Article

Teaching–Learning Politics in India

What Does the International Mean? IR's Deep Ontology and the Promise It Holds

Studies in Indian Politics
4(2) 1–7

sagepub.in/home.nav
DOI: 10.1177/2321023016665534
http://inp.sagepub.com

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This piece argues that international relations (IR), the academic discipline whose remit is the study of international reality, including international politics, has a ground of its own. There is an established notion that IR is a subset of Political Science. I acknowledge the strength and the long lineage of this view, but I argue nevertheless that IR is a discipline in its own right and it need not be seen as a sub-discipline of Political Science. I also offer a snapshot of the academic riches that await anyone who will participate in claiming for IR its fair share of the academic earth.

I go about this task in three parts. First, I outline the key reasons why IR is seen as a Political Science subset and show their limitations. Second, I argue that IR is a separate discipline because it has a *deep* ontology of its own, which is rooted in a distinct aspect of our social world: the coexistence of multiple societies. A grasp of this deep ontology reveals that IR's umbilical cord does not run back to Political Science but, in fact, to a dimension of social reality. And when this claim is successfully defended, deduction makes it obvious that international politics too is not a sub-discipline of Political Science but of IR. Third, I briefly discuss the implications of grasping the deep ontology of IR and the properties of the international for students of international politics and international relations of modern India and South Asia.

Substantively, there is limited originality to this piece. The conviction about IR's distinct disciplinary status has been shared amongst some historical sociologists of international relations. Acting as a bridge-builder between academic contexts, I reiterate this conviction in and for the Indian and South Asian contexts because of its sheer importance. My hope is that colleagues and students of international politics and relations in this part of the world will find it persuasive and share my enthusiasm for its potential to enormously vitalize and creatively redefine our approach to our subject matter.

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The Established View: IR as a Political Science Subset

The belief that IR is a subset of Political Science is very deeply held and it is hard to have someone seriously consider the suggestion that IR can have a distinct disciplinary identity. Below, I list out four strong reasons underlying this belief and show their limitations.

First, it is tradition to view IR in this manner. This tradition has a core academic component and a number of peripheral institutional ones. Academically, there is an almost unconscious practice in our setting to think of IR as being concerned with 'world politics' or 'international politics' or 'international affairs' or 'IR'. No matter which term is used, it invariably signifies politics at the international level or beyond the boundaries of our state. Now, since politics *is* the forte of Political Science, IR, effectively seen as being concerned with politics on the international scale, gets subsumed within it. As a result, the world is conceptualized in primarily political terms and its most obvious aspects—diplomacy, wars, international organizations, terrorism, etc.—are covered as part of Political Science training. This process begins at the undergraduate level and consolidates at the postgraduate level, when it becomes common sense. In most Indian universities, IR, thus conceptualized, is taught within departments of Political Science. Even in places where distinct IR departments exist, this tradition ensures that homage is paid, and IR's lineage traced, to Political Science.

Let us add to this the institutional components, which is my shorthand for how things, mostly and sometimes absurdly, are: IR scholars are either identified or self-identify as political scientists. While admitting students in IR programmes, we eagerly look for those who have backgrounds in Political Science. I have learnt from colleagues in other Indian universities that when a university administrator questions the rationale of an IR-only department, mostly out of ignorance of the subject, they desperately try to align IR with Political Science. MA programmes are frequently offered in 'Politics and International Relations'; IR departments facing existential threats become departments of Politics/Political Science and IR. I could pile on examples, but the point I am making is just this: There is a widespread suspicion in our institutions over IR's credibility as a discipline in its own right. When challenged by others—Political Science colleagues and administrators—to justify its independent standing, IR scholars themselves are overcome with self-doubt and retreat to the reassuring shelter of Political Science.

This combination of academic and institutional facts makes viewing IR as a Political Science subset a tradition and an authority that is not easily questioned. Since I cannot discuss the problems of the institutional facts here, I will mention the principal limitation of the academic one, which is this: A narrowness of imagination is at work here, which excludes a lot more of international life than it includes. In reducing the subject matter of IR to international *politics* alone, it excludes those vital aspects—such as economic, cultural, legal, normative and societal—that make up a lot of the stuff of international life. When IR is conceptualized as a Political Science subset, the scope of its subject matter gets vastly reduced. Politics undeniably shapes a great deal of international life, but the latter gets its rich character from law, culture, economy and moral frameworks that prevail internationally. These forces are given their due only when the full spectrum of IR's substance is recognized: when politics, law, economy, culture, society and ethics are studied in their interactive and relational forms. The tradition forecloses the possibility of such recognition.

Second, IR is often reduced to a field concerned with foreign policy analysis. But foreign policy of any country is domestic politics conducted on the international stage and not, strictly speaking, international politics or international affairs. A related tendency is to view international politics as aggregation of foreign policies of multiple countries. This too does not amount to international politics as there is no qualitative difference between analysis of any one country's foreign policy and those of multiple ones. We are still studying here domestic politics conducted on the international stage.

Third, there is also an imagination of IR as a field that either encompasses or equates with Area Studies. Area Studies are academic programmes concerned with in-depth studies of particular parts—countries or regions—of the world. Strictly speaking, they too do not fall within the ambit of IR and neither do the two equate. But the conflation of IR with Area Studies persists. The reason for this is the same as that outlined above: A study of any part of the world beyond the boundaries of our state is considered the domain of IR and, consequently, the international and the area are seen as practically indistinct. Scholars trained in Area Studies gain appointments in Political Science and IR departments where fields such as international politics and international security are covered and which they are not necessarily trained to handle. The University Grants Commission's (UGC) National Eligibility Test (NET) in 'International and Area Studies' oddly combines the international and the area even though they do not fit ontologically. As we shall see below, the international presupposes a fixed and definitive ontology, whereas an area can have shifting ontologies: The debate over what constitutes South Asia as an area—its countries, its distinctive geography, geopolitical interests of a great power like the United States, a patchwork of several sub-regions, a common experience of suffering or the centrality of India—illustrates how the ontologies of an area can shift for various reasons.

Fourth, just as they study domestic political systems, political scientists also study the international political system. There have been several attempts at conceptualizing the international political system—the objective being to understand the international political arena in its own terms. Hardly anyone in IR disputes that Kenneth N. Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (1979) remains the strongest such attempt so far. Waltz conceptualizes the international political system in terms of anarchy—or the absence of governmental authority above the level of states—and makes anarchy do all the theoretical explanation. Through his conceptualization of the system, Waltz shows why, and how, the international political arena is qualitatively different from the domestic one.

Waltz's book is seminal—it cannot be bypassed, has given coherence to the theoretical core of IR and has been so creatively provocative that responses to it have lengthened the critical end of IR's theoretical spectrum. But these achievements and the exemplary rigour of scholarship underlying the book's conceptualization of the international political system do not hide its core limitation—it defines international politics not in terms of what the international possesses but what it lacks: a world government. As pointed out by serious critics, Waltz starts off on the right note by trying to create a theory of politics that does justice to the distinctiveness of the international arena. But he ends up conceptualizing the international as the opposite of the domestic. In his scheme, the domestic arena is marked by government and hierarchy among political actors, while the international arena lacks governmental authority and political actors—states—share anarchy. Entrapped by the dominant imagination within Political Science, that politics as power is to be understood only in relation to the presence or absence of government, Waltz conceptualizes the international arena in terms of an absence. He makes what the international arena does not possess its defining feature! And he thus effectively says that the international rests on a negative ontology, namely, the non-presence of world government (see Rosenberg, 2016, pp. 133, 136–137). Waltzians do not concede that this is a limitation. But once the positive ontology of the international is demonstrated, which will be done presently, the limitation of the strongest Political Science attempt yet to claim the international for itself becomes clear.

Despite these major limitations, it is evident that the concerns of Political Science and IR overlap and that studies of international life carried out from Political Science points of view are often fruitful. But I see these as interdisciplinary encounters, and to substantiate this view, I now turn to IR's deep ontology.

Societal Multiplicity: IR's Deep Ontology

Intellectual disciplines come into existence either to account for particular aspects of social reality or in response to pressing needs of the human world. The social world of humans is characterized by a number of aspects—for example, space, time, power, the interplay of social agents and social structures, wealth and morality—and so we have disciplines that cater to each one of them. Geography explains social reality in terms of space, history in terms of time, politics in terms of power, sociology in terms of the interplay of social agents and social structures, economics in terms of wealth and ethics in terms of moral concerns.

Pressing human needs also give birth to intellectual disciplines, as IR's biography testifies. As per the dominant narrative, the recurrence of war among modern Western states despite decades of intellectual and practical efforts aimed at forging peace gave birth to the field. People were puzzled why war persisted in interstate relations despite professions of commitment to peace, efforts at transforming societies by endowing them with the Enlightenment values of reason and deliberation, interdependencies forged by trade and a clear grasp of war's immorality. Three answers were offered: one, wars recurred because our basal nature, driven by the desire to dominate, got the better of us when the crunch time came; two, wars recurred because there were flawed political systems—non-democracies—that served the private interests of the ruling elite and that were unaccountable to the masses; and three, wars recurred because there was no world government to prevent them from recurring. This last answer, articulated by Rousseau as a theoretical hunch, became the basis for Waltz's theory that considerably integrated the field.

Although interstate wars still exist, they increasingly compete with a wide range of complex international challenges for scholarly and policy attention. Civil rather than interstate wars, transnational terrorism, global governance of climate change and the world economy, mass migration, breakdown of political order and lack of shared political and value frameworks among the world's key powers demand urgent attention of policy-makers and pose explanatory challenges to IR social scientists. As the needs of the human world have multiplied and acquired greater complexity, IR's preoccupation with the original interstate war question has seemed increasingly insufficient if not outdated. And so the anarchy-centric conception of the international has appeared increasingly narrow.[2] In recent decades, disgruntled voices have questioned the 'anarchophilia' of IR scholarship and offered alternative conceptions of the international in response. Only a handful of these alternatives to the anarchy-oriented idea of the international have been substantive; I discuss two that seem of enduring significance.

In his *Rethinking International Relations*, the late Fred Halliday identifies IR's subject matter in terms of three forms of interaction: relations between states and societies; transnational relations across frontiers; and the workings of the international system, comprising states and societies, as a whole (Halliday, 1994, p. 1). Privileging the international point of view, Halliday also sets right the notion that interaction among nations gives rise to the international. Far from this, he says, it is the international that has given birth to modern states and societies (ibid., p. 2). The extension to this point is that the international shapes the dynamics of world affairs in their entirety and by grasping this fact we also see that *international relations are produced by the properties of the international and not by the interaction*

[2] A no small role in crippling IR's substance has been played by the US academia, whose influence over it, and Political Science more generally, has been decisive in shaping the iterations of both in various country settings. In India too, the dominant orientation of the IR community takes after the field's image that thrives in American Political Science departments; it is clearly reflected in course designs, pedagogy and the imagination—in terms of questions asked, methods selected and works referenced—that informs student and faculty research designs.

of the key units—states and societies—of our world. Once the correct causal sequence in the production of international phenomena is grasped, the only major challenge remains understanding thoroughly the international in terms of its ontology and its properties.

Sharing intellectual concerns with Halliday, and aware of the need to reposition IR as a field that is about much more than anarchy and its consequences, Justin Rosenberg has been unearthing the ontological foundations of the international in his recent writings. In a recent piece (Rosenberg, 2016), he offers his clearest and most persuasive statement yet on the question of IR's ontology and its status as a discipline in its own right. Rosenberg claims that IR has an ontology of its own, separate from that of any other existing human sciences, which makes it a distinct academic discipline. This ontology pertains to a dimension of social reality that has not been, surprisingly, properly unearthed and theoretically grasped until recently. This delay is surprising because IR possesses nearly a century-old body of rich speculation on international phenomena. What is this dimension?

Rosenberg draws our attention to the fact that human existence is multiple and not unitary in character. The world of human beings is organized into multiple societies that co-exist and interact all the time. Human existence is 'distributed among numerous interacting societies. This is the elemental fact about the human world that justifies the existence of IR as an academic discipline' (Rosenberg, 2016, p. 135). I will elaborate this pithy formulation to ease the process of grasping it.

Rosenberg says that the international is generated by the fact of societal multiplicity. We know from history that all humans at any point in time have always coexisted in multiple societies while the societies themselves have ranged widely in substance—from nation-states and empires to tribes and city-states. At this point, the political scientist will ask: But isn't it politics that causes human existence to fragment into different societies? In other words, doesn't political fragmentation produce the international? If the answer is a simple yes, then IR remains a Political Science sub-discipline. Rosenberg says this appears true at a superficial level, but it is important to recognize that multiplicity produces a radical impact on the nature of politics itself, a point that international political scientists like Waltz have emphasized to establish the distinction of international politics in relation to domestic politics. Further, the impact of multiplicity extends beyond the realm of power relations and politics to societal, economic, cultural, ethical and developmental aspects of human affairs as well. Multiplicity, in other words, subsumes politics and other domains, giving rise not just to international *politics*—the traditional preserve of Political Science—but to international *relations*, which comprise politics, culture, society, ethics and so on, and which constitute the full range of IR's subject matter. This enables him to claim that eventually, 'it is multiplicity, not politics, that provides the deepest code of the international as a feature of human existence' (ibid., p. 136). Simply put, *multiplicity generates the international and is the deep ontology of IR*.

Further, Rosenberg discusses (ibid., pp. 136–141) five major consequences of multiplicity, which constitute the properties of the international. First, multiplicity causes societies to *coexist* with one another. Coexistence changes the nature of all features of human affairs—politics, culture, economy, law, society, ethics and development processes—in their international dimension. Second, it produces *difference*, which is a qualitative fact. Societies differ with one another in terms of power, culture, economic size, historical sensibility and so on. And each society embodies difference as it develops over time in relation to other societies. Third, multiplicity compels societies to *interact* by entailing a common condition to which all individual societies must respond: the existence of the human world beyond themselves. Interaction can bring dangers and opportunities—as India's experience of colonialism attests. The key thing to note here is that it is multiplicity, which generates the international, that causes interaction, and not that the international is a product of interaction among geopolitical societies. Fourth, from interaction emerges the fact of *combination*, that is, the development of any given society through a joining of internal and external factors. No society develops in a uni-linear and self-enclosed manner.

Combination of the internal and the external, the domestic and the international, is a fact of all social development. The international constitutes not just the regional and the national but the sub-national and the local as well. Seen differently, the international is not about foreign policy alone. Finally, multiplicity causes the whole process of world development to be *dialectical*. By this, Rosenberg means that large-scale, long-term or pivotal interactions between social formations—as, for example, between the Arab world and early modern Europe, or between the Indian and the Islamic worlds—can spawn entirely new international developments. The dialectical bit here lies in the creation of a new third force from the interaction of already existing social forces. For instance, over a thousand years of deep and varied intercultural encounters in South Asia have produced the Indian/South Asian Islam, a truly distinct global cultural force and a potential model for intercultural and inter-civilizational coexistence and adjustment.

These five consequences of multiplicity are the fundamental features of the international and they account for a whole range of international phenomena—not just geopolitics and interdependence, preoccupations of most IR scholars, but long-term, large-scale phenomena, such as global power transitions (e.g., from the Euro-Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific regions) and deep roots of terrorism carried out in the name of Islam (in the troubled and contested nature of political modernization in the Islamic world). When the international is thus grasped, its consequences not just for international politics but also for all the aspects of the social world become evident. And a case is made for seeing IR as a discipline in its own right, a discipline that is concerned, at its deepest level, not with power or human organizations alone—as politics or Political Science is—but with societal multiplicity and its consequences for the entire social world, its political dimensions included.

Grasping the argument made in this part may not be easy, so this exercise might help: We can try to see the world as an outsider, as the late Eric Hobsbawm does in the famous Roberto Bobrow caricature of his, holding the political globe in his right hand as if he is at ease making sense of all its dynamics. To grasp the meaning and the properties of the international, and thus be persuaded as to why IR is a distinct discipline, we will have to get rid of the deeply ingrained tendency within us to look at the world from the point of view of our state or society. This kind of seeing amounts to the 'inside-out' vision and it is active when one thinks of IR as a Political Science subset.

My final task in this part, showing that international politics is not a sub-field of Political Science, is quite easy: IR comprises a number of sub-fields: Security Studies, International Law, International Political Economy, International Ethics and International Politics. If IR isn't a Political Science subset, then international politics isn't either: it is an IR subset.

Seeing International Politics—and Relations—Anew

In this last part, I want to discuss how acknowledging IR's deep ontology and the properties of the international substantially and substantively enriches our imaginative repertoire. My examples are about international politics specifically and IR generally in the context of modern India/South Asia.

I hope I am not off the mark in presuming that in most Indian universities, IR research predominantly takes the form of studies of Indian foreign and security policies, South Asian politics or individual countries. Studies of properly international phenomena are rare, especially in institutions outside Delhi, which remains the hub of IR research in India. In departments outside Delhi, rigorous research happens on the initiative of individual scholars who fight several institutional and locational odds to remain motivated. Over the past decade that I have been doing IR research, I have been puzzled by the narrowness of imagination on display in conceptualizing the international arena. The inside-out vision I referred to above remains deeply embedded in collective imagination and I have seen colleagues and students thinking primarily in terms of Indian foreign policy and Area Studies. My puzzle is this: Why is IR

research imagination in my context so constricted—restricted to foreign policy and country studies for the most part—when the setting that makes it up bears rich evidence of a very thorough impact of the international?

My research on aspects of international relations of modern South Asia has alerted me to the international provenance of the whole region—its sovereign states and the sub-regions within and across them—until its decolonization. Since the end of pre-modernity and the onset of European colonization, a range of international forces have caused momentous upheavals in South Asia's social, geopolitical and cultural worlds, thus shaping it decisively. Examples include (i) The long and complex decline of the Mughal Empire, which created the 'Great Anarchy' in the eighteenth century and became a pretext for consolidation of colonial rule. (ii) The emergence of Sikh and Maratha powers, whose geopolitical ambitions got entangled with the imperial power struggle in Delhi and also the ambition of the British to establish sovereignty over the subcontinent. (iii) The rise and fall of Maratha power and its consequences for the overall trajectory of modern South Asia. (iv) The global Anglo-French struggle for dominance and its impact on regional kingdoms from Bengal to Mysore, which in turn shaped the political process of modern India and South Asia. (v) The exercise of colonial power through cultural domination and subjugation and the three main responses to it—the Hindu, the Muslim and the 'secular'—which shaped the grammar of nationalisms and internationalization of social relations through partitions of the subcontinent. (vi) The colonial quest for security on the imperial peripheries, its impact on the formation of Afghanistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar and India's northeastern region, and its lingering influence on the relations between the Indian state and its own peripheries as well as its neighbours. (vii) The role of the international power alignment in determining the nature and timing of decolonization.

These examples are illustrative of a defining fact about modern India—its sub-regions included—and South Asia: their provenance is principally, but of course not wholly, international. And yet, negligible conscious IR research exists on making sense of this large phenomenon of immense importance. Why? I suggest that the principal problem is that the idea of international provenance will elude an IR researcher unless they abandon the inside-out vision that Political Science endows them with. Once the international is understood correctly, the vision too transforms: it becomes outside-in. State sovereignty remains important and focus on the state is understandable in IR studies. But one cannot remain blind to the complex ways in which international forces have shaped nearly all aspects of the modern South Asian social world. To see scholars duplicating efforts across departments by focusing on foreign policy and Area Studies is exasperating, especially when there are substantive questions that await examination and when scholars in regional settings are best placed to answer regional puzzles with a view to better understanding the South Asian picture. Examples include (i) A historical sociology of the collapse of the Mughal Empire is likely to cast a fresh explanatory light on the dynamics that produced the regional interstate system and international relations. (ii) On the other hand, a similar study of the rise and, especially, the decline of the Maratha power may not only shed light on South Asian dynamics but also explain the neurosis underlying the Maratha-Hindu chauvinism with regard to Indian and South Asian Muslims and the more localized expressions of anxiety that mark the politics of contemporary Maharashtra. (iii) International relations scholars across India and South Asia can identify similar regional puzzles for explanation and make the field speak to local and regional realities that are shaped by the international. But all this presupposes a grasp of the ontology and the properties of the international.

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