

Mainstream IR Theories and the Indian Knowledge System

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Abstract

Mainstream IR theories such as realism, liberalism, and constructivism emerged from Euro-American contexts. Such theories often inadequately capture the complexities of postcolonial states and non-Western epistemologies. The dominance of Western epistemologies has sidelined Indian voices in global discourse and created an epistemic hierarchy in spite of the pathbreaking contributions by Indian classical texts such as the Arthashastra by Kautilya which offer nuanced insights into governance and ethical statecraft (Rajadharma). Kautilya's ideas of rajamandala (circle of states) and the concept of loka-samgraha (welfare of the world) provide indigenous IR concepts. For centuries prior to the colonial era, the study of politics (Dandaniti) was a fundamental aspect of Indian intellectual life. India's post-independence foreign policy, notably the Non-Aligned Movement, reflects strategic autonomy and resistance to bipolar and unipolar global orders. This paper challenges these hierarchies and investigates how they restrict the potential for pluralism in the global IR. It discusses the disciplinary "gatekeeping" practices of the Western IR and argues that the current state of epistemic hierarchy stems from the West's epistemic power, which is founded in the imposition of various theories such as Civilization Mission (UK), Hegemonic Stability Theory (USA) etc. The paper will attempt to reclaim Indian Insights by emphasizing four areas of reclamation: theory, Concepts, Methodology, and Policy. The paper will also highlight the challenges in developing an IR theory in India.

Keywords: *Global IR, Epistemic power, decolonization, hierarchies, Loksamgraha, Dharma*

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Introduction:

Epistemic hierarchies emerge due to the dominance of Western-centric theories in IR. These theories often see non-Western experiences as less important or peripheral, which makes global scholarship discussions less fair. Global IR tries to break down these hierarchies by encouraging conversations that include a variety of perspectives from the Global South. As an imperative part of the Global South, India's civilizational insights, rooted in ancient traditions like dharma, ahimsa, and relational cosmologies, challenge these hierarchies by offering alternative frameworks for global politics that emphasize harmony, pluralism, and contextual ethics over universalist Western paradigms.

Learning Objectives

1. To examine the composition of epistemic hierarchies in Global IR, pinpointing uneven knowledge transfers between the Western core and the Global South peripheries.
2. To examine India's civilizational viewpoints, including dharma and ahimsa, as counter-hegemonic paradigms that contest Western universalism and enhance thematic richness.

Theoretical Context: Western Dominance in Knowledge Production

Western perspectives have played a major role in shaping the development, evolution, and understanding of international relations (IR) as a scholarly area. The conclusion of the Cold War led to the emergence of other intellectual movements, such as **postmodernism, postcolonialism, and decolonialism**, which contested the universal assertions of the modernist paradigm. Nonetheless, these institutions varied in their aims. The post-modernist school denies the universalism of the modern school mostly in the cultural domain, whereas the postcolonial school critiques colonialism and Eurocentrism predominantly in the political arena. The decolonial school critiques colonialism and aims to liberate indigeneity from the universalism of contemporary education. Catherine E. Walsh and Walter D. Mignolo (2018) assert that decoloniality should seek to challenge the "politico-epistemic violence" inherent in modernity. Epistemic disobedience may result in a decolonized transmodern world.

Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism have created global narratives by emphasizing Western experiences, power structures, and norms as universal benchmarks for international politics. These theories, developed after World War I in Europe and the US, emphasize state-centric anarchy, power struggle, and institutional collaboration while ignoring non-Western histories, cultures, and colonial legacies. The following headings explain how Western IR ideas affected global narratives:

1. Universalizing the Westphalian Model

The Treaty of Westphalia (1648) marked a pivotal moment in the history of international relations by establishing the principles of sovereignty and the modern state system. International relations were restricted to a limited geographical area in Europe, as the majority of states in the Global South were colonies, and the rights of statehood and sovereignty were not conferred upon them; thus, the populace was referred to as subjects of these colonies.

2. The Cold War and the Rise of American (IR) Hegemony

Post-1945, the United States emerged as the nucleus of International Relations theory development. American universities, think tanks, and government-sponsored research influenced the theoretical trajectory of the discipline.

3. Colonial Legacies and the Production of Knowledge

Western academia frequently labels non-Western civilizations as “developing,” “traditional,” or “non-modern,” thus perpetuating Eurocentric hierarchies.

4. Realism and the Global Discourse of Power Politics

Realism emerged as one of the first and most significant Western conceptions of International Relations. Realism, informed by European political theorists such as Thucydides, Hobbes, Machiavelli, and Morgenthau posit that international politics is motivated by the rivalry among states pursuing power, security, and survival.

The Influence of Realism on Global Narratives

Realism posits that international politics is centered on security threats, military capabilities, and national interests. This narrative prevailed during the Cold War, influencing: priorities in

defense expenditure, alliances such as NATO, and international military interventions.

Realism provided policymakers with a pragmatic framework for understanding the U.S.–Soviet competition as a structural power conflict. Realism neglected: colonization as a systemic force, the internal dynamics of post-colonial nations, indigenous diplomatic customs, and non-state entities, including liberation movements. Consequently, the global narrative established by Realism focused on the experiences of Western great powers while marginalizing alternative histories.

5. Liberalism and the Global Dissemination of Western Norms

Liberalism is a fundamental Western international relations paradigm grounded in Enlightenment principles, including individual rights, democracy, free trade, and the rule of law. International institutions established after World War II were mostly based on liberal ideas.

The Influence of Liberalism on Global Narratives

Liberal International Relations advocated the notion that Western-style liberal democracy represents the ideal governing model. Consequently, global narratives frequently depict democratic changes as essential indicators of “progress.” Institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, and subsequently the WTO promoted liberal economic frameworks that emphasized: deregulation, privatization, structural adjustment initiatives, and export-driven growth. These policies frequently slow down non-Western economies, but they were presented as generally advantageous. Liberalism contributed to the legitimisation of: humanitarian intervention, initiatives for the advancement of democracy, peacebuilding initiatives, and the Norms of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). These tales frequently concealed strategic aims under the pretext of moral superiority. The concept of “developed versus developing” nations originated from Liberal Theories, perpetuating paternalistic dynamics between Western benefactors and the Global South.

6. Constructivism and the Dissemination of Western Norms

Constructivism emphasises concepts, identities, and conventions over tangible power. Although providing a more culturally attuned perspective, constructivism predominantly originated from Western academia.

The Influence of Constructivism on Global Narratives

Constructivist scholarship frequently highlights conventions that originated in the West, including: human rights, sovereignty, humanitarian jurisprudence, individualism and liberal governance frameworks. These norms were asserted as universal despite being historically conditional. Western narratives have established identities such as “developed versus developing,” “democratic versus authoritarian,” “Contemporary versus Conventional.” These binaries maintain Western ideological dominance.

Constructivist analyses frequently depicted Western leadership in global institutions as normatively legitimate, perpetuating the notion that Western governments are the “standard-setters” of international conduct. Western universities predominantly house the leading International Relations departments and magazines. Consequently, Western theories outline the academic curriculum worldwide. Non-Western theories appear as anomalies or “alternative” aspects of viewpoints.

7. Exclusion of Non-Western Perspectives

Western International Relations theories not only prevailed but also marginalized competing intellectual traditions. For instance: The Rajmandala Theory (Ancient – Kautilya/Chanakya), Dharma-Based Diplomacy, Gupta and Mauryan Diplomatic Missions, Mughal Diplomatic Tradition, Nehruvian Diplomacy (Post-Independence) Based on Non-Alignment. These traditions provided profound insights about power, ethics, and diplomacy, yet were seldom amalgamated.

Indian Civilizational Insights: Conceptual Reclamation

Reclaiming these concepts is not an exercise in nativist glorification; rather, it pertains to intellectual pluralism. Four frameworks—**Arthashastra, Dharmic order, Rajadharma, and Loka-saCgraha**—constitute the philosophical foundation of ancient Indian statecraft. Collectively, they present a dual framework of realist pragmatism and normative ethics, yielding a unique blend in contrast to Western International Relations traditions.

Kautilya’s Arthshastra

Kautilya authored the Arthashastra, an ancient Indian treatise on statecraft and governance, around 3 BCE, long before Western scholars

such as Hobbes, and Thucydides wrote about realism. Henry Kissinger considered Kautilya's Arthashastra to be a combination of Machiavelli and Clausewitz focusing on power. (Pillalamarri 2015).

Kautilya's Arthashastra offers a non-Western viewpoint on power and security, which is more applicable to nations in the global South. He asserted that a state's aim to increase power should be attained through diplomacy, intelligence and other methods, as warfare may be both harmful and unpredictable. If all other methods outlined in upayas and shadgunyas prove ineffective, the state should only then engage in warfare.

Kautilya regarded prakriti (the seven elements of state power) as the foundation of state authority and established the significance of each element in a prescribed order; deviations in prioritisation could result in the deterioration of the state.

Rajmandala Theory

The Arthashastra delineates a "circle of states" (mandala), believing that neighbouring states are inherently rivals, while the neighbours of those states are seen as allies (Kautilya, trans. 1992). This concentric model foreshadows contemporary balance-of-power theory and depicts international relations as intrinsically conflictual and motivated by interests.

Saptanga Theory

The Saptanga model of the state, comprising the king, ministers, territory, fortifications, treasury, army, and allies, mirrors a pre-modern conception of state capacity (Mehta, 2009). The focus on a robust treasury and effective administration aligns with contemporary political-economic theories of national power.

Mandala Diplomacy

Kautilya delineates six diplomatic instruments: treaty formation (sandhi), aggression (vigraha), neutrality (asana), military preparedness (yana), seeking refuge (samsraya), and dual strategy (dvaidhibhava). These techniques exemplify an adaptive, interest-driven foreign policy approach, embodying a proto-realist perspective akin to Hans Morgenthau's principles of power politics from the twentieth century.

Dharmic Order

The term "Dharma" is initially employed in Vedic literature,

such as the Rig Veda, to denote the foundation of the universe. Dharma was utilised in Hindu legal texts, like the Manusmriti, to denote individuals' religious and legal responsibilities. Dharma, in essence, evolved into a prescriptive phrase delineating the actions individuals ought to undertake or refrain from.

A Comparison of the Dharma of Ancient India with Contemporary International Human Rights

It reveals a striking resemblance. The core concepts underlying both are, if not identical, remarkably analogous. The concept of Dharma is fundamentally based on the four primary values of humanism, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. When seen as foundational elements, they reflect the core principles upon which the IHR framework is established. Consequently, we must reevaluate the origins of IHR and acknowledge that, although contemporary methodologies originated in modern Europe, they are not the sole foundation of human rights. Dharma, an ancient idea over two millennia old, persistently challenges the fundamental basis of human rights, suggesting it is the origin of the concept. Therefore, if Eastern nations and others that adhere to Dharma embrace this concept, there will be no violation of human rights, as Dharma principles represent the precursor and old Eastern interpretation of human rights.

Rajadharma

Rajadharma, as articulated in the *Matsya Purana*, delineates the normative duties and ethical responsibilities of sovereigns. It mandates government based on fairness, welfare, and moderation. The king serves as the guardian of the realm (rakshaka) and is obligated to guarantee the safety, stability, and welfare of his subjects (Olivelle, 2004). In contrast to Machiavelli's prince, who is at liberty to manipulate, deceive, and coerce, the Dharmic king is bound by moral constraints. Raj Dharma emphasizes on Governance for the Public Good. The chapters of *Rajadharma* in *Matsya Purana* [Chapters 215-240] can stand alone and distinct, from the other discussions in *Matsya Purana*.

Loka-saCgraha: Global Welfare

The notion of Loka-saCgraha, as expressed in the Bhagavad Gita, signifies "the cohesion of the world" or "the well-being of all entities." It positions political authority inside a more extensive moral framework.

Lok Samgraha regarded Universal Welfare as a Political Obligation. Leaders should prioritise the collective stability and well-being of society over personal ambition (Radhakrishnan, 1993). This renders governance a manifestation of ethical service. Loka-saCgraha transcends the nation-state, advocating for accountability in the global order.

Table 1- A Brief Comparison

Concept	Nature	Modern IR Parallel
Arthashastra	Realist, strategic, power-centric	Classical Realism, Neo-realism
Dharmic Order	Normative, ethical	Constructivism, Liberal Internationalism
Rajadharma	Moral duties of rulers	Democratic governance, good governance norms
Loka-samgraha	Universal welfare	Global governance, soft power, and humanitarian diplomacy

Four Lenses of Reclamation

This section outlines four principal lenses for the reclamation of indigenous political thought: **Theoretical Lens, Conceptual Lens, Methodological Lens, and Practical Statecraft Lens**. Collectively, these lenses provide a thorough reconstruction of non-Western perspectives on international affairs.

Theory

Indigenous intellectual traditions globally contest the notion that International Relations theory is solely a Western intellectual construct.

1. Power: Transcending Material Capability

Numerous African traditions perceive power as community and rooted on social connections, rather than as individualistic. Authority is maintained via consensus, councils of elders, and reciprocal relationships. In Indian traditions, power (shakti) is deemed valid just when exerted in alignment with dharma, highlighting duty, restraint, and safeguarding.

2. Order: Harmony, Equilibrium, and Community

Indigenous traditions perceive political order not as a result of anarchy, as in Western International Relations, but as a system that is normatively grounded and socially integrated. The moral-political order in Indian traditions, grounded on dharma, perceives order as

the preservation of righteousness, adherence to rules, and the sovereign's obligation to avert oppression (Rajadharma).

3. Justice: Obligation, Reciprocity, and Communal Welfare

Justice within indigenous systems frequently surpasses the Western liberal emphasis on rights and legalism. It underscores obligation, mutuality, and restorative equilibrium. Dharma-oriented justice: Indian political thought perceives justice as the execution of one's obligations within the overarching moral framework. The ruler's authority is founded on the assurance of prosperity and security for all social strata.

These frameworks depict justice as participative, ethical, and socially integrated, providing a counterbalance to the individualistic and punitive traditions dominant in Western international relations and international law.

Concepts

1. Rajamandala as a Framework for Reevaluating Authority and Geopolitical Dynamics

The Rajamandala hypothesis, originating from Kautilya's Arthashastra, conceptualizes interstate interactions as concentric circles of allies, rivals, and prospective partners. It provides a reclaiming perspective through non-Western origins of realpolitik. Long before contemporary realism, Rajamandala expressed a balance-of-power rationale grounded in strategic pragmatism. The mandala underscores evolving coalitions, flexibility, and strategic adaptation, contesting rigid Western alliance frameworks.

Employing Rajamandala as a framework allows scholars to reevaluate modern geopolitics—such as South Asian regional dynamics or Indo-Pacific strategies—through an indigenous strategic paradigm that precedes and enhances Western International Relations theory.

2. Dharma as a Framework for Ethical Governance and Just Statecraft

Dharma is both a moral duty and the rule that keeps the universe and society in order. This method for reclamation changes the way IR analysis works by:

Incorporating ethics into governance: Instead of viewing morality as apart from statecraft, Dharma interweaves virtue, responsibility, and restraint into political actions. It prioritises wellbeing (loka-saCgraha) as authority is justified not via force but by the ruler's obligation to guarantee communal stability and prosperity.

3. Swaraj as a Framework for Political Autonomy and Epistemic Freedom

Swaraj, popularized by Gandhi yet rooted in ancient Indic traditions, denotes both self-governance and self-actualization. As a reclamation framework, it transcends anti-colonial politics to redefine the epistemic basis of International Relations. Swaraj contests external control in global governance, highlighting the principle of self-determination for nations and communities and thereby maintains Political autonomy. In Global IR, Swaraj serves as a revolutionary framework that challenges Eurocentric epistemologies while simultaneously empowering other theoretical paradigms.

Methodology

This research paper employs a contextual, pluralistic, and dialogical technique to analyse indigenous notions such as Rajamandala, Dharma, and Swaraj as frameworks for reclamation within Global International Relations (IR).

1. Contextual Approach: Placing Ideas within Their Intellectual and Historical Context A contextual methodology underscores the necessity of interpreting concepts within the cultural, chronological, and political contexts of their emergence

2. Pluralistic Approach: Adopting Diverse Epistemologies A pluralistic methodology acknowledges the intrinsic diversity of global political thought and asserts that International Relations cannot be confined to a singular intellectual tradition

3. Dialogical Approach: Formulating Knowledge Through Intellectual Engagement A dialogical methodology promotes reciprocal interaction across diverse traditions, facilitating conceptual cross-exchange instead of assimilation. This methodology draws upon uâstrârtha, the Indian tradition of structured discussion, and intercultural communication.

4. Synthesis of the Three Methodologies

The efficacy of this methodology is rooted in the synthesis of all three components:

They collaboratively establish an interpretive framework in which indigenous concepts serve as reclamation lenses—mechanisms that restore marginalized intellectual traditions and redefine the global disciplinary standard.

Policy

Strategic Independence as Contemporary Swaraj

The intellectual legacy of Swaraj is echoed in the postcolonial concept of strategic autonomy, which is defined as autonomy in external affairs. This includes refusing to submit to powerful blocs, maintaining autonomy in decision-making, and establishing national interests based on internal demands as opposed to outside influences. As a result, Swaraj becomes a policy orientation that directs foreign relations rather than just a political ideal.

NAM as Institutionalized Reclamation Practice

Created in 1961 by Nehru, Nasser, Tito, Sukarno, and Nkrumah. NAM is the institutional manifestation of postcolonial reclaiming in global affairs. NAM challenged the East–West binary during the Cold War. Non-alignment maintained: state independence from military blocs, resisting superpower objectives and liberty to make issue-based decisions. This directly challenged Western alliance politics and global order assumptions. NAM pioneered Global IR calls for plural knowledge systems by stressing on Global South political agency.

In conclusion

The future of International Relations may depend on establishing a more inclusive and pluralistic theoretical framework that acknowledges diverse histories, cultures, and political experiences. In Global IR, adopting a pedagogical paradigm signifies a radical change from Eurocentric instruction to pluralistic, multi-civilizational education. Decolonization manifests itself in pedagogy—not just via resistance, but also through reclamation, reconstruction, and the production of truly global knowledge. Consequently, indigenous theorization—utilizing notions such as Rajamandala, Dharma, and

Swaraj—serves as a transformative mechanism that re-establishes diverse knowledge systems and reconfigures the intellectual framework of International Relations. We must reexamine the Indian knowledge base that we have inherited to understand its applicability and relevance in contemporary Global IR.

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