

Interview – Pallavi Raghavan

Written by E-International Relations

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, MAY 10 2022

Pallavi Raghavan is Assistant Professor of International Relations at Ashoka University. Her book, titled *Animosities at Bay: An Alternative History of the India-Pakistan Relationship, 1947 – 1952* was published in 2020, by Hurst & Co. (UK), and OUP (US). For her next project, she is interested in developing a broader history of the British Empire's theories of partition in the twentieth century. This project is to be contextualized in a comparative framework looking at partition histories in different contexts, such as Ireland, Palestine, and South Asia. She has published widely in peer-reviewed journals, including *The Economic and Political Weekly*, *Modern Asian Studies*, and *International History Review*. She also contributes frequently to digital news platforms such as *The Wire* and *Scroll.in*. She has her PhD in Modern South Asian History from the University of Cambridge.

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

The resurgence of interest in South Asia's historical setting as a component in the shaping of its internationalist thinking is opening up exciting possibilities of enquiry. It allows us to appreciate how the processes of state making have to be understood in a context specific way, and think about how state formation isn't always a one-size fits-all formula. This in turn helps us to think about the complexities of international behaviour further, and look at the reasons that different states follow different paths in the international arena. I think the field of Historical IR in South Asia is only going to grow, and I look forward to following its evolution.

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

Increasingly, I am concerned and fearful of the way the rules based international system of the twentieth century—something that I took for granted when I was studying—is increasingly under serious attack. All the assumptions that people worked with in the aftermath of the second world war—that nation states, not ethnicities or vaguely defined civilisational values would count for the most in decision making, that a sense of liberal internationalism held these systems in place, and that a serious breach of the laws of this system would be penalised— have steadily eroded in the past decade. A number of reasons are probably responsible for this—while arguments about colonial wrongs and the processes of decolonisation have increasingly been hijacked by regimes that are committing the most serious breaches in the international order—but one of my own working hypothesis is that some of this might also be to do with the feelings of betrayal and anger caused by the Iraq War. My sense is that the feeling that the same rules don't have to apply anymore must have taken root at that stage.

How should History be read at a time when it has become a tool for fuelling polarization across the globe?

In a way, I think the problem with History these days is that it has become too generalised—practically everyone in India thinks that they are a fully qualified historian, university degree or no. I think this poses troubling consequences, both for the state of the discipline, as well as for the future of academic university departments in India. I think the relevance of History as an academic discipline is absolutely crucial to all kinds of disciplines—including IR—but I think there's a danger that its dilution to the point of simply a fond imagination about the past also poses a grave threat to other disciplines.

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How far-reaching has the impact of colonial thinking been on the historiographical practices of the Indian subcontinent? What kind of hurdles do historians face when they attempt to move away from colonial tropes?

I guess a lot of the undergirding assumptions about the discipline of History go back to the ideas about the excavation of the past as part of a colonial agenda. For example, as recent work in this area shows, so much of the Harappan excavations were also a product of the colonial attempt to invent a past for India that could align with their own 19th century objectives. History, the modern discipline as we understand it today, is also inextricably linked to a 19th century agenda about colonial powers recovering ‘lost’ civilisations, so as to help its current descendants along on the path to modernity, in line with the requirements of colonising powers. But I also think it makes more sense to recognize and address these blinkers, as opposed to doing away with the nature of the discipline as we understand it altogether. A lot of what is being done in the name of Decolonisation is actually really harmful to discipline—colonially inherited or not.

In your book *Animosity at Bay*, you present an alternative history of Indo-Pak relations that breaks away from hegemonic traditions in IR. How far does a context-specific historiography help in opening new avenues for understanding and analyzing diplomatic history in contrast to the dominant (often Western) knowledge traditions?

Being context specific IS important—there’s not much point working with a set of theories that don’t work in your own context. But I may not go as far as to say that this process always goes against Western knowledge traditions—it might help explain them further, reinforce them or subtly alter their meaning. But in a broader sense I think a more historicised study of India’s IR—what is currently being called ‘the archival turn’—helps to give more meaning to thinking about norms, values and imperatives of the internationalist behaviour of states. They help out flesh out how statehood means different meanings, have different routes, and thus show how all states don’t have to share the same values when deciding their international behaviour. More than that they also help to show how, for different people statehood itself is a contingent set of factors, is not pre-determined, and thus throws up further explanations about why states behave in the way that they do.

There has been a tendency to exceptionalize histories of certain regions and places in mainstream global history like South Asia and the Middle East. What do you think is the way out of this exceptionalization of history, if it is at all possible?

Many scholars of the Middle East have argued that the analysis of their region is unfavourably skewed toward a tendency to view the trends of this region as a unique phenomenon—that undefinable cultural and religious ideologies were somehow more convincing as explanations about the state of the region, than explanations that would have logically also been applicable to other parts of the world. I also think a similar problem works in the study of the South Asian region: that its evils are understood as part of a set of identities that apply uniquely to the region, rather than more straightforward explanations about poverty or illiteracy or the legacy of colonialism. What scholars of the Middle East, such as James Gelvin point out is that we have to appreciate that problems in different regions are deeply interconnected: that the problems of that region should be seen as part and parcel of global political processes. I think this kind of intervention also has useful possibilities for scholarship on South Asia: for example, India’s own problems would also be able to be connected more firmly with the legacies of colonialism, rather than the supposedly unique cultural characteristics of its people.

In your experience as an academic from the “East” or global South, how far has the discipline of IR come in including narratives from the non-West?

I definitely think there have been substantial strides in the past few years—partly as a result of the global moment that we’re in, partly as a result of a shift of scholars interest toward recovering ‘non Eurocentric’ perspectives in IR. For example, as Manjari Chatterjee Miller, or Bérénice Guyot-Récharde (to name just a sample of some of the books I’m consulting right now) have shown, the ‘state-making’ process in South Asia was a distinctly different phenomenon to the established rules of the Western world—it was held in place by different assumptions, and it had

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different expectations. To some extent, this is also a question of folding in the insights of the processes of Decolonisation more firmly into how we think about states behaviour in the non- western world. But I also feel like we have to be wary of making these processes seem too 'unique', or exceptionalized: there is a danger in going too far with this argument of taking at face value the orientalist assumptions about the 'non- West' that were constructed because of the processes of colonialism in the first place.

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

I think the most important thing that I would stress is the importance of a good theoretical foundation for the study of International Relations: I think it's fun to develop a sense of the state of the discipline first, before applying it in practice. It's also so important—and this is as important in the field of IR, as it is in History, as it is, I suppose, in life—to keep asking the question why, as opposed to being content to receive the accepted wisdom in an unquestioning way, without actually checking to see if it is, in fact, worth accepting. Its more interesting, I like to sometimes tell students, to want to reinvent the debate, rather than wanting to be anchors on TV to moderate it.