and Ramayan.

As we have argued in our books, the Ramayan is an epic that deals primarily with the ideal that we are asked to live up to – Lord Ram is the ideal hero, Lakshman is the ideal brother, Sita is the ideal wife, etc. – which does not mean, by the way, that it does not have anything to offer us on politics – it does, as the Indian Foreign Minister, Dr Jaishankar, has rightly argued in the case of Hanuman ji. But our long-standing interest in the Mahabharat, stems from the fact that it encapsulates all the wonders, but also all the flaws, that constitute "humanity". It is also a deeply political text – it is not "only" a piece of Literature or History. Even those who have a general awareness of the Mahabharat usually assume that its primary theme is war, but in fact, of the 18 mammoth chapters that make up the 100,000 verses, only 5 deal with the great war itself. In fact, as Aruna Narlikar and I argued in our 2014 book with Oxford University Press, this is a book about negotiation and bargaining – negotiation in normal times, pre-war negotiations, negotiations during war, and post-war negotiations. It is also a text that is very insightful on questions of both strategy and morality; it deals with questions not only of Realpolitik but also values. Our latest book brings some of the wisdom of the Mahabharat – told through its stories – to the fore.

How can incorporating a non-anthropocentric perspective, rooted in values outlined in the Mahabharat, contribute to a more comprehensive global approach to environmental policies, particularly in addressing challenges such as biodiversity loss, animal welfare, and sustainable development?

I would suggest that a non-anthropocentric perspective is fundamental to addressing all the problems you mention above – and the fact that it is absent from global debates partly explains why progress on these issues has been so slow. The sooner we stop thinking of the planet as belonging to "our children and our children's children", the sooner will we be able to address the issues of consumerism, meat and dairy consumption, etc. We would be doing much more to prevent trophy hunting for instance. Importantly, this would not be just a "soft" area of words; it would translate into action, including in areas of foreign policy. We would build closer partnerships among countries that share the core values of LiFE (Lifestyle for the environment, as advanced by PM Modi – I had the honour to serve on the T20 taskforce on this, by the way). And allowing the LiFE concept to come to fruition, we would focus on not only human-centric development, but planet-centric development; we would speak about not only inter-generational justice but trans-species justice.

How do we move this agenda from one of ideals to action? I would suggest the use of at least three major instruments: a) trade agreements that ensure better terms for partners that prioritise animal welfare and rights; b) political narratives – besides working at the global level, these would also be reflected locally through leadership by example – for instance they would push for stronger domestic laws on Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and consequent legislation including the updating of PCA60 in India, while globally these would be raised across international forums ranging from the WTO; c) a global coalition of researchers, especially from the Global South, that is willing to think outside the box of the Western "liberal script" and develop even more liberal interpretations of more-than-human rights that have seeds in some democracies in the Global South.

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

First, on content: a) understand the importance of values, and do not think that standing up for values necessarily means diminishing the importance of interests. It is not always easy to do the right thing and still win – but it is possible. b) Don't fall into the trap of crude dichotomies such as values *vs* interests or "Asian"values *vs* "universal" values. The world is far more interesting, and we need to have theories that help us better understand this. c) Know that recognizing nuances in the world does not equate with cultural relativism. Just as it is important to recognize and appreciate difference, it is also important be fully aware and consequent of one's own red lines.

Second, on Approach: Remember the adage that is variously attributed to John Maynard Keynes, Paul Samuelson,

and Winston Churchill: “When the facts change, I change my mind; what do you do Sir?” This is especially important for scholarship – be prepared to reject old paradigms, and don’t just stick ideologically to particular theoretical approaches.