THE CUBBYHOLE OF AREA STUDIES: WHY INDIAN IR IS AT AN ANALYTICAL CUL-DE-SAC

POLICY BRIEF

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ABSTRACT

Indian IR appears today to be caught in a Dickensian moment of sorts, signalling both momentum and inertia at the same time. At a time when Indian diplomacy appears to be turning a discursive corner, the intellectual discourse is all but stuck in an analytical cul-de-sac. The fatigue of attempting to reconcile geopolitical and geoeconomic countercurrents has meant that the idea of the region has ended up being an oddball of sorts in Indian IR. At the very least, mainstream research needs to systematise the diversity of this growing regional engagement by border regions in terms of its nature (formal or informal); activities (social, economic, cultural, political); duration (sustained or episodic) and actors (public or private). If it is willing to do so, the subregional turn in India's foreign policy can bring a long-overdue attention to the borderlands both as a missing level of analysis as well as a governance actor in its own right besides nudging Indian IR towards innovative intellectual pathways.

BOXING ITSELF INTO A CORNER

The institutional landscape of India's diplomacy in subregional Asia has been transforming in interesting ways and acquiring a level of diversity and complexity in recent years with a host of subregional initiatives like the BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Multi-Sectoral Initiative for Technical and Economic Cooperation), the Mekong Ganga Economic Cooperation (MGC), and the BCIM Economic Corridor (Bangladesh China India Myanmar). Delhi's 'new' reading of borders is an admittedly feel-good narrative of rethinking borders as bridges and speaks a comfortable cosmopolitan language. (Kurian 2014) One would have expected this discursive shift to bring rich methodological and conceptual insights that addresses implicit biases in knowledge production. But in reality, academic silences have been deafening not least on account of self-serving red lines that scholars have drawn for themselves. Part of the reason for this is the colossal shadow that 'geopolitical gatekeeping' has cast on patterns of knowledge production both in the field of regionalism in general and border studies in particular. The geopolitics of knowledge has accompanied the geopolitics of borders, often mimicking reasons of the state. Far from offering alternative imaginaries, mainstream IR has tended to faithfully mirrored the 'cartographic anxiety' of the state. The mimetic nature of formal research has meant that many of these questions have been studied in fractured frames, with scholarship often taking the cue from statist frames.

The fatigue of attempting to reconcile geopolitical and geoeconomic countercurrents has meant that the idea of the region has ended up being an oddball of sorts in Indian IR. This dualism was also to strike deep roots since entire generations of Indian scholars 'mixed up IR with area studies, encouraged the latter to the detriment of the former… and thus beggared IR'. (Bajpai 2009:125) There has also been a surfeit of straight-line projections that draw a direct correlation between conflict and crisis with the borderlands seen as yet another theatre of the growing strategic rivalry between states. Asia is presumed to be 'ripe for rivalry' and conflict said to be endemic to the region on account of its legacy of unresolved disputes, weak institutional structures, militarisation and nascent state building (Malik 2005; Friedberg 2000). Take for instance, the bulk of writings on India-China relations that by and large continue to be in reactive mode with each power presumed to grow at the expense of the other. (Chellaney 2013; Karnad 2011; Kaplan 2010; Pant 2006) In stark contrast to the geopolitical narrative is the rather straightforward neoliberal vision of shared prosperity. (Bhattacharya and De 2005, Khanna 2007, Singh 2005) Booming bilateral trade is held out as 'the strongest pillar of China-India rapprochement' claiming to have 'overtaken the pace of political confidence-building.' (Singh 2005:1) Constructions such as 'Chindia' seek to conjoin the economic dynamism and closer integration of two rapidly rising economies. (Ramesh 2005) Some of the monotony of a fixed narrative is however broken by accounts that explore alternative sites of interactions and explore the intersections between federalism and IR and border states and foreign policy. (Sharma 2009; Uberoi 2009; Kurian 2010; Jacob 2011)

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The basic assumption that drivers of formal regionalism are inherently exogenous has resulted in a discipline that has lived in denial of its social history. As a result, it has refused to question the politicality implicit in the apparent objective categories of Asia's many regional divisions- South, Central, East and Southeast Asia. An example of this reductive thinking is evident in the sequestering of Ladakh that historically functioned as the 'land of trails' and the celebrated 'crossroads of high Asia'. Is it any wonder then that the social history of trans-Himalayan trade remains a blind spot in the discourse on regionalism in India? It is unfortunate that a montane region, which once sat astride many of these traditional trade routes linking India, China and Central Asia, today finds itself segmented into the bifurcated regions of South and Central Asia. (Harper and Amrith 2012: 252) By presupposing the irrelevance of sub-systemic actors to state behaviour, the mainstream debate fails to understand that transnational social networks, based on ancestral and kinship ties and interpersonal trust networks constitute a form of social capital that is integral to a transborder subregion, resting on a highly place-centric sense of self and community identity. (Tilly 2007, Chen 2000) A classic instance of this is trans-Himalayan trade that was typically characterised by highly personalised trust-based informal agreements such as the *gamgya* and *netsang* that were so durable that they often lasted for several generations, often bequeathed to the next of kin.

Reminding ourselves of these cultural crossings can be useful countercurrents to much of mainstream scholarship on the region that remain hived into the cubbyholes of area studies. Asian histories, as Sanjay Subrahmanyam reminds us, are essentially 'connected histories' and the tendency to compartmentalise regions to absurd levels are props for the 'intellectually slothful', who accept them as givens and caricaturise these as closed systems. (Subrahmanyam: 742) These networks and flows also remind us that 'it would be a mistake to assume that only the elite is capable of cosmopolitan practice'. (Joel Kahn cited in Harper and Amrith 2012: 257) By choosing to remain coy about the intersection between social history and IR, India's intellectual engagement with borders at multiple levels-cognitive, territorial and disciplinary has remained cosmetic and unimaginative (Kurian 2019)

THE SIREN CALL OF QUOTIDIAN IR

Indian IR thus clearly needs to make a fresh set of choices. Its self-chosen preoccupation with esoteric systemic battles that structuralism wages has meant that IR often has little useful to say about micro-governance challenges at the borders. If it wants to get out of the analytical cul-de-sac it has boxed itself into, Indian IR needs to look beyond (and below) the systemic to the subterranean. At the very least, mainstream research needs to systematise the diversity of this growing regional engagement by border regions in terms of its nature (formal or informal); activities (social, economic, cultural, political); duration (sustained or episodic) and actors (public or private). If it is willing to do so, the subregional turn in India's foreign policy can bring a long-overdue attention to the borderlands both as a missing level of analysis as well as a governance actor in its own right besides nudging Indian IR towards innovative intellectual pathways.

Lowering the research and policy gaze can help Indian IR comprehend the manner in which quotidian processes problematise the Westphalian idea in fundamental ways. These represent instances of subterranean subregionalism(s), a form of integration that mainstream research has so far chosen to ignore and are scripting a bottom-up vision of India's subregional imaginary. (Kurian 2016) There are three reasons why a serious engagement with these processes is absolutely critical. Firstly, there is growing evidence that border regions are beginning to effectively engage the Indian state to deepen subregional integration processes. The effects of this lobbying can be seen in India's decision to open 70 border haats along its border with Bangladesh, with 35 along the border with West Bengal; 22 at the Meghalaya border; five in Tripura and four in Assam. (Chakraborty 2014; Kurian 2016) Secondly, they are on occasion bypassing the state and directly forging cross-border issue-based linkages. What is likely to be bookmarked as one of the first instances of subregional problem solving is the Palatana thermal power project. Given the challenges in transporting heavy equipment to Tripura due to the difficult terrain, Bangladesh allowed transhipment of heavy turbines and machinery through its territory. Bangladesh's decision to allow transhipment became a critical factor in the successful completion of the project. Thirdly, these processes have the capacity to socialise national policy makers towards a decentred approach to problem solving and thereby build subregional governance capacity. The key organising principle here is that of subsidiarity, the idea that each issue or task is performed most effectively at the local or immediate level. There represent successful international instances of local substate actors exercising effective functional autonomy with the role of central authority being a subsidiary one.

Indian IR appears today to be caught in a Dickensian moment of sorts, signalling both momentum and inertia at the same time. At a time when Indian diplomacy appears to be turning a discursive corner, the intellectual discourse is all but stuck in an analytical cul-de-sac. When all is said and done, if it persists with its theoretical navel-gazing, Indian IR will continue to struggle with the contradictions of maintaining its analytical focus on relations between territorially-bound sovereign states in the face of the overwhelming reality of social, economic and cultural flows that bear declining relevance to territory. A phobic resistance to change could prove to be Indian IR's undoing, robbing it of much of its explanatory power and the conceptual tools to interrogate transitions. Quotidian IR can be a serendipitous moment to reopen the tired debate between social sciences and area studies. But can this binary be creatively recast to mutual advantage and along the way transform the way we do area studies in India?

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