

Imagining new worlds: forging 'non-western' International Relations in late colonial India

Martin J. Bayly reveals an Indian dimension to the development of International Relations studies



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For some time, the academic discipline of International Relations has comforted itself with the notion that its origins lie in the noble quest for peaceful coexistence after the horrors of the First World War. Given an institutional footing here in the United Kingdom with the establishing of the Woodrow Wilson Chair at Aberystwyth in 1919, and rooted in the longer standing traditions of 'political science' in the United States, International Relations has maintained its European and North American creation myths.

Yet in August 1919, the 13th edition of the leading American journal *American Political Science Review* published an article by the Indian sociologist and political theorist Benoy Kumar Sarkar. The paper, titled 'Hindu Theory of International Relations', drew upon a wealth of Hindu spiritual texts (the *Vedas*) published by Oriental Societies in India, the United States and elsewhere, outlining a doctrine of *mandala* or 'sphere of influence'. Described as underlying the 'Hindu idea of the "balance of power"', he presented the doctrine as pervading multiple texts in the longstanding tradition of Hindu 'speculation on the subject of international relations', including the famed 4th-century BC political writings of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and Kamandaka's *Nitisara*.

Sarkar's work demonstrates that envisaging the 'international' was not just the preserve of imperial powers seeking a new framework for international co-operation



Professor Benoy Kumar Sarkar, from the March-April 1917 issue of *The Hindusthane Student*.

– as with ideas of 'Greater Britain'.¹ Nor was it solely the product of a rising American great power delineating a strategy for the enacting of its prestige and power in what would become known as the 'American Century'.²

1. Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

2. Stanley Hoffman, 'An American Social Science: International Relations', *Daedalus*, 106:3 (1977), 41–60.

The activity of ‘thinking the international’ was forged in global projects of imperial power and anti-imperial resistance. In India, this reimagining of international order would resonate in the theory and practice of India’s foreign policy long after independence, and in many ways leave a legacy that exists to this day. In this 70th anniversary of India’s independence this story is worth recalling.

Internationalism

Sarkar was not alone in his efforts to propound an Indian vision of international affairs. From its creation in 1910 onwards, the earliest issues of the *American Journal of Race Development* – the forerunner to *Foreign Affairs* – included articles by North American and South Asian scholars alike covering developments in India such as the state of the Indian national congress, the status of the Sikh diaspora in Canada, and Indian attitudes towards the future of world order after the Great War. Indeed, for internationalist thinkers in India, envisaging a post-imperial concept of India’s role in the world carried with it a distinct national and often *political* project.

This movement was global in its impact. In the ‘internationalist moment’ of the inter-war years, a thriving community of political writers and publishers flourished both in India and abroad. Many held connections with ‘nationalist’ papers in America such as *Young India* and *Hindusthane Student*, publishing articles propounding anti-imperial visions of history and futurist visions of pan-Asian solidarity and renewal – ideas that were matched with projects of pan-Islamism, and pan-Africanism elsewhere. Mobility was key in the spread of these ideas as Indian scholars from across the ideological spectrum partook in a vast array of intellectual exchanges, buoyed in no small part by advances in international travel.³ Many embarked on lecture tours in Europe, America, and East Asia, often using such opportunities to check on the progress of disciplinary trends in those countries. Benoy Kumar Sarkar’s exhaustive lecture tour of the United States in March–June 1949 took in no fewer than 25 university and college appearances, as well as numerous meetings with commercial bodies, financiers, chapters of the Federal Reserve, learned societies, and Indian diaspora associations such as the Vedanta Society of Chicago and the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Centre in New York.⁴ These connections between independence movements in South Asia and receptive communities of solidarity in North America, in particular, seemed to herald new patterns of vibrancy in international thought.

Yet was this merely an intellectual movement? Late-colonial Indian internationalism was part of a global network of philanthropy and capitalist funding of projects that provided new visions of international order as power shifted from declining European powers towards the superpowers of the United States and Soviet Russia. In the North American context, these global networks of scholarly exchange were frequently sustained by funding from organisations including the Carnegie Endowment, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Ford Foundation, thus connecting the spread of learned knowledge with the expansion of global capital.⁵ Sarkar’s trips were funded by the Los Angeles-based Watumull Foundation, established by a US-based Sindhi merchant, as well as the New York-based Institute of International Education. These developments showed that ways of thinking about international affairs were becoming linked with now dominant centres of economic and cultural power.

Indian Council on World Affairs

A major shift in this privatisation of policy knowledge revolved around the formation of international affairs think-tanks. India was part of the movement towards the ‘private’ accumulation of useful knowledge to inform the conduct of statecraft with the establishing of the Indian Council on World Affairs (ICWA) in 1943. Modelled on the Royal Institute of International Affairs (‘Chatham House’), and presenting a founding vision of an ‘independent organization in India for the objective study of international affairs’,⁶ the ICWA adopted a more policy-orientated posture. Yet its founding Managing Director, A. Appadorai would become a key discipline builder in Indian international studies, including playing a central role in the establishing of the School of International Studies at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, which remains a leading centre for the study of international affairs in India today.⁷

As the ICWA demonstrates, the purposes of these ventures also crossed the scholarly and administrative divide, with many dividing their writings between academic texts, political advocacy (including on behalf of ‘nationalist’ movements), and policy advice. Appadorai’s advocacy for the ICWA took him to London in 1948 – much to the suspicion of nervous Foreign Office officials, who feared his ‘Communist’ sympathies – where he established links with Chatham House and successfully lobbied the UK government for official publications on UK domestic policy with which to develop the ICWA

3. Benjamin Zachariah, ‘Internationalisms in the Interwar Years: The Travelling of Ideas’, in *The Internationalist Moment: South Asia, Worlds, and World Views, 1917–39*, edited by Ali Raza, Franziska Roy and Benjamin Zachariah (Delhi: Sage, 2015).

4. Tarak Nath Das, *India in America: The Diary of Professor Benoy Sarkar’s Travels and Lectures in the U.S.A.* (Ann Arbor: Craft Press, 1949).

5. Inderjeet Parmer, *Foundations of the New American Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

6. British Library, London, India Office Records [hereafter ‘IOR’], L/1/1/116, ‘The Indian Council of World Affairs: Constitution, Rules, and Activities’, 1946, p. 38.

7. See for example, A. Appadorai, ‘University Teaching in International Relations in India’, *India Quarterly*, 10:1 (1954), 52–71.

library.⁸ Indeed the ICWA had been founded on the principle of providing useful knowledge for a newly independent India, carrying with it ideas of national renewal and purpose. The first edition of the organisation's journal *India Quarterly* spoke of an 'all pervading sense of helplessness in public life in India ... it appears as though, politically, economically and socially, we are still groping our way to those ideas and institutions which will enable us to be ourselves'.⁹ The edition incorporated papers on 'Approaches to the Indian Constitutional Problem'; 'Stabilization of Currencies and Prices'; and what would become a regular section on 'India and the World'. This policy advice fed into wider projects of post-war global governance too, including within the nascent United Nations organisation. Appadorai was one of many whose scholarly work and insights contributed to intergovernmental organisations such as UNESCO.¹⁰ The close relationship that the ICWA cultivated with administrative power was clear in the 1947 Asian Relations Conference. Sponsored by the Congress Party, the conference comprised nearly 400 delegates, official and unofficial from across Asia, establishing the Asian Relations Organization and laying the foundation for the 1955 Bandung Conference, an international conference of newly independent states, which would later evolve into the 'non-aligned' movement during the Cold War.

'Counter-knowledge'

Whilst these examples locate parts of the scholarly and practical enterprise of international affairs in India in wider 'global histories' and sociologies of knowledge, attention to more learned approaches rooted in universities and their faculty reveals alternative patterns. Here international studies emerged as an exchange and dialogue between European and non-European traditions of political thought. In many cases this included strong voices of dissent and resistance against dominant European forms of knowledge. In such examples, 'political science' was a tool against the powerful, almost as a means of 'counter-knowledge'. The inter-war era was a particularly fertile period for the voicing of South Asian dissent in the field of international thought. Writing in the *Journal of Race Development* on 'The World and the Next War: An Eastern Viewpoint', M.N. Chatterjee turned the corpus of 'western' peace studies, including the work of Nobel Peace Prize recipient Norman Angell, against the supposedly 'civilised' warring European

powers. Referencing his own experience in the Glasgow slums as evidence of the hypocrisy of western moral superiority and the devastating impact of class hierarchies, Chatterjee predicted a future conflict between East and West, as the West faced the inevitable demand from the East for greater justice in international relations.¹¹

In December 1938, the first Indian Political Science Conference was held at Benares University under the auspices of the newly formed Indian Political Science Association (IPSA). Representatives from all but three of the Indian universities were present, and inaugurated the ceremony with the singing of the independence movement song *Bande Matram*, first sung by Rabindranath Tagore at the 1896 session of the India National Congress.¹² Giving the Presidential Address, the Prime Minister of the United Provinces, Pandit Govind Ballabh Pant, railed against the use of science (including political science) as part of an imperial project. He advocated a new political science in the service of independent India by 'throwing into the Ganges ... many of the text-books on political science ... [to] lay the foundation of a real working basis for political realization.'¹³ The IPSA's journal *The Indian Journal of Political Science* began publishing in 1939, presenting the proceedings of the recent conference and articles on subjects including reform of the League of Nations, and a 'Muslim political theory of rebellion'.

But whilst resistance was an important theme, many sought to merge different traditions, producing surprising patterns of thought that seemed to resonate with, and even feed upon, European approaches to theorising international relations. Taking a less activist position, writing from the Hindu University Benares, on the eve of the Second World War, the Oxford-educated S.V. Puntambekar, for example, reflected on the shared role that mythological forms played in the development of both European and non-European political thought. Delineating 'realistic, idealistic, and utopian lines' of political thought, Puntambekar channelled ideas that resonated with E.H. Carr, one of the most prominent figures of international thought in inter-war Europe. Carr's contemporaneous *The Twenty Years' Crisis* sought to castigate those 'utopians' who believed in the possibility of peaceful coexistence through 'idealistic' institutions such as the League of Nations, instead arguing for a more 'realistic' understanding of international relations that would put 'power' at the centre of calculation. For Puntambekar, this analysis emerged as a

'Political science' was a tool against the powerful, as a means of 'counter-knowledge'.

8. IOR/L/I/1/116.

9. 'Ourselves', *India Quarterly*, 1:1 (1945), 3–5.

10. Appadorai, 'University Teaching'.

11. M.N. Chatterjee, 'The World and the Next War: An Eastern Viewpoint', *Journal of Race Development*, 6:4 (1916), 388–407.

12. Gurmukh Nihal Singh, 'The First Indian Political Science Conference', *Indian Journal of Political Science*, 1:1 (1939), 107–112.

13. G.B. Pant, 'Presidential Address', *Indian Journal of Political Science*, 1:1 (1939), 113–19.

far more expansive discourse on political theory incorporating Christian, Hindu, and Islamic ‘myths’ of political thought and their modern equivalents.¹⁴ Puntambekar thereby provided a more cosmopolitan vision of international political thought.

Yet it was B.K. Sarkar who was perhaps most vocal and most eclectic in his intellectual resources. In his essay on ‘The Futurism of Young Asia’, Sarkar lodged a wide-ranging assault on the ‘race-psychologies’ of ‘Eur-America’, critiquing their denial of history and the unfair treatment of non-Europeans by European thinkers that had repeatedly denigrated the cultural and intellectual achievements of the ‘East’. Turning to the *orientalisme* of the ‘West’, and its emphasis on the ‘immorality, sensuousness, ignorance, and superstition’ of the ‘East’, Sarkar drew a parody of Occidental methodology, interpreting the Iliad as evidence for Europeans as ‘fractious; immoral; licentious; polygamous; in thrall to despotic government and the rule of tyrants’.¹⁵ Here, Sarkar drew upon European history as a means of lodging a protest at the intellectual treatment of India by the ‘orientalists’ of the west.

Conclusion

The richness and vibrancy of international thought in South Asia provides a number of insights for International Relations as a discipline, and for the social sciences as a whole. Attention to international thought in South Asia reveals the global connections of scholarly networks, challenging the notion that the discipline of International Relations disseminated from the ‘west’ to the ‘rest’. Instead, the ‘non-west’ is revealed as a critical site for the constitution of political science and International Relations, encompassing multiple forms of dialogue, contestation, and resistance. This was a discipline that was ‘global’ at birth and South Asian thinkers played an active role in its practices.

Equally important are the forms of knowledge that were generated in these exchanges. Anti-imperial and anti-colonial projects produced new ways of thinking about the purpose of social science. Often this resulted in a more emancipatory vision, one that often questioned the presumptions of race and hierarchy that were embedded within notions of ‘great powers’ and their authority to rule. This attitude also led to a questioning of the centrality of European histories. Long before the



The first Indian Political Science Conference, held at Benares Hindu University, on 22–24 December 1938.

post-colonial moment in the arts and social sciences in the west, intellectuals in South Asia were therefore questioning the ‘hegemonic’ knowledge of the west. In these examples, social science – and International Relations in particular – was a tool of resistance, even emancipation, against the intellectual dominance of imperial and post-imperial states.

Yet these projects also interacted with powerful forms of capital and state power. The dependency upon the funding streams of philanthropic organisations, as well as the tendency to mimic learned societies in the west, and draw upon their knowledge resources created tensions between emancipatory visions of international order, and the regeneration of pre-existing hierarchies. The need for ‘useful knowledge’ to inform Indian statecraft in post-independence India led to the prioritising of policy relevant scholarship at the expense of the cultivating of distinctly South Asian contributions to political and international thought. On the one hand this explains the curious absence of South Asian international thought in the disciplinary histories of International Relations (including those written by South Asian scholars). On the other hand, it makes the recovery of these ideas all the more important, to widen the geographic and intellectual scope of International Relations and the social sciences as a whole.

Finally, as this history shows, when international politics transitions to new centres of political, economic and cultural power, so the ideas that inform international politics transition too. As diplomats and politicians come to terms with the shift from post-Cold War US supremacy, prevailing ideas of international order may once more be up for debate. ■

14. S.V. Puntambekar, ‘The Role of Myths in the Development of Political Thought’, *Indian Journal of Political Science*, 1:2 (1939), 121–32.

15. Benoy Kumar Sarkar, *The Futurism of Young Asia and other Essays on the Relations Between the East and the West* (Berlin: Julius Springer, 1922), 4–6.