Indigenism in Contemporary IR Discourses in India: A Critique

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Abstract

This article critically examines indigenism in the field of International Relations (IR) in India. Indigenism involves a claim that a select corpus of resources from early India—'indigenous historical knowledge'—is relevant for understanding contemporary India's politics and international relations. It is also projected as a basis for reimagining IR in India. Contesting these claims, the article outlines the ahistorical and politically problematic nature of indigenism. It also argues that the appeal of indigenism reveals a predicament of imaginative capacity that marks the scholarship concerned with reimagining IR in India: despite considerable interest in lessening the dependence on the architecture of IR of the West, there is less clarity about the shape and substance of new scholarly frameworks. The enthusiasm for reimagining IR is not, as yet, matched by very substantive pathways to doing it. This too, inadvertently, encourages indigenism. The article concludes by arguing that closely studying the political modernization of South Asia and its implications for international relations of India and the region can resolve this predicament.

Keywords

Reimagining IR, non-Western IR, Kautilya, *Arthashastra*, indigenism, South Asia, India's rise, great power, social theory, political modernization

Is it possible that knowledge forms can appear to be concerned with history but remain without a sense of the historical? Historians suggest that claims about the past must be examined before being accepted as historical. The field of International Relations (IR) in India is witnessing, among several of its scholars, a growing inclination towards a select corpus of resources from early—'ancient'—India for doing IR in an 'Indian' way. This trend and the intellectual activities pursued within its fold can be termed indigenism. Voices associated with indigenism claim that 'indigenous historical knowledge' chronicled in a corpus of Brahminical texts and traditions from early India can not only inform India's domestic politics and foreign policy but also become a basis for reimagining IR in India. Problematizing this claim and thus critiquing indigenism, this article emphasizes the salience of the historical and the modern for IR in India. It underlines the necessity of studying resources from India's past historically and argues that studying the political modernization of South Asia instead can be a substantive pathway to reimagining IR in India.

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The Shades of Indigenism

The following examples provide glimpses of indigenism:

In 2012, a leading Indian IR scholar proposed 'an *Indian* grammar for International Studies' (Mattoo, 2012, emphasis added). He suggested that having emulated the western ways of studying international relations, it was time for Indians to 'use the vocabulary of our past as a guide to the future'. Claiming that thinking on international relations in 'great civilizations' like India and China went back 'to well before the West even began to think of the world outside their living space', he suggested:

> If all the books on war and peace were to suddenly disappear from the world, and only the Mahabharata remained, it would be good enough to capture almost all the possible debates on order, justice, force and the moral dilemmas associated with choices that are made on these issues within the realm of international politics.

The scholar conceded the claim was 'astounding' and clarified that his proposals were not advocating 'revivalism' or Indian exceptionalism. Yet, he argued that given India's rising influence and the self-confidence of Indian IR intellectuals, recovery of ideas from the Indian past will be essential to guiding its future (Mattoo, 2012).

In 2009, one of India's leading foreign affairs analysts wrote a piece on the 100th anniversary of the publication of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* where he noted that even though the '*mandala* theory of international politics was referred to in many of India's *dharmashastra*s, it was Kautilya's Arthashastra that codified it'. He stressed the need for 'a rising India to create a strategic vocabulary *all of its own*' (emphasis added). And further: 'That India's strategic lexicon must be rooted in its *own political traditions* has not always been self-evident.' The scholar noted that as India and China emerge as great powers in the twenty-first century, as they begin to end the Western political dominance, 'strategic thought from Asia's past is likely to return to the centre stage'. According to him, because Kautilya made his arguments about power, governance and statecraft without invoking religion or divinity, Kautilya was 'a *true* founder of what we now call political science' (emphasis added). He concluded: 'As it becomes more consequential for world politics in the twenty-first century, India would do well to revisit its own *realist* tradition so solidly reflected in the Mahabharata, Panchatantra, Arthashastra, Kamandaka-neeti, and Shukra-neeti' (Raja Mohan, 2009; emphasis added).

The Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) in New Delhi houses a project on 'ancient indigenous historical knowledge'. The project aims to build a conceptual language on strategic and security issues and reinterpret texts and traditions relevant to them during the contemporary period. Its objectives as specified in the opening event are: (*a*) to promote scholarship on Kautilya (and, presumably, other similar resources from early India); (*b*) to 'establish that India has a *long tradition* of strategic thinking, which needs to be brought to light'. This is necessary because, 'Western scholars have held and many Indians agree that India has no culture of strategic thought. Nothing can be farther from the truth. We need to *rediscover* India's strategic thought. We do not know enough about it'; and (*c*) to provide impetus to the study of regional thinkers on strategy and to '*rediscover* the *Panchatantra*, the *Mahabharata* and Tamil Sangam literature to better appreciate Indian strategic thought' (Gupta, 2012; emphases added). A monograph (Gautam, 2013) written as part of the project positions Kautilya's *Arthashastra* as 'indigenous political theory' (Gautam, 2013, p. 7), makes a case for engaging the text for directions on policy studies, and argues that it is relevant to strategic and academic international studies too. Its author identifies the 'undue weight of foreign academic hegemony' on Indian academics as one of the several

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reasons for the neglect of Kautilya's 'classical wisdom', which could provide an alternative to western theory and thought (Gautam, 2013, p. 17).

These prominent examples, illustrating only some of the various shades of indigenism, must be located within a larger body of indigenist thought and writings. It must be said that there are IR writings with only traces of indigenist impulses. Furthermore, there may be scholars who invoke indigenous resources without worrying about its implications; or indeed who perhaps believe that there is no harm in invoking these traditional national resources. Still others may be interested in them but unsure of how best to use them. Nevertheless, instances of indigenist writings and writings with indigenist undertones are substantial and growing. More examples: A scholar traces the sanction for modern India's nuclear weapons to ancient Hindu culture and thought, which, in his assessment, was not averse to development and use of the weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) (Karnad, 2013, pp. 191–250). For another scholar, a study of political ideas in the *Valmiki Ramayana* can help us ascertain the values and understandings of security that animate contemporary Indian and South Asian thinking (Rajagopalan, 2006, pp. 24–53). Scholars also claim that a text like *Mahabharata*, that represents India's national culture, sheds light on the state's bargaining positions and negotiating strategies in international affairs (Narlikar and Narlikar, 2014). Furthermore, readers of IR literature about India will also notice numerous mere references within it to Kautilya's *Arthashastra* as the definitive classical text on Indian political and strategic thought. It is not unlikely that indigenist currents in IR discourses in India are also encouraged by western writings that glorify these resources by claiming, as Roger Boesche does for instance, that Kautilya was the 'first great political realist' (Boesche, 2002).[1] Intellectual competition with China, which has its own form of indigenism, also fuels indigenist trends in India. In addition to this, those political science departments in India that produce a genre of literature in the name of knowledge that does not meet some indispensable criteria of scholarship promote what they call research on the relevance of these resources for contemporary India's politics and international conduct. Finally, indigenism in IR discourses in India cannot be dis-embedded from the larger context of right-wing political consciousness in modern India (though of course every IR indigenist may not have right-wing leanings or convictions; besides, this article is not interrogating the normative dimensions of right-wing philosophy). Having gradually emerged over the past century, this consciousness may significantly strengthen in near future due to a favourable domestic and international economic and political climate. As indigenism may grow alongside it, there is a need to empirically understand the linkages between them. Therefore, it is useful to examine the structure and methods of indigenism and the intellectual context that adds to its appeal.[2]

The Structure of Indigenism

The trend of invoking supposedly-indigenous resources to reimagine the study of international relations from an Indian perspective is evidently tied to the discourse of India's 'emergence' or 'rise' as a 'great power' in international affairs. This elite discourse of great power desire is more than a decade old and is conspicuous by its aspirational tone (see Mallavarapu, 2007 and Mishra, 2013). While it has drawn its share of adherents and critics, the discourse has influenced academic research and policy commentary. It has also given birth to a narrative of the (re)discovery of intellectual self-confidence among IR scholars in India who now wish to unhesitatingly engage with India's 'long' historical tradition and its resources to revise the content of IR in India. Indigenism thrives within this upbeat discursive ambience.

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The following are the key features of indigenism. First, it is preoccupied with only a select corpus of Brahminical texts and traditions that are claimed as being relevant to understanding contemporary Indian statecraft and international conduct and for producing academic knowledge with Indian concepts and theories. Thus, the *dharmashastra* and *nitishastra* corpus of literature are prescribed and resources that are championed include the *Arthashastra*, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Shukra-niti*, *Nitisara*, *Manusmriti, Panchatantra* and so on.

Second, as these resources belong to the period before the arrival of Islam and Christianity in the subcontinent, the 'indigenous' appears to signify a fixed and exclusive temporality. It is reasonable to assume that here the 'indigenous' does not include knowledge created within the Islamic or Christian traditions or those developed during the period of Muslim rule in the subcontinent.

Third, within the fixed temporality of the indigenous too there seems almost no recognition or awareness of alternative resources. For instance, alongside the form of materialism and rational reflection evidenced in the *arthashastra* tradition, of which the *Kautilya Arthashastra* is the supposed apogee, there existed alternative traditions, such as Buddhism, that were also rooted in materialism and rationalism. Buddhism is understood to have provided an influential alternative to the Brahminical conception of human—social and political, domestic and international—relations whose sway over the subcontinent continued until the early centuries of the Common Era. There is an unawareness or non-recognition within indigenism of these alternative traditions and absence of emphasis on studying them to understand their relevance for politics and international relations of contemporary India.

Fourth, indigenists seem particularly interested in establishing, beyond doubt, the absolute earliness or comprehensiveness of these texts and traditions within the comparative timeline of scholarship. Thus, the *Arthashastra* is presented as the earliest treatise of political science, statecraft and 'realism' in the world, predating its western 'counterpart', the writings of Machiavelli, by several centuries. And the *Mahabharata* is presented as a philosophical resource containing unmatched insights about the tensions between absolute moral command and prudent political action. This projection is linked to the revival of interest in the text and the story in print and television domains where the epic is being sold as 'the greatest story ever told' (Majumdar, 2009). Efforts to establish the superiority of these select resources from India's remote past over Western and Chinese traditions of reflections on politics are hard to miss.[3]

Fifth, while these indigenist prescriptions and initiatives seemed to be concerned with 'historical knowledge', both history and knowledge take interesting forms within them. The scarcity of history comes through in the following way. While these resources are located, through textual gestures such as dating the *Arthashastra*, on the globally-shared scale of historical time, the questions raised about these resources are those of their 'relevance' and not their 'translatability' to contemporary times. It is difficult to come across serious discussions in existing indigenist writings in which historical questions about the social life of these texts, practices and ideas are asked. Once we recognize its ahistorical nature, we also notice that indigenist scholarship leaves much to be desired.

Put together, these distinct yet mutually reinforcing aspects constitute a whole that makes indigenism intelligible. Indigenism thus appears a structural stance embedded within the universe of intellectual activities about politics and international relations of contemporary India and adhered to by people with some common concerns about doing IR differently. It may be articulated in the writings of individual scholars, but indigenism is more than the sum of their writings. This critique of the indigenist stance, therefore, need not be seen as criticism of individual scholars. This distinction allows us to appreciate the fact that irrespective of the intent of its proponents, indigenism, in its current form, can be critiqued on

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three grounds: that it is ahistorical despite appearing to be concerned with history; its claims of being scholarly are yet to rest on firm ground; and the exclusions it brings into effect raise questions of politics and methods that are inseparable from each other.

Ahistoricity, Claims of Scholarship and Exclusion

Indigenism 'appears' historical. Its concern with resources from a specific period of the subcontinent's past gives it that appearance. Here, the historical becomes that which is not contemporary. This is unsurprising: several fields of study, including IR in India, make this distinction between the contemporary and the historical. For example, for students of IR in India, the country's independence is the moment where history ends and political science and IR begin. We continue to see as 'historical' the ideas and practices of the pre-1947 periods and usually do not weave their trajectories into our understanding of the post-1947 or contemporary periods. We loosely invoke events from periods before 1947 without engaging with them in a concerted, theoretical manner. Similarly, indigenism appears historical because it is not concerned with the contemporary. It has the advantage of being interested in resources of early India—in popular perception this period is 'historical' primarily because it exists in a past so distant from the present.

But mere interest in the non-contemporary, or the past, scarcely makes a stance historical. History constitutes social consciousness by bringing time, on which the past is located, into play as a variable that is amenable to different uses. As societies gradually come to terms with the presence of history in their midst, time becomes a commonly available resource that can be used not just historically but also, ironically, in ahistorical ways. To take examples of the historical uses of time from modern India: the structures of nationalist and subaltern discourses in modern India reveal how different claims about autonomy, sovereignty and political rights have been anchored in differing interpretations of temporal sequence of events and processes between the past and the present.

The ahistorical use of time within historicized societies is an elusive phenomenon. If historicity implies social time, then ahistoricity occurs when time is emptied of this social content, when the idea of the meanwhile escapes the perception of time. Ahistoricity thrives by ignoring the fact that ideas, practices and institutions have social lives and that they mutate and vary within a structured temporality. In the ahistorical mode, these are viewed as singular, abstract and fully formed universes that can be utilized for contemporary purposes, progressive or regressive.[4] There is scarce recognition of the contexts within which ideas, practices and institutions take shape, gain relevance and/or fall out of favour.

The ahistorical engagement with time within modern, historicized societies remains innocent of those method-related questions that give history its philosophy, thus making time socially intelligible and useful for making normative claims. Any historical enquiry must come to terms with at least four method-related issues of metaphysics, hermeneutics, epistemology and historicism. Daniel Little renders them into the following questions:

> (1) What does history consist of—individual actions, social structures, periods and regions, civilizations, large causal processes, divine intervention? (2) Does history as a whole have meaning, structure, or direction, beyond the individual events and actions that make it up? (3) What is involved in our knowing, representing, and explaining history? (4) To what extent is human history constitutive of the human present? (Little, 2012)

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These are core questions of the philosophy of history. Interestingly, few indigenist writings seem to consider these issues seriously.

A strong reason for this lack of historicity could be the erroneous belief that these questions are meant for historians and not IR scholars. Because the belief is widespread and may also explain the generally weak historical and social content in our writings, examining it is helpful. Sudipta Kaviraj draws attention to the crucial difference between the historians' history and the social scientists' history (Kaviraj, 2005a, p. 498). The stance of the social theorist is as determined by her interpretation of history—for which methods are essential—as that of the historian. Questions of method are germane to histories of both the historian and the social scientist as they give meaning to temporal phenomena. The two differ, among other axes, on how they use these histories. Working with a sense of history enables social scientists to embed their theories and analyses within a historical and social context and prevents their frameworks from becoming versions of what Justin Rosenberg has termed the 'operator's manual' (Rosenberg, 2001, p. 10). But so dominant is the hold of the mechanistic and asocial conception of theory in IR in India that we often fail to recognize the importance of the social and the historical. It is not surprising that indigenism, which is part of this common sense, does not take a social view of history.

The expectations that indigenism has of its resources further reflect its ahistoricity. Indigenists seek to establish the 'relevance' of these resources for contemporary India's governance and international conduct. But because the idea of relevance is not unpacked, it leads them to mechanistically apply a Kautilya to contemporary affairs. Indigenism is characterized by inattention to historicity of the concepts that are employed within it. It is also pertinent to wonder if the belief in the relevance of the indigenous to the contemporary is a 'reflex response' to the distorting effects of theories and methods borrowed from IR of the West.

With some hermeneutic empathy, we can see that the relevance of a resource depends upon the uses it is put to. And there are at least four ways in which the resources circulating within the world of indigenism are claimed, although implicitly, to be relevant to us in modern times.

First, their utility as anecdotes and metaphors employed in popular writings and discussions on governance, moral consequences of political actions, statecraft and international relations. Such uses are common and, unless one is concerned with researching the popular, unexceptional from the scholarly point of view.

Second, their use as a springboard for ideas and wisdom in making policies. In such cases, the value of these resources depends upon their utility compared to resources from the contemporary period. For instance, reading the contemporary situation, a strategist may arrive at conclusions on statecraft broadly similar to those prescribed in, say, the *Arthashastra* without being familiar with the text or the tradition to which it belongs. In such cases, claiming that the strategist represents the Kautilyan tradition would amount to a retrojection. More than revealing the relevance of the Kautilyan tradition, such a claim would disclose a lot about the claimant's understanding and use of that tradition.

Third, it is also implied that these are philosophical resources that take their place in contemporary discourses for their normative prescriptions. Some questions will have to be answered to test the validity of this insinuation. Is it possible to have a modern Indian philosophy of politics and international affairs sourced from resources created in different historical and social contexts with different conceptual languages and cultural codes? How does a philosophical resource differ from a popular policy, and a theoretical resource? What is the desirability of a philosophical resource that is fundamentally exclusionary?

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Fourth, indigenists commonly appear to do scholarship or argue that there must be a move from cursory interest shown in these resources by journalists, political leaders, corporate executives and policy analysts in think-tanks, who use them to merely garnish their writings, to universities where scholarly work can be undertaken on them (Gautam, 2013). However, any scholarly engagement with these premodern resources will require acknowledging that their contemporary relevance, if any, can be established principally by first asking questions related to their translation and translatability to our modern times. The question of their relevance would come 'after' the question of their translation and, especially, their translatability, are satisfactorily answered.

Why are these questions salient? In literary contexts, translation involves converting a text from one language to another and translatability describes the potential of a text to be translated. Translation is necessary for accessing the meaning of a text written in a different language. But it is the translatability of the text that mediates the question of accessing difference. Some texts may change meaning in translation—get mistranslated—while others may be untranslatable. The questions of translation and translatability are encountered not merely by literary scholars but also political and social theorists working to access historical difference (Kaviraj, 2009, p. 177). Located in the modern, if we seek to understand the political–philosophical resources from early India, then we are trying to access historical difference. And therefore we must ask how these resources can be translated to our times. More pertinently, we must ask whether or not these resources are translatable into the modern period. In historical scholarship at least, relevance of the ideas contained in these resources will be determined by the scope of their translatability—and that will be a question of both method and politics. Rather than considering these questions, indigenists merely pluck a few ideas from a larger ideational constellation belonging to a different period and abstractly employ them to explain modern phenomena.

The aspirations of indigenism to scholarship are not helped by its emphasis on the earliness of articulation of a point of view within these resources or the superiority of their content. Such postures may be useful for fuelling intellectual competition between partisans of nations; they are hardly relevant for scholarship. Indian and international historians of early India have already contested similar forms of glorification and appropriation evident in the context of the Harappan civilization and the Aryan debate (Thapar, 2000; Trautmann, 2005; Witzel and Farmer, 2000). The trend is now being repeated in IR too. Anachronistic proclamations (for example, the *Arthashastra* is a text of political realism that predates its western counterpart, the writings of Machiavelli, by several centuries) or nationalist (in the religious–cultural sense) estimates (for example, the *Mahabharata* is the most comprehensive among the epics of political morality written anywhere, ever in the world) encourage methodological nationalism and power consciousness instead of considered, dispassionate reflection that characterises scholarship.

The exclusions perpetuated by indigenism are apparent to anyone conversant with the histories of the subcontinent. The 'indigenous' comes into effect, becomes itself, through 'temporal' and 'lateral' exclusions. The temporal exclusion, earlier hinted at, lies in the almost exclusive prominence given to those resources that are supposed to have flourished and held influence before the arrival of Islam (and perhaps even Christianity) in the subcontinent. This exclusion goes unnoticed or uncontested at least partially because the idea of a once-thriving, self-sufficient and glorious tradition unspoilt by 'foreign' religious and cultural influences, an idea whose narrative flatness reveals its contrived nature, resonates with strategically-influential sections of the Indian population as well as with those abroad who continue to have a stake in promoting it.[5] If the temporal exclusion is conspicuous, the lateral mode is more striking. Indigenists do not invoke non-Brahminical texts, traditions and practices from early India that existed alongside the Brahminical ones during the pre-Islamic and pre-Christian phases of Indian history.

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These resources were robust and humane alternatives to a system that inflicted manifold harm on human dignity of the many while privileging the few. These alternatives, including Buddhism, also had considerable popular adherence. Yet, these are excluded.

Whether or not these exclusions amount to selective intellectual amnesia—a condition under which an intellectual community suffers a deficit in memory so that it remembers only some aspects of its history and forgets others—is an open question. In a country intricately 'composed'—more than 'invented' or 'discovered'—in the modern times through inclusion of several histories and communities, the exclusionary stance of indigenism appears politically problematic. In fact, historians have contested and criticized its analogous form prevalent in the academic field of history for its divisive implications. While it will be a bit of a stretch to view indigenism within IR in India in the same manner, the similarities between the two may not be coincidental.

Indigenism and Historical Trajectories

Indigenism's ahistorical use of the past in India's historicized social–intellectual context is problematic on grounds political and those related to methods. Methods and political judgement are difficult to separate in an intellectual practice concerned with the historical in India. In addition to several material factors—local, regional, national and international—the composition of modern India became possible also because an intricate and sensitive philosophy of history undergirds it. This philosophy takes a politically responsible and progressive approach to reading Indian history, which is distinctive for its privileging of the modern. Thus, as it refrains from blurring, distorting, denying or ignoring history, it also cautions against legitimizing ideas and practises from the past that may create (often debilitating) disadvantages for contemporary India's constituent populations such as Dalits, religious minorities, women and tribal people. The complexity of this philosophy makes it vulnerable to assaults from reductionist and elementary readings of the historical trajectories of the subcontinent. This explains why historians committed to the composition of a syncretic modern India have to regularly counter various forms of ahistoricity. Without claiming any competence of the historian, however, I will flag some issues germane to working with resources such as those currently identified in the corpus of indigenism in the light of this philosophy of history.

First, almost all the resources that constitute the indigenist corpus are today identified with a problematic philosophical universe. The norms of conduct they prescribed were degrading to the lives of the members of the 'lower' castes, women and tribes. Besides providing clues to efficient statecraft and ideal methods of rule, both *Arthashastra* and *Manusmriti*, to take the two most prominent examples, also make profoundly regressive assumptions about the (human) nature of some groups. The punitive practices prescribed against women, shudras and tribes by these texts are acutely undesirable and, contrary to claims, not universally applicable at all: how could texts that—in the progressive language of the modern—prescribe torture as a form of punishment for crimes, uphold an unequal social system and reproduce gender discrimination be universally applicable? Indeed, throughout South Asian history, several vocal traditions have identified and protested against Brahminical excesses on subaltern populations. The historical narratives of these traditions are sometimes starkly opposed to the one espoused within indigenism. If the 'indigenous' resources have been subjected to political critique for their exclusionary formulations on the state and politics (for example, Ilaiah, 2000), these theorizations must be

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recognized and conversed with.[6] Indigenists show little awareness of these issues and of the social and political implications of indigenism.

Second, indigenists appear to understand these resources in a strikingly reductionist way. Critical editions of many of these texts may be available today, but it is useful to be aware of the long plural and social lives of the narratives associated with them. Several popular versions of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* exist within and beyond the boundaries of the modern Indian state and they differ from each other in their normative import. These versions are a reminder that several normative codes often get subsumed within the umbrella terms 'Ramayana' or 'Mahabharata' that the indigenists use. Each of these popular or vernacular versions represents the social history of a community's negotiation with its context. No serious project concerned with historical resources can ignore these, especially if it seeks to create conceptual languages rooted in local ethos. Indigenism does.

Third, given indigenism's emphasis on developing a vocabulary about strategic and international affairs based on these resources, the absence within it of a serious concern with the intellectual history or history of ideas is difficult to comprehend. If concepts or ideational structures found within these Sanskrit language resources were once prominent and have become otiose or unfamiliar today, the reasons for these cannot be located entirely in the modern or the contemporary period. Studying the trajectories of the Sanskrit language-world will reveal more about the social lives of these political and strategic ideas as they were articulated in that language. Indeed, recent social histories of Sanskrit knowledge systems have complicated the conventional (and convenient) narrative of their decline or 'death'. The conventional account suggested that the consolidation of Muslim rule in South Asia and the subsequent arrival of colonial power and western knowledge caused the decline or 'death' of Sanskrit. This account enabled a revivalism, through which it was earlier argued that India's political independence implied a reconstruction of its cultural past. A somewhat similar form of revivalism is now evident in the attempts to glorify the idea of a rising, great power, modern India which must be intellectually serviced by Brahminical resources from early India. Recent scholarship challenges these notions by showing how the decline of Sanskrit knowledge systems was a long-drawn-out process that unfolded unevenly and in patches over the past millennium (Kaviraj, 2005b; Pollock, 2001). Although it serves indigenism to work with the conventional narrative of the decline and death of the Sanskrit language world, holding on to that narrative amounts to a reductionism that is unsustainable against empirical evidence.

Knowledge systems are complex phenomena ensconced within assemblies of political, economic, social and cultural forces. Sanskrit knowledge systems took different trajectories across South Asia during the past millennium and it is fallacious to ascribe an elementary causality to the process of their decline. Scholars argue that the vernacularization of South Asia that commenced during the early centuries of the second millennium undercut the influence of the 'language of gods' in the region and gradually strengthened local knowledge systems over those of Sanskrit. They also argue that forces 'internal' to the Sanskrit knowledge systems and the associated social order led to their breakdown. Indeed, new writings reveal that the decline of the Sanskrit language and the associated conceptual world was a complex process that must be closely examined (Kaviraj, 2010a, pp. 129–141; Pollock, 1998). Indigenists show little concern for the implications of this scholarship for their claims. They also appear unconcerned with the historical trajectories of concepts and ideational structures they frequently invoke. As they abstractly speak of India's 'long tradition', they ignore the interruptions, the unevenness, the recessions and the pluralities that actually characterize sub-continental knowledge traditions.

Fourth, indigenism appears unaware of other resources that could be more relevant towards understanding contemporary Indian strategic practice and international conduct than the Brahminical

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resources from early India. For instance, the political and strategic resources developed during the long period of Muslim rule in South Asia appear more useful for creating a conceptual language relevant for contemporary Indian politics and strategy. The period from the Delhi Sultanate to the Mughal and the colonial states saw changes but also crucial continuities in political rule that have been chronicled. Because the postcolonial Indian state is a successor of all these entities, it may be more useful to examine the continuities in governance and statecraft across them. Again, indigenism excludes these more pertinent resources.

Why, despite these limitations, does indigenism thrive? What are the implications of its prevalence? Is there an alternative to it? The remainder of this article answers these questions.

Two Sources of the Reimagination Project

Indigenism in IR in India is also positioned as a response to the calls for reimagining the academic field. There are two sources of this aspiration, or, as some think, need. One of these is related to the impact of the end of the Cold War on scholarship. The dominant intellectual template during the Cold War period was of great power rivalry, which conditioned the knowledge produced by scholars in India and the West. A by-product of this great power centrism was that most IR scholars within and outside India—then considered a large but weak country—did not take much interest in texts and traditions of politics created during various periods of Indian history. With the end of the Cold War, the intellectual template associated with it became redundant. Soon, a new template—of the supposed decline of the West and the rise of Asia (India and China)—became prominent. Literature produced under this new template fuels the narrative of the rise of Asian states. Within this larger narrative, considerable intellectual attention of the western and Indian academe has become focussed on projecting the image of a rising India. Here, reimagining IR implies creating intellectual resources to help India act as a great power in international affairs. Indigenism is the key to these efforts: it enables indigenists and intellectual and political elites to claim that India was a great power in the past. And that it had developed indigenous knowledge about politics and international affairs during that period which can be employed to support its rise to great power status again. Reviving that knowledge for contemporary purposes is seen as an exercise in reimagining the field.

The other source of the need for reimagination lies in the intellectual challenges faced by those IR and other social scientists—historians, political theorists, anthropologists and sociologists—who recognize the normative and empirical value of modernity but who are deeply uncomfortable with the dominant theory of modernity that has emerged in the West and has been adopted in many other places of the world. This theory claims that modernity is a singular phenomenon whose expansion will, over time, transform the modernizing world in the image of the West. They suggest that this theory of modernity denies agency to those cultures and populations that have come in contact with western modernity through colonialism and globalization and thus overestimates the transformative powers of the West. Moreover, it encourages a flawed tendency among analysts to assess non-western social and political practices in the light of their conformity or deviance from theoretical postulates devised in the West. These scholars point out that non-western cultures and populations have not been passive recipients of western modernity. The encounters between western modernity and non-western cultures and populations have taken different forms and hence there are widely-different trajectories of the modern in different parts of the world.

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This insight questions the universalist claims of the abstract theory of modernity in the West and creates possibilities of correcting the distortions produced by its application to conditions outside the West. The insight has been articulated in different ways. Combining the methods and objectives of critical history and political theory, the *Subaltern Studies* project showed how subaltern populations have fashioned grammars of the modern that are different from that of modernity available in the West and its emulated forms represented by the sovereign nation-states. Partha Chatterjee has pioneered this idea of a different modernity based on the reading, not uncontested, of the subaltern politics in India and argued that while democracy in India is liberal in constitutional intent it is postcolonial in practice. Chatterjee thus provides a theory of modern democracy without precedent in the West (Chatterjee, 2011). Approaching the problem differently, Kaviraj asks what happens when modernity in the West encounters historical difference. He argues that as modernity is elaborated outside the West, it increasingly generates differentiation, and not similarities, as claimed by the dominant theory. Using examples from the political modernization of India spanning colonial and post-colonial periods, he shows how complex interactions between an initially western modernity and pre-existing social and cultural forces have shaped in India a politics that is modern but different from the West. Kaviraj thus argues that the original social theory of modernity, which claimed that modernization produces homogeneity in the world, must be revised into a social theory that recognizes that modernization actually leads to differentiation (Kaviraj, 2005a).

These conversations have taken place in the context of India and widely circulated within Indian academic institutions. However, IR scholarship in India has yet to closely consider the possibilities they open for relooking at the way we conceptualize 'the international', by which I mean the political multiplicity whose various forms we study. If we did, we would ask if there could be theorizations of democracy and politics that are at once modern and different from the accounts presented in the West, can there not also be theorizations of the international that are modern yet different. We may have had reasons for our lack of interest in them. Disciplinary conditioning may have led us to view them as related to India's 'domestic' issues and therefore unhelpful for understanding its international affairs. Another reason could have been the persistent sway of the intellectual architecture of IR of the West whose traces, to my mind, are evident in a lot of mainstream IR writings in India. However, lack of close interest in these developments has prevented scholars interested in reimagining IR in India from resolving a predicament of our imaginative capacity. What is this predicament?

Over the past decade, IR in India has witnessed considerable enthusiasm among a number of its scholars for reimagining the field of study so that it reflects the country's and the region's concerns. The objectives of these scholars are to create new concepts, frameworks and, if possible, theories, that are scholarly—that is, not insular, parochial or excessively nationalist. Although the need to lessen the dependence on the architecture of IR of the West is widely felt by these critical scholars in India, little substantial headway has been made so far in response. The awareness that our knowledge is distorted by the persistent and uncritical use of frameworks borrowed from IR of the West has made us wary of them. But at the moment we seem to have little clarity of the new frameworks that should be built in their stead. Indigenism also gets encouraged as a result: some of those desirous of doing non-Western IR get drawn towards indigenism as a 'reflex response' without, it is possible, intending to perpetuate its limitations through their scholarship. After all, for someone who is discontented with the frameworks of the IR of the West, getting drawn towards indigenism in order to do 'Indian' IR appears 'natural'. Those who avoid indigenism because of its perils, but who see the need for alternatives more tuned into Indian contexts and histories, tend to take two other positions, which overlap considerably. First, some argue in the favour of espousing normative theory. This argument is implied in a diffused manner by the Nehruvians

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and other champions of the traditional principles of India's foreign policy as well as critical theorists like feminists and postcolonial scholars. Although normative theory is important, it remains perennially susceptible to the serious charge of being blind to empirical realities. Second, others have taken deep interest in critiquing the hegemony and excesses of IR theories of the West and the practices of their emulation in India. Scholars working within the framework of postcolonial theory have productively used critique as a mode of IR scholarship in India. Other critical theorists have also made effective use of critique. Although critiques are important, there is surely the need to attempt the more painful task of positive theorizing—the process of providing conceptual coherence and intelligibility to international phenomena. And we do not have as much theorizing of this sort as is required or desirable. That despite keen interest in creating alternative knowledge, critical IR scholarship in India struggles to move beyond normativity and critique, besides facing the danger of descending into indigenism, is a sign that it is facing a predicament of imaginative capacity. In the following section, I argue that this predicament can be resolved if we closely study the political modernization of South Asia and its implications for the international relations of India and the region.

Centrality of the Modern for the International Relations of India and South Asia

Social sciences in the West emerged while making sense of the newness of the modern and social theory, which carried out this task, was shaped in the process. I use the deceptively-simple word—sense—to convey the numerous practices of cognition—identification and distinction of a field, forming bedrock assumptions and key questions, reasoning, perception, description, explanation, judgement and prediction—that are the staple of the social sciences. Social theory in the West became the substratum for several academic disciplines: contributions of Marx, Durkheim and Weber (to name the three canonical social theorists) have been relevant not merely for sociologists but for political scientists and international relations scholars as well. Although this is usually not discussed, IR too has its roots in modern social theory. It emerged as an intellectual response to political modernization of that part of the world where peace and war among states were central concerns. If, for this version of IR, the international primarily meant the domain of interactions among nations (inter-national), then there were sound reasons for it. Alongside, IR scholars indulged in an anachronism: they read as trans-historical regularities the tendencies—such as the recurring conflicts among territorially-bound political societies—they found during the modern period.

It is well known that for a considerable period, social sciences in places like India borrowed, accepted and internalized the explicit theoretical claims as well as the implicit assumptions and methods of the social theory developed in the West. There was a strong reason for this dependence: as mentioned earlier, taking a singular view of modernity, this theory claimed that modernizing societies will begin resembling each other in the course of time. If this hypothesis was valid, social scientists outside the West needed only to fill local content in western theoretical concepts, modules and methods to establish just how far back in time the developments in their part of the world were from the telos indicated by the social theory. This theory was problematized by the scholars mentioned above, who recognized that societies in the non-Western world do not line up in what Dipesh Chakrabarty has called the 'waiting room of history' to become versions of the West (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 9). The ideas of 'multiple

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modernities', 'postcolonial modernity' or 'alternative modernities'—versions of that insight—suggest three points relevant for us students of the international outside the West.

One, social theory in the West was a product of the forces operational in that part of the world. Its theoretical claims as well as methods and assumptions may not have the same salience outside that part. Rooted as it is in that social theory, the IR of the West may not be very useful to explain the international relations of India or South Asia. Two, at the same time, responsible academic scholarship within the social sciences requires that we engage the modern and not reject, bypass or ignore it, as indigenists do. Doing IR as a non-western social science does not imply a descent into indigenism, as sometimes happens in India. At the same time, espousing normative perspectives and critiquing the hegemony of western scholarship are useful but not adequate. Three, to avoid insularities that breed parochial nativism or revivalism, engagement with modernity in South Asia must be located within the larger corpus of scholarship about other modernities from other parts of the world.

It is evident from the above that the predicament of our imaginative capacity is linked to the absence of a robust social and historical sense of the modern in our cognitive universe. Undeniably, IR discourses in India do display an elementary awareness of South Asian or Indian modernity. But the intellectual architecture of the field of study—theoretical traditions, conceptual vocabulary, methods, questions and the very idea of the international—still relies heavily on frameworks produced elsewhere. Expectedly, not all scholars in India see the problem in this emulation of the Anglo-American ways of producing IR knowledge. But those who do want to lessen this dependence on frameworks developed elsewhere find themselves either promoting indigenism or normativity or critique; positive theorization is hard to find. A way out from this condition is to study the linkages between the region's political modernization and its international relations. Doing this would lead to a social theory of international relations, which would benefit from normativity and critique while foregrounding the limitations of indigenism. There is an inexplicit but widely-shared assumption that international relations of India begin after its independence. The early and colonial modern phases of the subcontinent are still predominantly seen as domains of the historians, or as constituting the pre-history of India's international relations that begin with the arrival of the sovereign state. This assumption needs to be problematized.

The modern is an immensely important site for IR students. Transitions in South Asia during the early, colonial and postcolonial modern periods have been so invasive, thorough and unprecedented that social and political theorists, historians as well as historical sociologists are only beginning to map the extent of their consequences. It should interest those drawn towards indigenism that these scholars are trying to understand the cognitive and institutional ruptures produced by colonialism: the stalling or ending of several pre-modern trajectories and constitution of new languages, institutions and ways of being. The intricate processes of the composition of modern India have been outlined by several scholars. Their writings show that although India is a sovereign nation-state that resembles other nation-states, this description does not exhaust the complexities of this entity. To see modern India only as a sovereign state is to self-limit our cognitive horizons and voluntarily impoverish our conceptual language.[7]

The modern is important for critical IR scholars interested in reimagining the field for one good reason: just as IR of the West emerged in response to political modernization of that part of the world, IR in India too may gain much from closely studying political modernization of South Asia. The political transition of South Asia from the pre-modern to the post-colonial may be deeply relevant for explaining contemporary international relations of India and the region. At the end of pre-modernity, the region comprized several overlapping and interacting geopolitical entities that differed in many ways from

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their modern counterparts. By the end of colonialism, these were replaced by modern sovereign states. Clearly something distinct and unprecedented happened: a complex pre-modern space transformed into a modern international space. A deep awareness of the modern set in among South Asian populations, causing widespread changes within the region. A prominent example of this transformation was the 1947 partition, which was caused when inter-community and inter-social relations became politicized and emerged as international relations. (Although we turn to historians for accounts of this transition, the historians' history, as noted above, is different from the history of the theorists. Since we lack social theoretical accounts of this transition, we do not have accounts of the international that emerged from within it either. To cover this lack, we borrow the ideas of the international from elsewhere and fit South Asian trajectories in them.)

In this evidently wide and complex field spanning considerable time and space, there are likely to be several ways of conceptualizing the international that are distinct from those fashioned in the West and yet thoroughly modern. These ideas of the international may be quite distinct from those we are familiar with. But these would be more relevant to the study of international relations in contemporary India and South Asia than the western state-centric framework that is applied to Indian past and present. Engaging the modern along the lines suggested here can resolve the predicament of our imaginative capacity. By engaging the modern, we would take more interest in social theory. Social theory not only provides a sense of the modern but also a sense of historical time and the methods through which its contents can be made responsibly intelligible in the light of the modern. It could wean scholars away from indigenism.

Conclusion

Historical methods and the philosophy of history undergirding modern India are absent from indigenism. But its limitations are only partly related to methods. Modern scholarship in every domain also rests on a deeply-shared commitment to creating responsible knowledge. Disciplines view it as an ethical imperative. Social scientists choose certain lines of enquiry and ignore others because they recognize that the knowledge they produce has social and political consequences. The resources championed within indigenism represent a normative universe deeply inconsistent with the political values of modern India. The uncritical and celebratory tone as well as self-images of superiority that mark indigenist knowledge claims are potentially counterproductive: they can dissuade prospective students belonging to those social groups of India who do not identify with these resources from taking interest in the field of IR.

Indigenists do not take history and modernity seriously, although interest in both can be intellectually productive for them. They justify their intellectual efforts by claiming that the resources they seek to revive are relevant for contemporary issues of governance and international affairs. There is a disconnect between their policy-oriented goal and their intellectual activity which is preoccupied with a particular aspect of India's early past: the challenges faced by modern India in South Asia and the world beyond are results of the political modernization of the region, through which the Indian state has emerged, and the world. Relying upon early Indian Brahminical resources to meet them appears absurd. Knowledge actually relevant for understanding, explaining or influencing contemporary practices of the Indian state can be created by studying India's, and South Asia's, political modernization rather than by reviving

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the Brahminical resources of early India. These resources must be studied *critically* and *responsibly* by scholars of IR. Such studies will further bring out the problems associated with the attempts to revive them in contemporary India.

To recap: this article critically examines indigenism in contemporary IR discourses in India. It has argued that although indigenism appears to be concerned with history, it is actually ahistorical and politically problematic. Furthermore, the article argued that although recourse to indigenism by scholars enthusiastic about reimagining IR in India is understandable, this option is fraught with limitations and therefore avoidable. Instead, interested scholars should closely study the political modernization of South Asia and its implications for international relations of India and the region.

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Notes

1. Because indigenists frequently use terms like ‘realism’ and ‘realist’ to describe Kautilya or the nature of Brahminical political writings from early India, they have come to be identified as realists. They are not. Many indigenists working on security and strategic issues who claim to be, or are described as, ‘realists’ are actually ‘realistic’ or ‘realist-inclined’ analysts. In the Indian context, indigenists are nationalist revivalists (some aggressive, others benign) who seek to maximize and project state power in the international arena while realists are theorists of international politics who give primacy to relative distribution of power among states, proscribe unchecked growth of state power and caution against its celebratory projection lest it makes weaker neighbours of India feel insecure. Critical IR scholars in India often describe scholars working on security and state-centric issues in international politics as ‘realists’. Due to this oversimplification, critical theorists overlook the crucial differences between nationalists and realists. This further prevents a potentially-fruitful dialogue between realists and critical theorists (of different persuasions), besides leading to a neglect of the state and geopolitics by critical scholars. Rakhahari Chatterji has recently noted that this ‘anti-realism rhetoric’ has ‘seriously constrained the growth of the discipline in this part of the world and undermined the status of realism as a theory as well’ (Chatterji, 2013, p. 9).
2. Although there are several examples of indigenist writings about politics and international relations of India, I have deliberately cited only a few of these because my purpose is not to prove the existence of indigenism. While acknowledging that indigenism is not a monolith, I assume that a reasonable degree of commonality exists among different forms of indigenism and, on that basis, lay out the structure and limitations of the indigenist stance and suggest a better alternative to it.
3. This trend of declaring the superiority of these writings over those from other cultures and civilizations likely draws its legitimacy from such assertions periodically made by scholars in the West. Max Weber started it in his ‘Politics as Vocation’ by suggesting that Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* represented radical Machiavellianism and *The Prince* was harmless in its comparison.
4. Romila Thapar (2014) shows how time and past have been used ahistorically and politically in modern India.
5. Such myths, old and new, have built transnational solidarities between Indian and western elites. Thomas Trautmann, who debunks the mythical racial theory of Indian civilization, notices the foundation stone of the Old Indian Institute Building in Oxford constructed in 1883 describing as ‘Aryans’ those Indians and Englishmen

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who were interested in developing the Eastern sciences. In recent times, a transnational elite group comprising Indians, Europeans and North Americans has vigorously projected the idea of India's rise as a great power.

6. Ilaiah's outline of the Buddhist challenge to the Brahminical ideas of state and political order also critiques the dominant political ideology of contemporary India.
7. The following writings offer a sense of the issues involved in understanding the modernization of South Asia and India through colonialism: Bayly (1988), Chandra (2009), Cohn (2004a, 2004b) and Kaviraj (2005b, 2010a, 2010b).

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