



Reimagining International Relations: Building an India-Centric Theoretical and Strategic Framework

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Key Takeaways

- ▶ **Western Origins of IR:** Reimagining International Relations: Building an India-Centric Theoretical and Strategic Framework is necessary because existing IR theories like Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism were all developed by Western thinkers, rooted in Western experiences and histories, making them ill-suited to explain the strategic cultures and priorities of postcolonial states like India.
- ▶ **Westphalian Limitation:** Even the founding moment of modern international relations, the Treaty of Westphalia, which emphasised sovereign states, was deeply European in thought, showing how much of IR remains locked in a Eurocentric worldview.
- ▶ **Need for Non-Western Theories:** This calls for new theories to be developed by non-Western thinkers that can resonate with the experiences of the developing world, incorporate civilisational ideas, and better reflect the realities of a multipolar global order.
- ▶ **India's Philosophical Assets:** Not just in terms of modern theories, but India's rich intellectual history contributes diverse knowledge traditions like Advaita Vedanta, Kautilya's Arthashastra, Buddhist interdependence, and Gandhian ethics, which together provide a civilisational foundation for rethinking IR.
- ▶ **Diplomatic Practice as Theory:** Moreover, since its Independence, India has followed many successful diplomatic measures like the Non-Aligned Movement, Act East Policy, and Neighbourhood First Policy, while promoting the motto of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, thus demonstrating that practice itself can shape theory.
- ▶ **Structural Exclusion in Global IR:** Global IR scholarship is dominated by Western journals and publishing norms, making it difficult for Global South scholars to contribute due to language barriers, funding gaps, and systemic bias, which prevents the development of truly pluralistic IR theories.
- ▶ **Gandhian and Tagorean Alternatives:** Gandhian ethics of non-violence and trusteeship, combined with Tagore's vision of ethical cosmopolitanism, provide alternative models of international relations that emphasise moral diplomacy, cultural dialogue, and global trusteeship over power politics.
- ▶ **Civilisational Foreign Policy:** India's foreign policy behaviour is not just a response to geopolitical shifts but is deeply rooted in civilisational ethos like Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, dharma, and strategic autonomy, which continue to guide its stance in conflicts such as the Russia-Ukraine war and its leadership in global digital and humanitarian initiatives.

Executive Summary

The Sharp Scope critiques the dominance of Western International Relations (IR) theories—Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism—which are rooted in European histories and values. These frameworks fail to capture the strategic cultures, priorities, and philosophies of postcolonial states like India. The author argues for developing an India-centric IR framework that integrates indigenous traditions such as Advaita Vedanta, Kautilya's Arthashastra, Buddhist interdependence, Gandhian ethics, and Tagore's humanism. The edition traces contributions from modern Indian IR thinkers and situates India's foreign policy practices within its civilizational ethos—strategic autonomy, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, non-violence, and moral diplomacy. While India has achieved significant global stature, challenges remain: limited institutional support, marginalisation of Indian perspectives in academia, weak policy-academia linkages, and over-reliance on Western validation. The conclusion presses for decolonising IR, empowering Global South voices, and institutionalising Indian perspectives to generate pluralistic theories fit for today's multipolar order.

Introduction

Popular International Relations theories, like Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism, were all developed by Western thinkers. These theories are, therefore, based on Western experiences, histories, and values, which limit them to the Western world only. Even the founding moment of the modern international relations, the Treaty of Westphalia, which emphasised the role of a sovereign state in world politics, is deeply European in thought. Thomas Hobbes and Immanuel Kant, some key figures of IR theories of Realism and Liberalism, are also from the Western world. One would rarely come across someone in the field who is from the other side of the world or from the developing world. The Western Models don't explain Global politics well, and are of little use to the developing world. This calls for new theories to be developed by non-Western thinkers,

which can resonate with the experiences of the developing world.

If we look at India, it has a lot to offer in the field. Not just in terms of new theories, but India's rich history has contributed various Indian knowledge traditions like those of Advaita Vedanta, Kautilya's Arthashastra, Buddhist interdependence, and Gandhian ethics. Moreover, since its Independence, India has followed many successful diplomatic measures like the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM), Act East Policy, Neighbourhood First Policy, and belief in the motto of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam".

There is a growing need, globally, to decolonise academia, specifically disciplines like International Relations. IR needs to move beyond Western, Eurocentric views and towards a more global view, incorporating the theories of the Global South and the developing countries. India is not just a postcolonial



state, but has a civilizational identity of its own. Thinkers like Kautilya, Buddha and Gandhi represent strategic and ethical frameworks that challenge dominant IR paradigms. Recently,

India has been gaining a global stature, like the G20 presidency, leadership in multilateral forums, and an important role in minilaterals like QUAD, which strongly demands a theory that reflects its diplomatic ethos, and strategic autonomy. India's foreign policy is significantly stronger today than it was a couple of years back. A uniquely Indian approach to IR can better explain India's foreign policy behaviour in today's multipolar world. This brief explores the limits of Western IR, India's historical contributions towards IR, the practice of Indian diplomacy, and the structural challenges in paving a way for the Indian school of IR.

This article argues the need to develop

Indian and other Global South IR theories. The core idea of this article is that prominent Western theories fail to explain the diplomatic partnerships and strategic priorities of the developing world. In response, it proposes IR frameworks that are grounded in indigenous knowledge traditions and postcolonial experiences. It further draws upon India's contemporary foreign policy practices to better explain its current position with regard to global affairs.

Limits of Western IR

Whichever prominent IR theories we come across today were all developed in the context of European history. These theories often do not account for the historical experiences of the Global South. Therefore, these theories fail to explain the priorities and strategic cultures of postcolonial states like India. This leads to ignorance of important

Indian theories of “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam”, Gandhian non-violence, or Kautilyan strategy.

Some of the most important IR theories include Realism, Constructivism, and Liberalism. However, if we talk about Realism, it overemphasises power and conflict. Liberalism, on the other hand, idealises international cooperation among Western institutions. Even though Constructivism is more nuanced as a theory, it still uses Western social norms as a default. Therefore, Western thoughts draw heavily from historical, philosophical, and institutional experiences of the West. These theories don't shed light on how civilizational thinking and colonialism have shaped the behaviour of non-Western countries.

Moreover, the Western concepts of power, order, and diplomacy are assumed to be universally applicable by Western theorists. This “one-size-fits-all” approach fails to account for the diversity in Global South political thought. Theoretical contributions from the Global South, especially India, like *Kautilya's Arthashastra*, *Advaita Vedanta*, or *Ubuntu*, are often dismissed as historical anecdotes or case studies rather than recognised IR theories¹.

Global IR scholarship is dominated by Western journals and publishing norms, which makes it difficult for scholars from the Global South to access these platforms. Many issues arise in the form

of language barriers and funding issues, which lead to a structural exclusion of non-Western voices. As most of the theories in IR are developed by Western scholars, Global South contributions are left in the periphery. This prevents the development of truly pluralistic global IR theories².

History of Indian IR Thought

In this section, we will take a look at 2 Indian-origin philosophies that can help us view IR from an Indian perspective, and what they bring to the IR discourse:

- 1) Advaita Vedanta- This philosophy, which found its roots in the Upanishads and Bhagavat Gita, emphasises non-duality- believing that the individual and the ultimate reality are the same. This challenges conventional notions of self-versus others, or friends versus enemies, which form the core of mainstream International Relations. This philosophy, at its core, has ethical and epistemological implications for IR theories.

This theory challenges popular Western norms, which are based on binaries or dualistic frameworks, meaning they view the world through clear oppositions. Certain examples of these include Self vs. Other, Anarchy vs. Order, Friend vs. Enemy, Democracy vs.

¹ Acharya, A., & Buzan, B. (Eds.). (2010). **Non-Western international relations theory: Perspectives on and beyond Asia**. Routledge.

² Tickner, A. B., & Wæver, O. (Eds.). (2009). *International relations scholarship around the world*. Routledge.



Autocracy or Civilised vs. Barbaric. The theory of Advaita Vedanta offers a relational and integrative approach to global politics, which focuses on interdependence and mutual respect.

- 2) Buddhist and Gandhian Ethics- Buddhism, which was founded in India, follows core principles of interdependence, compassion, and detachment from ego and desires. If adopted in IR, they can help counter state egoism, encourage compassionate diplomacy and peacebuilding. The Buddhist approach promotes peaceful coexistence, dialogue, and ethical diplomacy. It considers war and any form of aggression as morally flawed, and advocates for

peaceful conflict resolution through understanding and empathy³.

Gandhian ethics also provide us with some key concepts that can be useful for IR. It introduces moral resistance as an important tool in international conflict. Its focus on non-violence paves the way for countering realism by showcasing the cruciality of nonviolent strategies. His theory encourages dialogue, empathy and decentralisation in global governance. He also proposes global trusteeship, a theory that says wealthy nations should see themselves as custodians of global welfare, and not as owners of resources or power. Gandhi strongly rejects notions of

security through arms and power. India's non-alignment movement, peaceful advocacy in climate and development forums, and promotion of moral leadership in South-South cooperation are some examples of how his theory is still relevant even today in shaping the foreign policy of some states⁴.

- 3) Kautilya's Arthashastra- This is an ancient Indian treatise, written around the 4th century BCE, on statecraft and diplomacy. On the IR front, it talks about the Raja-mandala theory, which states that a state's immediate neighbour is a potential enemy; the enemy's enemy is a friend, which anticipates the balance-of-power logic. This text provides a foundation for a non-Western IR theory.

Kautilya doesn't advocate using power for its own sake- rather, he suggests using power with discretion, while balancing dharma (duty), artha (material interest), and niti (policy). His theory places an extraordinary emphasis on intelligence networks, like using spies not only for external threats but also for managing allies. Kautilya asserts that a state must be internally strong- economically, militarily, and administratively- before pursuing external ambitions. It combines realpolitik with a sense

of moral leadership, setting it apart from Western realism's amoral undertone⁵.

- 4) Tagorean Internationalism- Rabindranath Tagore's form of internationalism was rooted in humanism, spiritual unity, and ethical cosmopolitanism. He strongly critiqued narrow nationalism and called it a "great menace", which promoted division and violence. He advocated for cultural dialogue over civilizational conflict and emphasised mutual respect and learning among nations. He supported an IR framework that relied on cooperation, dignity and moral diplomacy, as an alternative to realism and power politics⁶.

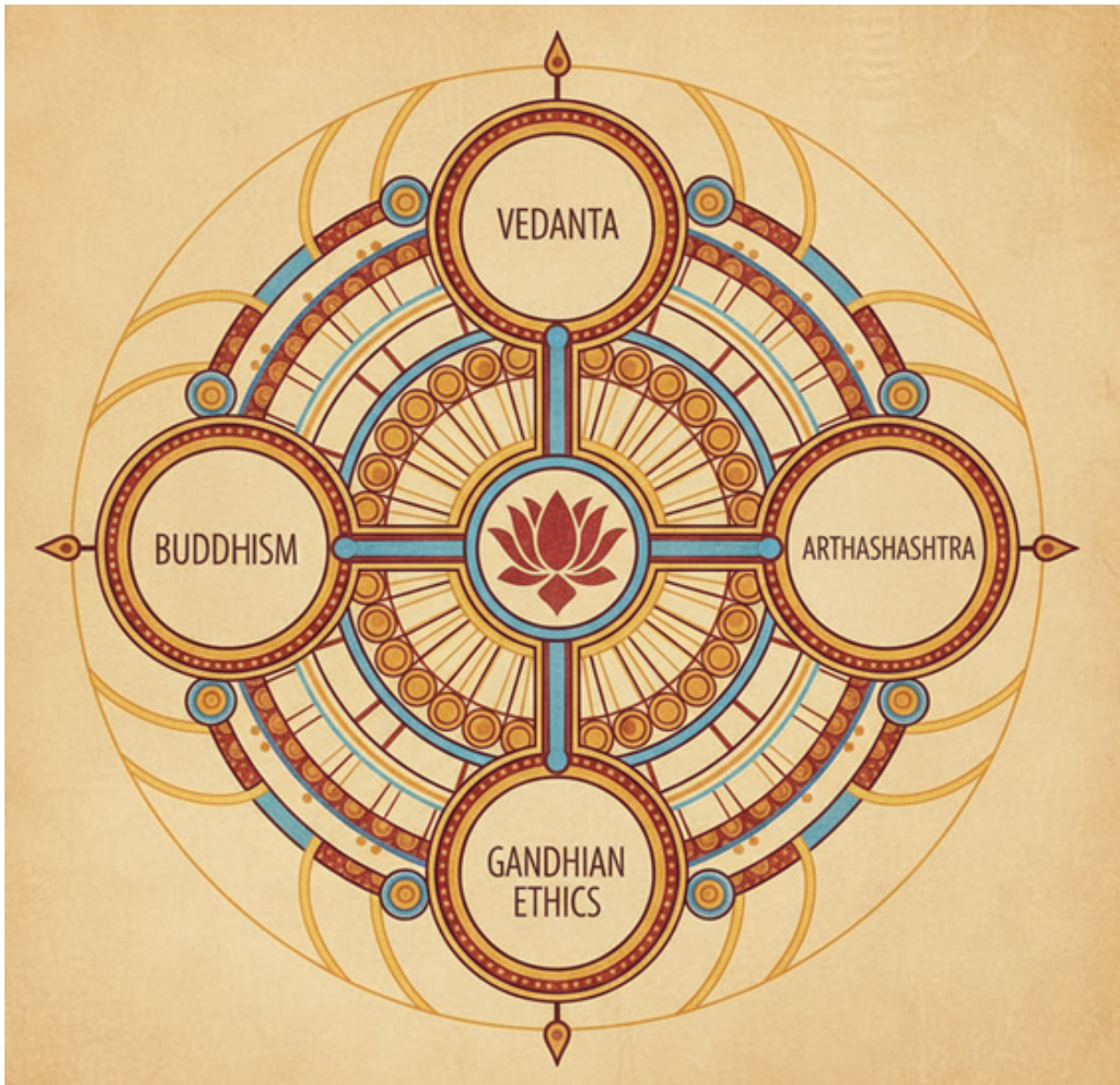
Tagore saw the Western model of nationalism as mechanistic, violent, and rooted in egoism, particularly after witnessing its role in imperialism and war. Being an anti-imperialist thinker, his ideas resonated with postcolonial critiques of IR. His very emphasis on decolonising the mind and fostering dignity in IR remains significant in the Global South discourse. He urges leaders not to see the world as a battleground of interests, but rather as a shared space of living together.

³Hershock, P. D. (2006). *Buddhism in the Public Sphere: Reorienting Global Interdependence*. Routledge.

⁴Parekh, B. (1989). *Gandhi's Political Philosophy: A Critical Examination*. University of Notre Dame Press.

⁵Boesche, R. (2002). *The First Great Political Realist: Kautilya and His Arthashastra*. Lexington Books.

⁶Tagore, R. (1917). *Nationalism*. New York: Macmillan.



Modern Indian IR Thought

Some of the prominent IR thinkers from India who have contributed greatly to the field include Benoy Kumar Sarkar, M.N. Chatterjee, V.S. Ram, Taraknath Das, and M.N. Roy. Sarkar proposed a distinct worldview in IR, based on Indic universalism, which is deeply rooted in ancient Indian political thought. It can easily stand against European liberalism and realism. He challenged conventional colonial stereotypes of India being apolitical or spiritual. On the other hand, Roy developed ideas of

radical humanism and cosmopolitanism, which relied on linking India to global anti-imperialist struggles. His thoughts were deeply rooted in global leftist movements, particularly the Comintern and anti-colonial internationalism. His theory emphasised rationality, ethics, and universal human dignity, anticipating many elements of critical IR theory. Taraknath Das used international forums and networks to question imperialism and promote Indian self-determination. He was a forerunner of track-two diplomacy and early non-state transnational activism, long before such

concepts even entered the field of IR. These thinkers shaped international thought even before IR became a formal academic field in India.

Indian IR did not emerge from just academic scholarship, but also from the nationalist movement and political activism. Institutionalisation of IR came with the establishment of bodies like the Indian Political Science Association, the Indian Journal of Political Science, ICWA, and the School of International Studies (now SIS, JNU). Moreover, leaders like G.B. Pant framed IR as a

tool for national self-realisation, while focusing on emphasising its relevance to policymaking⁷.

IR in Indian Policy-Making

Strategic IR has played a crucial role in framing India's foreign policy, balancing global aspirations with the changing world order. Historically, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) established India's strong commitment to strategic autonomy and not aligning with either of the blocs while maintaining a neutral stance in geopolitical affairs.



⁷Bayly, M. J. (2017). The forgotten history of Indian international relations (Issue Brief No. 210). Observer Research Foundation.

India's regional policies aimed at cooperation and development in South Asia and Southeast Asia have also been well-crafted. These include the Neighbourhood First Policy, the Act East Policy, and its strong alliance with nations in the Indo-Pacific. India also focuses on maintaining strong ties with other Asian nations through actively participating in groupings like ASEAN, SAARC, BIMSTEC, and SCO, to name a few⁸.

Moving beyond Asia, India also highly engages in multilateral forums like the UN, WTO, WHO, G20, G7, etc. Not just these, India has also actively taken part in climate negotiations. Moreover, India also uses small, focused groupings,

also known as minilateral organisations, like QUAD, I2U2 and IBSA to address specific challenges pertaining to the global level.

Yet, despite active global participation in various forums, there exists a policy gap between academia and policy. Such a crucial gap can be bridged by developing collaborations between scholars and policymakers. There is a growing need to develop India-centric IR theories, which are drawn from indigenous thinkers. Revamping of IR education is extremely necessary to include practical, policy-oriented learning.



⁸Bajpai, K., & Pant, H. V. (2013). India's foreign policy: Coping with the changing world. Pearson Education India.

India's Foreign Policy Through A Civilizational Lens

India's foreign policy is not just a response to contemporary geopolitical shifts but is deeply ingrained with civilizational ethos. Philosophies like Vasudhaiva Kutumbukam (the world is one family), dharma (righteous duty), strategic autonomy, and non-violence greatly influence India's foreign policies. These civilizational ideas are foundational to how India shapes its foreign policy behaviour and how it engages with other actors at the global stage.

If we talk about the Russia-Ukraine war, we notice that India has not yet condemned Russia outrightly, but has called for the immediate cessation of violence and supported diplomatic dialogue. This reflects India's strategic autonomy, wherein it refuses to completely align with either the Western bloc or Russia. India also places huge emphasis on non-violent, peaceful resolution, which echoes Gandhian principles in global diplomacy. India has been providing medicines and aid to Ukraine, showing compassion and global responsibility without taking political sides. This portrays how India still applies its civilizational philosophies while dealing with global conflicts.

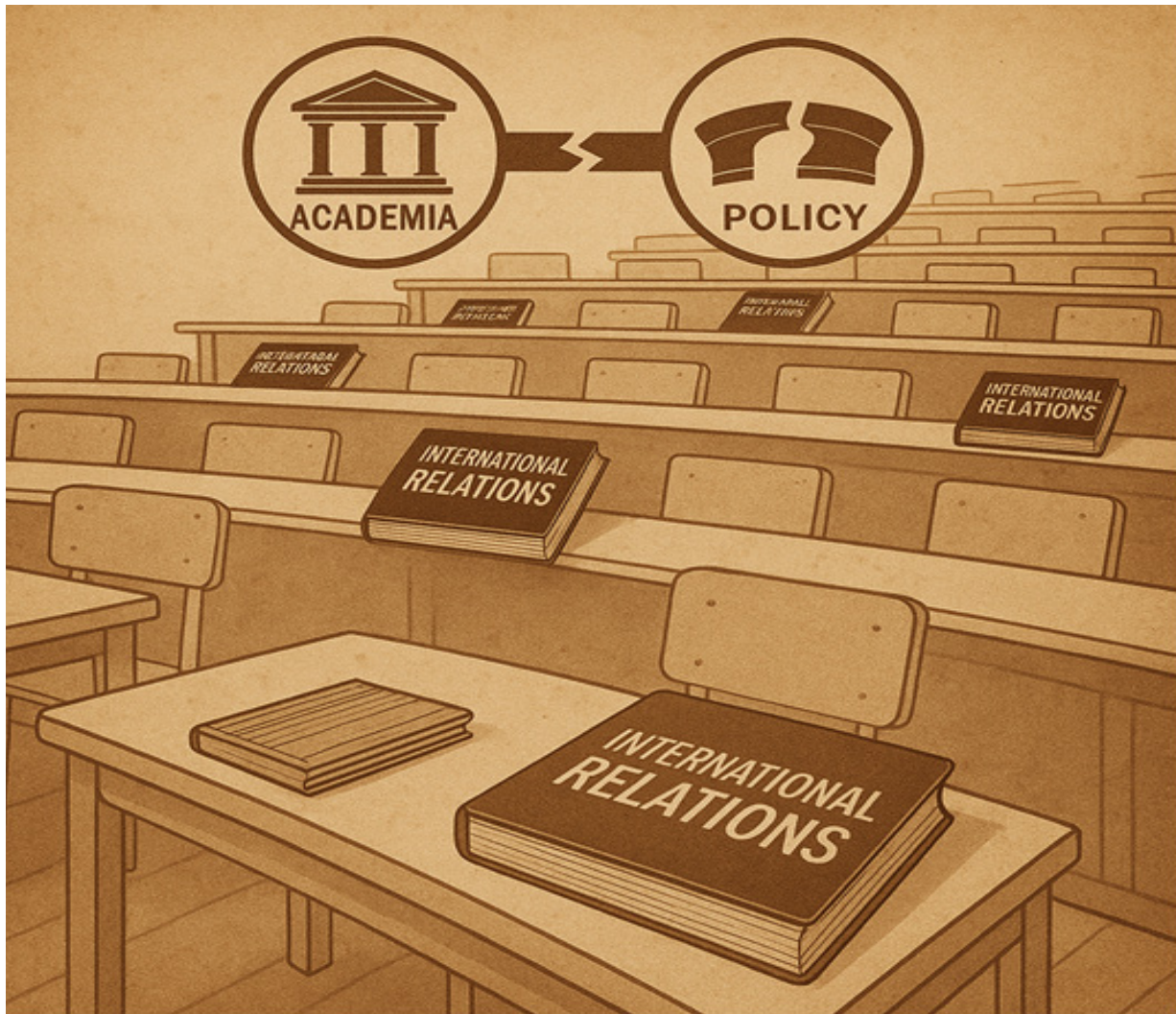
On the digital front, India shares its platforms like Aadhar, UPI, and CoWIN with other Global South countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. It strengthens India's position as a technology provider to the Global South. This reflects on India's age-old tradition

of Antyodaya, that is, uplifting the very last person in the queue. However, this does not promote dependency but rather focuses on capacity-building and digital sovereignty. India's focus on digital diplomacy was also reflected during its G20 presidency through the Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) framework. This positions India as a leader in ethical tech diplomacy, while combining innovation and development.

India has also emerged as a net security provider and first responder in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), during times of difficulty through its Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) missions. Some notable mentions have been: Operation Maitri (during Nepal earthquake, 2015), assistance to Sri Lanka during the 2022 economic crisis, and relief missions sent to Syria, Turkey, the Maldives, and Mozambique during natural disasters. These assistance missions are rooted in dharma and lokasangraha (welfare of the world). India uses HADR missions not for coercion, but to build goodwill, trust, and influence, especially in its neighbourhood.

Potential Challenges for Indian International Relations

International Relations is often marginalised in India. It is rarely offered as a standalone discipline at the undergraduate level in Indian universities. It is mostly treated as a subfield of Political Science. Most syllabi prioritise Western IR theories of Liberalism, Realism and Constructivism, while paying minimal attention to



Indian or Global South perspectives. We witness limited integration of the IR field with History, Philosophy, Area Studies, or Economics, which restricts a holistic understanding of it from an Indian lens. Moreover, there is a dearth of institutes that have autonomous IR departments or research centres focused on indigenous or alternative IR thinking. Even in institutions where IR is taught as a separate discipline, Indian philosophies, thinkers, and traditions are often left out or treated as peripheral in mainstream academic discourse.

There is also the problem of limited government funding in the field, as compared to STEM fields, or even Economics, public policy, which limits

long-term theory-building projects. There is also limited engagement between universities and influential policy think tanks (like the Ministry of External Affairs, NITI Aayog, IDSA), which creates a gap between theory and practice.

IR narratives are dominated by metropolitan institutions, especially by those present in Delhi. This sidelines regional universities and their perspectives. Even the voices from India's border regions, like the Northeast, Ladakh, and Kashmir, are underrepresented in shaping foreign policy or IR theory, despite their strategic importance. The contributions of NGOs, diaspora networks, and

grassroots peacebuilders are rarely studied within mainstream IR frameworks. Critical perspectives, including feminine IR and subaltern diplomacy, remain marginal in Indian IR academia, despite having a growing global presence⁹.

In IR, scholars often feel pressured to frame their research within dominant Western theories (like Realism or Liberalism) to gain academic legitimacy and publication. This shows that there is over-reliance on Western validation in International Relations. Moreover, there is limited confidence to develop original IR theories that are rooted in Indian philosophical or historical traditions.

Conclusion

Concludingly, we can agree that Western-led IR theories are insufficient to explain the strategic behaviours of postcolonial societies like India. This calls for India to develop a multifaceted approach to tackle the shortcomings that India faces in terms of a lack of institutions and funding. India also needs to create a bridge between policy research think-tanks and institutions where IR is taught as a separate discipline. For decolonising IR, we need to empower regional, subaltern, and Global South voices, and recognise them as theory-generating, and not just as descriptive agents.



⁹Acharya, Amitav. (2016). "Advancing Global IR: Challenges, Contentions, and Contributions." *International Studies Review*, 18(1), 4–15.

Glossary

Advaita Vedanta	Indian philosophy that emphasises non-duality.
Arthashastra	An ancient Indian treatise on statecraft by Kautilya (Chanakya).
BIMSTEC	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation.
Constructivism	IR theory focuses on the role of ideas, norms, and identities.
Dharma	Righteous duty in Indian philosophy.
G20 (Group of Twenty)	An intergovernmental forum of 19 countries plus the European Union that represents about 85% of global GDP.
G7 (Group of Seven)	A grouping of advanced economies - the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Canada, and Japan. India participates as an invited partner.
QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue)	A strategic partnership between India, the United States, Japan, and Australia focused on maintaining a free, open, and secure Indo-Pacific.
I2U2 (India – Israel – UAE – US)	A relatively new “West Asian QUAD” aimed at economic cooperation, food security, energy, and technology.
IBSA (India – Brazil – South Africa)	A trilateral partnership among three major democracies of the Global South.
Global South	A collective term for developing and postcolonial countries, highlighting shared struggles and aspirations in global governance.
Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR)	Missions providing emergency support.
NAM (Non-Aligned Movement)	Postcolonial grouping advocating strategic autonomy.
Ubuntu	African philosophy emphasises community and interconnectedness.
VasudhaivaKutumbakam	Sanskrit phrase meaning “the world is one family.”



About the Author

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