

International Workshop

On

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Discussant Comments*

On

Obstacles to Good Work in IR—Professor Kanti Bajpai

The paper on ***“Obstacles to Good Work in IR by Professor Kanti Bajpai*** is honest and sincere effort to elucidate the state of the discipline of International Relations Theory in India from a very personal experience and ethnographic perspective of the discipline.

His location of the problem is perfect equating India and IR in templates that signify past glory and present stagnation. While all the hype of India as a “Rising Power” is made by the establishment intellectuals, there is a serious deficit of the Knowledge Quotient proportionate to the evolution of India as a rising power. Contrasting it with the periods of 1950s when India enjoyed comparable levels of growth and intellectual capacity, the India of the present century has serious deficits in the knowledge quotient and has self-imposed several limitations that have come from within the country rather than from external sources.

In the interim period just as India did not flourish, so also Indian IR languished. Professor Bajpai lays the benchmarks of what could be “good work in IR” by ascertaining the taxonomy of knowledge in terms of descriptive knowledge, analytical knowledge and prescriptive knowledge. This taxonomy is quite helpful in defining the nature and scope of how IR in India has been studied,

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researched and examined in its academic and policy salience. He points out several issues of how this taxonomy has been helpful in locating the pitfalls in the discipline. Professor Bajpai goes on to lay out the obstacles to the good work in IR in India.

He outlines the ***Obstacle #1: The Absence of “Puzzles”*** in terms of how disjuncture exists in existing realities and theoretical frameworks. He candidly outlines the dearth of “puzzles” in the Indian IR as the daunting lacunae that has dampened the zest of the theoretical enterprise into a mundane exercise of mere descriptive and prescriptive policy relevant studies that is superficial and lacks analytical depth. He is quite right in stating that “India’s puzzles are not just an Indian preoccupation” but would have to evoke interest in other parts of the world.

Obstacle #2 is Poor Methodological Skills. This is well portrayed in terms of how individual academic capacities have serious limitations as well as corporate perceptions of departments who shy and shun hard work on methodology. While he shuns the perfectionist approach to methodological issues at the same time condemning the lack of it, Professor Bajpai calls for a “golden mean” of balanced perspectives of good methodological training and utility. The imperative is to build capacity in the MA students in an incremental manner so that they are able to be focused in their research efforts at the masters level leading to M.Phil and Ph.D programs. He is quite right in pointing out the “politics of the departments / centres” in teaching methodology that is not only prevalent in SIS, JNU but in all departments in the country

Obstacle #3 is rightly “The Neglect of Theory” is quite profound. Outlining the epistemological basis of theory in Social Sciences and its locus in IR with its primary task of providing clarity of “categories”, “variables” that provide a coherent set of concepts and terms. It provides for a good cause-effect framework of reference. Professor Bajpai rightly points out the Indian lethargy for complex intellectual exercises as theory is difficult. Theory is also viewed as a western construct and the false premise that India should not adhere. Indian IR was never theory-relevant since the academic backgrounds of the earlier academics were from Literature, History, and law. But there has been false notion of adapting Realism as a theory of the Morgenthau type that was suited more for the establishment intellectuals completely devoid of any rigour.

India’s IR as rightly pointed out was more “relational” rather than deductive or inductive. With no sound theory, whatever that is called the Indian enterprise of strategy and strategic studies is absolutely bereft of any foundation. The urgent imperative is “theory-illuminating studies” that would be the basis of sound puzzles and sound policy.

Obstacle #4 Bad Teaching This is the single most detrimental issue in the country. There are key deficiencies in curricula, serious deficiencies in academic capacity, and serious deficiencies in theoretical capacity in Normative IR. In terms of systemic problems, critical deficiencies in libraries in the universities outside JNU are quite glaring. University departments are “gloriously bloated

academic bureaucracies” with feudal mindsets mirroring India’s political and bureaucratic class. Their so-called Boards of Studies and Research are nothing but empty vessels that make a clamoring noise with no content in them.

The problems of language and translation are all quite evident and they continue to be an obstacle to the discipline. There are several impediments in the translation effort. One, there is no true commitment to such an effort, two, the level of linguistic skills and scholarship is lacking, three although there are resources available notionally, there are serious problems tapping them, four there is absolute lack of interest of a clientele in the vernacular audience for translated works.

Yet another challenge in the teaching sector of Social sciences in general is the increased preference of senior peers to move away into administrative responsibilities. This is either due to a “allurement” of the “charm and perks” of office and the inducement that “more can be done” in such positions. This needs to be observed as a type of behaviour.

In the larger part of Indian universities, the impetus to curriculum change is slow, indifferent responses have been mostly evident.

Obstacle # 5 (Mis) Managing the Profession. Rightly termed; the lack of professional association of IR scholars. It is serious handicap, lack of an Indian ISA handicaps Indian scholars both the junior and the senior scholars, complete absence of peer-review of work since there is no real community. Even if associations were to come there are serious problems of offices, elections, and executive positions—there are more races for the “politics” of the association than the substantive gains.

I share the same situation—isolation in a Political Science Department; virtually no support systems, lack of energetic debates and collaborative initiatives and partnerships. Imperative for an Indian ISA is an important initiative.

Indian IR certainly needs the popularizers and impresarios. Indian IR suffers from compartmentalization and is challenged more by the establishment intellectuals whose superficial policy analysis seems to be a better model of popularizers and impresarios.

Issues in this Paper

The following are important issues in this paper for discussion:

- 1) What does the state and substance of contemporary Indian IR imply for the knowledge quotient of India's "Rising Power" Are there any implications?
- 2) How do we re-orient pedagogical and research approaches to "puzzle-centric" approaches, shifting away from the mundane "descriptive-centric" "relational-focussed" approaches?
- 3) What serious initiatives are required for a good and comprehensive methodological training in qualitative and quantitative frameworks in Indian IR?
- 4) What optimal synergies are needed to engage with global diaspora Indian IR scholars in "bringing theory home"?
- 5) Is the Indian IR community seized of the academic-professional challenge and the imperatives for capacity-building for itself and its younger peers for a viable future
- 6) What visions of Indian IR are there for the Indian IR community? Are there separate visions for the academia, policy research, media or is there a common vision for these groups that profess the enterprise of IR in India;
- 7) What could be pragmatic "next steps" in building a Indian IR community ISA partnership that engages the diaspora with the India-based IR scholars?

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