Review - India’s Strategic Practice and the Return of History

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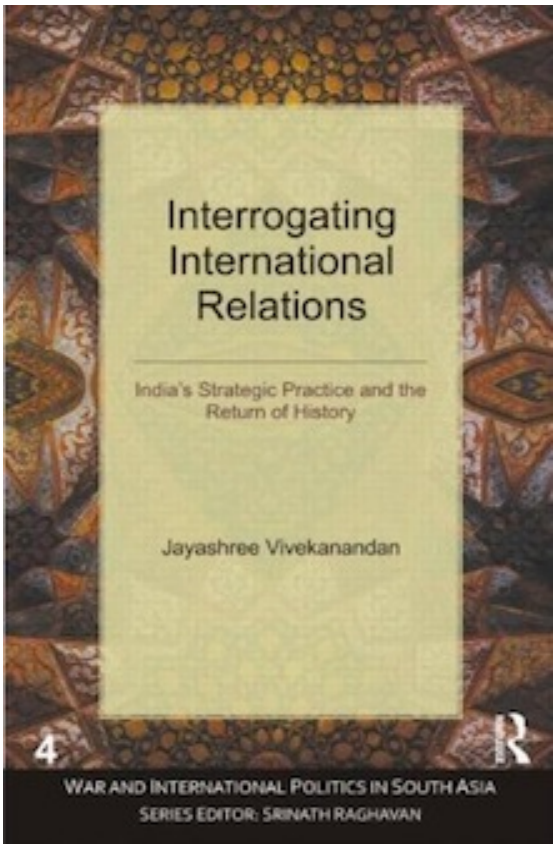
Interrogating International Relations: India’s Strategic Practice and the Return of History
by Jayashree Vivekanandan
Routledge India (2011)



The cultural turn in International Relations (IR) has had its moments of epiphany. Invariably, like most other disciplines, those eureka moments have been first experienced by westerners. It is not surprising since the resident discipline of culture studies, ‘anthropology’, is often credited with being the scientific advisor to colonialism in the past. In Indian IR, one such moment was publication of a RAND study in 1992, in which American scholar George Tanhem claimed that Indians had no strategic culture. Indians, owing to a cultural pre-disposition towards karmic philosophy and circular logic, were incapable of planning and thus betrayed a strategically absent mindset. His assertions provoked a number of studies by Indian scholars that criticized Tanhem for his misreading and misinterpretation of Indian culture and its effect on strategic thought and practice in India. Many of these studies,

meanwhile, engaged in a fallacy that they criticized Tanhem for – cultural essentialism. By weaving a romantic history of Hindu India's glorious strategic past, these scholars argued that Indians were not only capable of strategizing, but also have had a rich tradition of amoral *matchpolitik*.

Jayashree Vivekanandan's Interrogating International Relations: India's Strategic Practice and the Return of History intervenes in this debate and castigates both sides for veering towards cultural essentialism. In a systematic refutation of claims made by cultural essentialists on both sides, she argues that contextual rather than overtly cultural lenses ought to be used to investigate India's strategic thought. This is not to deny the explanatory potential of culture as a variable, and Vivekanandan explicitly locates her study within the broad rubric of cultural studies. However, her understanding of culture is of one that is historically protean.

The book, which builds upon her doctoral work, looks at the strategic practice of the Mughals, particularly Akbar. The Mughal Empire was an unprecedented achievement in terms of its territorial breadth. While it increased in size, mostly through coercive means, a more difficult issue was to ensure sustained allegiance of the smaller rulers to the Mughal crown. This necessitated a well-defined grand strategy. According to Vivekanandan, the Mughals developed the notion of 'accommodation' to fulfill that need. Accommodation implied a willingness to engage the adversary beyond the usual practice of coercion by using both assimilative as well as manipulative policies. It may baffle realists as to why the Mughals who were incomparably superior to other Indian rulers in terms of material power were less than willing to make rampant use of force vis-à-vis the other powers. To Vivekanandan, the answer is implied in the need for legitimacy. The success of Mughal rule can be attributed to the willingness of its rulers to indigenize its form of rule through instruments of socialization. Vivekanandan comes up with very interesting insights into how Mughals were able to pacify Rajputs by drawing them into unequal alliances wherein the latter were allowed to retain significant autonomy, but were compelled to remain loyal to the ruler. The Mughals were keener to establish normative legitimacy rather than material predominance over Rajputs. It is counter-intuitive to imagine how the Rajputs – who otherwise were very honour-driven in their conduct – could agree to serve as lesser officials in Mughal court. Listing a number of material and ideational factors that the Mughals budgeted into their grand strategy in order to ensure Rajput allegiance, Vivekanandan credits it to the political dexterity and normative inventiveness of Akbar's rule (the most successful Mughal ruler, 1556-1605).

Understandably then, Mughal strategy was also not cast in stone. It differed according to the context. In another case study, she takes up Mughal strategy towards the Deccan rulers. Given the enormity of distance between the Mughal centre of power – despite attempts by Mughals to move imperial capitals from Agra to Delhi in the north of India to Aurangabad in the south – and the Deccan states, socialization could not become a viable strategy. Here, the Mughals relied more on their coercive apparatus, and, not very surprisingly, were not as successful.

Located within the grand debate about India's strategic thought, the book is both a contribution as well as an indictment of the recent fetish for a search for Indian strategic thought. Her investigation into Mughal Grand Strategy and her conclusion, that there most definitely existed one, shall please the contra-Tanhemites. However, in making an argument for contextuality and historical contingency, she seems to convey that every culture – surely the Indian one – speaks in plural, protean undertones. Cultures manifest themselves through traditions and texts which are invariably polysemic. To look for cultural coherence, and thereby instill belief in a singular strategic tradition, is to murder the essence of culture. One cannot miss here that she takes Muslim rule, as against the tendency to view only 'Hindu past' as representative of India in the mainstream discourse, as one speaking on behalf of India's strategic history.

Given the western bias of disciplinary IR that attaches a foundational significance to the Westphalian moment, Vivekananda's study is interesting both from the standpoint of temporality and spatiality. Almost a hundred years before Westphalia, the greatest experiment in state-making began in India. Akbar's reign had been able to achieve, to a great extent, the twin objectives of a modern state – internal pacifism and external security. To not see any strategic merit in bringing together and governing a huge landmass, perhaps only bettered by the Chinese in history before that, is to turn a blind eye to the obvious. And yet, non-Western voices remain marginal to any discourse about state-making and strategic practice in the discipline.

The pessimism that such ignorance exudes is however beginning to wane. Vivekanandan's work is symptomatic of this new insurrectionist movement underway in IR. Increasingly, and with great assertion, scholars from the Global South are infiltrating the citadels of IR. Significantly, this charge is not from the secluded disciplinary quarters of postcolonial or postmodern types or even from history, sociology, law or anthropology, but from within the discipline. To that corpus of writings, Vivekanandan's work is a welcome addition.

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