

Neglected Yarns and New Beginnings: A Delhi Diary

Written by Peter Vale

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PETER VALE, JAN 22 2016

A near-forgotten yarn from IR in the 1960s quite suddenly came back to me in an airless conference room in Delhi ten days ago.

I was at an event organised by a locally-based think-tank called International Research on India and International Studies (IRIIS), which was sponsored by the World International Studies Committee (WISC) and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIS).

The location was the India International Centre (IIC) – an attractive campus of almost 5 acres which is adjacent to Delhi's famous Lodi Gardens. This was certainly an apposite place to consider the conference theme *Alternative Cosmologies & the Knowledge Systems in International Relations: Voices from the Global South*.

The IIC was created (in 1958) as a place to promote the 'quickenning and deepening of true and thoughtful understanding between peoples of nations'. Most at last week's conference would have agreed that the mainstream IR has failed to deliver on this founding mandate.

The question of why IR has turned out as obstacle, rather than facilitator, of 'the true and thoughtful understanding between peoples of nations' was largely left at the conference door. But it has troubled IR, as much as it troubles the world that the discipline makes.

Since the end of the Cold War, IR's path has been marked by the exchange of perplexed stares (at the ISA and elsewhere) between the mainstream and the margins. In a real sense, however, there are two, not one, paths in IR – and, for all the celebratory claims of plurality, IR's equivalent of the dirty little secret is that the margins and the mainstream seldom converge.

Why this was so, brought the near-forgotten tale to my mind: upon Nigeria's independence in 1963, the United State gifted the country a library of books on International Relations. As the story goes, America's independence gift was located in the head-quarters of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs which was established a few years earlier. The collection was curated by American, not local, librarians. This confluence of America's 'knowing' of the world and British organisational authority of the field remains to be researched in this case.

But Nigeria was not an exception, the same Anglo-American understanding of what constituted IR coursed through the world-in-the making during the independence movements of the late-1940s, the 1950s and well-into the 1960s. It was an approach to the idea of the international that effectively silenced alternative narratives of social relations at the sovereign level – silencing other explanations – even those which might well offer 'true and thoughtful understanding(s) between peoples of nations'. This modernist discourse was carried in a language, English, that shamelessly muted other languages which (as Linguists tell us) offer insights into social relations at the quotidian level.

If these concerns were formally outside of the conference room in Delhi, the enthusiasm for making and re-making the discipline and, indeed, the world continuously brought the everyday into the conversation. Expectedly, perhaps, issues of race – and, of course, gender – featured strongly, as did the questions of translation, voice, authority and

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that old disciplinary scab, sovereignty, was opened again.

Can the latter ever heal? The wound is scratched each and every time the two words 'international relations' are mentioned.

A remarkable array of approaches and voices filled the room – and the interdisciplinary reach was enhanced by the participation (for two of the four days) of the acclaimed theorist, Ashis Nandy. Although positioned outside the discipline, Nandy's many writings have sparked searing insights for those positioned at the margins – it is small wonder then, that amongst his many awards, he counts one from the ISA. In several incisive interventions – histologically-informed, theoretically-rich, and unremittingly critical, he twice (with almost devilish pride) confessed that he'd never studied IR.

Was the Delhi gathering just another shindig – IR scholars travelling the world in search of comfort, colloquy, cuisine? Can the rich exchange in a stuffy room help to deliver on the IIC's hopes for international relationships that are both 'thoughtful' and 'true'? Would the energy of the young participants (drawn from many of this world's corners) in Delhi make a real difference?

Could they finally help find the voice to free the margins from the mainstream?

With passion and purpose, they drew the conversation into that dark recess – ontology – which is the place where the margins and the mainstream meet, and seems to be the only space where IR's compass can be reset. And it is in this hope that the 'Delhi Group: a forum for IR in the Global South' – the name we proclaimed for ourselves in the final session – has been established!

About the author:

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