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Interview – Rahul Sagar

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Rahul Sagar is a Global Network Associate Professor of Political Science at NYU Abu Dhabi. Prior to this he was Associate Professor of Political Science at Yale NUS College and the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, and Assistant Professor of Politics at Princeton University. His work has been published in major journals, edited volumes and media outlets, such as BBC, *The Washington Post* and *The Indian Express*, among others. He has written a variety of books, including *To Raise a Fallen People: The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Indian Views of the World* (Columbia University Press and Juggernaut), *The Progressive Maharaja: Sir Madhava Rao's Hints on the Art and Science of Government* (Hurst, Oxford University Press, and Harper Collins), and *Secrets and Leaks: The Dilemma of State Secrecy* (Princeton University Press). He has a PhD in Government from Harvard University and a BA in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics (PPE) from the University of Oxford.

Where do you see the most exciting debates/research happening in your field?

My field is political theory, which can broadly be divided into analytical and historical approaches. The most interesting work in the former category involves studying norms and institutions required to manage contemporary topics in public policy, such as fake news, climate change, and AI. A great example is *Digital Technology and Democratic Theory* edited by Lucy Bernholz, Hélène Landemore, Rob Reich. The latter approach has been reinvigorated by the growth of global and comparative theory, which examine cross-cultural connections and parallels. The outpouring of scholarship on modern Asia is especially welcome. I am, for example, eagerly looking forward to Daniel Bell and Amitav Acharya's *Bridging Two Worlds: Comparing Classical Political Thought and Statecraft in India and China*.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Over time I have become ever more conscious of the importance of history. Isaiah Berlin was central to this awakening. His collected works, which came out as I was starting at Oxford, had a profound impact on me. They helped me see how far political phenomenon—for example, the persistence of nationalism—owe to ideas rather than empirical factors. Richard Tuck has been the other great influence. He made me appreciate how context affects the ebb and flow of ideas. His seminar on Roman political thought, which I attended in my first year at Harvard, changed the course of my professional life. I was never the same after reading Tacitus! I came to appreciate history not only for explaining the course of events, but also as the prime teacher of political morality.

Over the past decade, I have become particularly interested in modern Indian political thought. Many factors lay behind this shift. Perhaps the most pressing was the sense that this field is underdeveloped. I would describe this as *patangbazi* (kite-flying), by which I mean we see grand claims lofted on very thin strings. We need to move beyond predictable figures and texts and develop a fuller account of Indian political thought based on rigorous archival research.

In your new book *To Raise a Fallen People*, you use archival material from the 19th century to outline debates about India's position in the world back then. In what way does this relate to contemporary politics within India and its placing as a 'rising global power'?

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To Raise a Fallen People shows that 19th century Indians were divided over the question of whether India should emulate or reject great power politics. Because these discussions occurred when India was a colony, a time when Indians were excluded from high office and Britain's power shielded India from invasion, there was little incentive or reason to arrive at something like a national consensus. The debate over what kind of power India should become revived somewhat after 1947. But, because India was so impoverished at the time, the debate was rendered moot. Indeed, for the next few decades after 1947 there were worries that, far from becoming a great power, India might go to pieces. It is only now, with its economy expanding and its capabilities steadily increasing, and with a new Cold War brewing on its doorstep, that India is being compelled to answer the long pending question—does it intend to behave like a conventional great power? This is the reason why the debates that occurred in the 19th century are still so important and timely. It has fallen to us to pick up the threads.

How have the worldviews of 19th century South Asians contributed to the anti-colonial discourses dominant in the 20th century?

The worldviews of 19th century Indians contributed to 20th century anti-colonial discourses in two ways. In the closing decade of the 19th century, Indians began traveling widely. Whether on ships to Europe or at public meetings in Britain, encounters with other colonized peoples laid the foundations for the language of solidarity. Simultaneously, the enthusiasm with which they adopted the English language, and the liberal ideals it expressed, made metropolitan Indians aware of, and unhappy with, the brutality of colonial enterprises elsewhere in the world. One example, which I examine in *To Raise a Fallen People*, was the opium trade, which Indians came to abhor once they became aware of the cost it had imposed on the Chinese.

How does your research on the Idea of India database contest or complement notions of a Eurocentric modernity in 19th century India? Can modernity during this period be conceptualised in non-European terms?

My principal objective in creating Ideas of India was methodological. I wanted to resist the error, which is commonplace, of undertaking historical research to prove an ideological point. This method invariably leads to cherry picking. Ideas of India challenges such parochialism. Now claims about the history of Indian political thought can be measured against a robust sample of the ideas that were in circulation in the modern era. Thus, for example, when we examine this corpus, which covers every major English-language periodical published in India between 1850-1947, we find material that contests and complements “Eurocentric” modernity. It complements it in the sense that it shows how important the encounter with the West was in stimulating advances in ideas and institutions in India. It contests it because it shows how Indians creatively adapted or even rebutted ideals circulating in Europe. In my most recent book, *The Progressive Maharaja: Sir Madhava Rao's Hints on the Art and Science of Government*, I show how both these interacting processes unfolded in the Native States in particular. In places such as Baroda and Mysore, rulers and ministers devised a modernity of their own, which sought to combine ancient structures and ideals with modern values and practices, a *jugalbandi* (performance in Indian classical music that features a duet of two solo musicians) that led the Native States to devise constitutions, advance industrialization, and push for social reform, before British India did.

Has the nation-state always been a dominant way of organising political communities? From your research, did any notions of modern political organisation that do not conform to this vision emerge?

My research focuses on the British era, circa 1800-1947. During this period, there certainly were proposals to organize political power differently, for instance to revive village republics or to participate in international federations. But these proposals, it must be said, lived and died on the margins of public life: the nation-state was the dominant form. We have hundreds of periodicals, newspapers, and petitions at our disposal in the archives, and one is hard pressed to find evidence of any meaningful move toward other forms of political organization.

Your first book, *Secrets and Leaks*, argues that “the fear of retaliation usually prompts officials to act anonymously — that is, to “leak” information”. Does this help democratise access to knowledge, or risk negatively impacting national security?

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Secrets and Leaks shows that the story can go either way. At times, leaks can make the public aware of serious wrongdoing. More often, leaks allow officials to covertly shape public opinion. This is why citizens must respond to leaks cautiously. They should begin by pondering over who benefits from a given leak. But even this will not always help. At times officials themselves leak incriminating information because they want to “get ahead” of a story and “shape the narrative”. So, what appears an expose may actually be an exercise in mitigation. At other times, reporters or insiders will reveal sensitive information or exaggerate its significance, because they are seeking to score partisan points. In such cases leaks may seriously damage national security or undermine diplomatic relations. Unfortunately, there is no easy way for citizens to decipher ex ante what a leak truly intends to accomplish. This is why much rides on the character of journalists, who ought to act as sieves.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Given what I have said so far, you will not be surprised to hear that I would urge emerging scholars to develop historical awareness. By this I do not mean, at all, that they should study the discipline of history, which has come to be obsessed, in a rather ahistorical way, with questions of identity and interpretation. Instead, they should study facts, especially archival materials as well as narratives and biographies that engage deeply and honestly with such materials. This will help cultivate a true understanding of the factors that shape and influence international politics.