Interview – Siddharth Tripathi

Siddharth Tripathi is a Senior Research Fellow at the Faculty of Economics, Law and Social Sciences, University of Erfurt, Germany, where he is leading the BMBF (Federal Ministry of Education and Research) project on *Postcolonial Hierarchies in Peace and Conflict*. Prior to that, he was a Senior Research Fellow at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg, University of Duisburg Essen and Postdoctoral Fellow at Willy Brandt School of Public Policy, University of Erfurt. He completed his PhD in International Relations at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He is primarily interested in the politics of knowledge production in IR and Peace and Conflict Studies in addition to postcolonial and decolonial praxis. He worked as a Lecturer at Lady Shri Ram College for Women (LSR), University of Delhi, where he facilitated courses and coordinated the diploma programme on Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding at the Aung San Suu Kyi Centre for Peace. He has published papers on epistemic hierarchies in International Relations (IR), and edited a volume on International Relations: Theories and Approaches. At present, he is co-editing the Rowman and Littlefield Handbook *Peace and Conflict Studies: Perspectives from the Global South(s)*, which is a collaborative endeavor of over 50 scholars and practitioners from the Global North(s) and the Global South(s).

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

My academic journey is that of a first-generation migrant scholar (in-between 'the home' and 'the world'), like many others, who has moved from (and within) the Global South to the Global North. While this has been enriching and enlightening, it has also been painful to experience at the same time. This has shaped my understanding of the world, though not always for the better. I left my 'home' (a town in rural Uttar Pradesh (UP) in India), when I was 15 as there were no good (read English-medium) schools in a city within my state. It was important for my mother (Anita Tripathi), who doesn't speak English, that her kids do. After that I moved to New Delhi to pursue my higher education and studied Literature (Hindi and English), History and Philosophy (both Indian and 'Western'); the convergences and divergences that I noticed in those subjects still accompany me.

My first introduction to IR (as a discipline) has been through my Professors at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), where I did my Masters and PhD. The critical discussions (inside and outside the classroom) had been formative for me and helped me make sense of some of the classical canons in the field (which then felt 'foreign' to me to be honest) and the (dis)connect between the 'home' and the 'outside' world. This disconnect seemed more obvious while I was doing my PhD on external intervention (seemingly well-intentioned) in Afghanistan and Bosnia-Herzegovina, when I spent more time in those contexts. What I was reading about the critique of international intervention and the politics (hierarchies) surrounding it became more pertinent. It prompted me to think about the 'coloniality' of power structures which operates through spatialized and temporalized processes of both connection as well as differentiation. In addition to that, works of Arlene Tickner, Robbie Shilliam, Meera Sabaratnam, Pinar Bilgin, Inanna Hamati-Ataya, Navneeta Behera, Siddharth Mallavarappu, Gulsah Capan (the list goes on…) gave me the articulation to speak to different audiences but I also felt and experienced the multiple borders that are dividing different groups.

I moved to Germany to pursue postdoctoral research on legitimacy of external interventions in Kosovo (and Mali, which never happened due to Covid). The disillusionment with the politics of intervention (and the arrogance of the interventionists) made me rethink how the 'international' works and what is (can be) the role of individuals in it. I

ended up immersing in the works of bell hooks, W E B Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, along with Gloria Anzaldùa, Elizabeth Dauphinee, Sara Ahmed, Nira Yuval-Davis, and reflecting on them through my lived experiences and observations. The *silences* (still) prevalent in the discipline, along with the *silencing* have encouraged me to critically evaluate my own role as a scholar who is part and product of this process, to also speak and articulate. Catherine Walsh's idea about the practice of seeing from and through the cracks which allows us to examine "our own cognizance of the cracks and our own participation in the crack making", resonates with and helps me navigate across my multiple positionalities as I search for answers about being and (be)longing. Coming from a postcolonial context and thinking through (and with) decolonial scholarship, my curiosities, at the moment, lie to make sense of the 'home' and the 'world' (or the in-between), in whichever order and strive for a more equitable society.

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

When I think of debates, the image that I have in mind is of scholars coming together to discuss key concepts and problematiques of International Relations, or any other discipline, from different epistemological, ontological and methodological perspectives and agreeing to disagree. Perhaps it is my wishful thinking, but I do not see that happening (beyond classrooms and individual writings) in the broad 'field' of IR and Peace and Conflict Studies, where I situate myself. This is not to say that there is none, but I feel that most of the discussions are happening in separate silos among like-minded scholars/groups/networks who do not necessarily speak *with* each other, whether in the Global North(s) or the Global South(s) or within them.

In terms of research, I am excited about how the idea of the 'international' and the field of IR is changing and becoming more dynamic and inclusive (also on account of cross-fertilization from other disciplines, albeit slowly) with discussions on silences, racialised hierarchies, decolonial/postcolonial struggles (sensibilities), emotions, care and intimacies. Critical, feminist, queer, decolonial and postcolonial scholarship is contesting the dualistic and binary mode of thinking across different spatialities and temporalities in IR. What also intrigues me are conversations on decolonial/postcolonial methods and pedagogies (praxis) which are being used along to create collectives and solidarities, for example, South-South movement, enabling new voices, carving spaces for creative ways of thinking and articulating and (un)doing re-search. Some of this work is being undertaken by members of the Global South Caucus, Global IR section of ISA, and the Colonial, Postcolonial and Decolonial (CPD) working group of BISA but also beyond that. I am optimistic that the field is transforming, as is the meaning of the 'international' and what (who) is becoming/considered part of it. IR is slowly starting to become more human(e)?

A great deal of your work is focused on studying knowledge production in IR. How does understanding the politics of knowledge production help address epistemic hierarchies?

I want to start by saying that many of us can articulate stories about the world but only a privileged (rather selected) few find their way into what is referred to as 'the international'. Given my situatedness in this field I focus on this, though it is a bigger issue that needs to be discussed (beyond epistemic hierarchies). A look at IR theory textbooks, editors of major IR journals or heads of the International Studies Association (ISA) provides definitive evidence for existing hierarchies within the discipline that reflect the marginalisation of agents from the Global South.

This leads us to broader questions like- what is considered knowledge, who (re) produces it and where is it (re) produced and in which language? Examining the politics of academic knowledge (re) production enables us to understand the 'coloniality of knowledge' (to quote Anibal Quijano) that shapes and constructs limpid binaries of 'I' and 'you', 'individual' and the 'international', 'academic' and 'practitioner', 'north' and 'south' among many others and creates 'asymmetries of ignorance' (to quote Dipesh Chakrabarty). Further, the constraints of universities or academic knowledge production and the gatekeeping practices obstruct new forms of knowledge creation/cultivation/production from emerging and/or entering IR's disciplinary core.

Developing an explicit understanding of multiple sites and systems of knowledge creation/production/cultivation in IR comes with the responsibility towards self and others to be able to transform it. For scholars, this would include a sensitivity towards the lived experiences of – both mainstream and marginalised – individuals/researchers in the Global South(s) as well as an engagement with knowledge(s) that emerges on the basis of their everyday, beliefs

and survival strategies within their immediate environment. A lot of decolonial/postcolonial scholars have been arguing that decolonization is a collective task and individual scholars cannot decolonize the entire machinery of knowledge (re)production on their own. Until and unless we understand the epistemic and structural hierarchies (funding, visa regimes, everyday micro-aggressions, precarity) prevalent in academia, we cannot undo the banking model of education as Paulo Freire calls it, still working within the neo-liberal understanding of knowledge as a good to be consumed for a specific end.

In a paper, you propose the idea of 'doing IR differently' through methodologies like Participatory Action Research (PAR) that include the perspectives of the subject of the research. What is the importance of this methodology particularly in Peace and Conflict Studies (PCS)?

The core idea of PAR goes beyond research or engagement with abstract ideas, devoid of contexts and transformative action. PAR creates new knowledges, but it aims for transformative learning on the part of participants and researchers and results in action towards some social or personal change. PAR becomes relevant for scholars, especially from the Global South, who might have very different incentive structures beyond academic publishing. For instance, Enrique Mu and Milagros Pereyra-Rojas argue that many Latin American scholars based in the region aim for political and not merely intellectual impact of their research (in contrast to those who are based outside), due to specific societal expectations of their work.

Coming to PCS, I find that the importance lies in its ability to not allow theory/concepts for example peace/justice/violence to drift away from the imperatives of action. Generally, PCS researchers go to 'post-conflict' contexts, gather data and leave (on grounds of maintaining objectivity, neutrality and distance from the field once we are out of it). PAR reminds us that the explorer is not different from that which s/he is exploring. It centres the communities' needs as defined by themselves based upon their context and social realities, led by them to address them. It also calls for collective dialogues and engagement with and intervention from those who are most impacted by marginalisation in its many manifestations. In that way, it not only challenges the established premises of PCS research but also the classical model of so-called 'peacebuilding' or 'development' initiatives which are designed in the headquarters of some International Organisation or NGOs. The core idea is also to go beyond the limits of 'studies' and understand that (emancipatory) knowledge is also created and 'cultivated' outside the contexts of the academy to build a more just world. I do not want to say more about that here as there is a chapter by colleagues in the Rowman and Littlefield handbook that I am co-editing on "Peace and Conflict Studies: Perspectives from the Global South (s)", (consisting of over 30 contributions with more than 50 contributors, so wish me luck!) which is in its final stages and shall be out by early 2024.

You have spoken about the need for 'dialogic encounters' in decolonising knowledge production in IR. Could you elaborate on this concept and how it can be incorporated in IR curricula within university spaces?

I have borrowed this idea from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire who emphasises the need to co-produce knowledge through dialogic encounters, between those who have the privilege to speak and others who have been denied the right to speak. It cannot be a situation where some claim to name on behalf of others. Dialogic encounters incorporate love, humility, criticality, humour, faith and hope to transform the world. I feel it can serve as a powerful tool for collaborative processes of knowledge creation/cultivation/production since it allows individuals, irrespective of their geographical or socio-economic location, to see their (and others) personal and social realities as well as the contradictions within them in a new light.

Teaching and curriculum design is not a neutral or apolitical space. It is (and should be) political. When I was teaching IR at undergrad level in India (a few years back), I observed that most of the prescribed texts by the university were focused on classical theories like Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism as reference points and that's about it. Some of us used the tutorials to discuss critical approaches and those were the discussions which were most exciting for the students as well as for me. When I could design courses at Willy Brandt School of Public Policy, Germany, I tried to engage with the students about their preferences and welcomed comments on the syllabus, I had designed. Sometimes it worked well, sometimes it didn't. To create a knowledge-plural curriculum, I would suggest

that starting point can be dialogue between a) IR scholars across the board to situate themselves within the intricate matrix of relational power, potentially reshaping how they approach their work/syllabi, b) students who are involved in creating their own accounts and c) exploring oral narratives, stories, written historical documents, indigenous or local texts (from contexts of the researchers/students). Jacqueline De Matos-Ala's work on IR curriculum development at the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa, provides an excellent example of the fruitful operationalisation of critical pedagogy and dialogic action. I want to be clear that focusing on just university spaces and curriculum is not enough, but we need to start somewhere. Maybe e-IR can start an online collection of knowledge-plural syllabi, which could help lecturers everywhere!

In another paper, you talk about the need to de-center Peace and Conflict Studies (PCS) since the key concepts used come from Global North's experience of violence and war. Could you elaborate on some of the key differences between North and South's experiences of violence?

I say that, since the reference points which shape Peace and Conflict Studies have been in the Global North. It took a while to bring discussions about violence of colonialism and coloniality in PCS, even though there has been huge literature on it in other fields. Decentering is just a starting point to incorporate peripheral/ silenced or marginalized voices but it is not the end goal.

Violence is experienced everywhere at personal and systemic levels, whether in the Global North or the Global South. The problem is that Western notions of peace/violence/war only see some forms of violence and make others invisible. So, the key differences lie in the (non)acknowledgement and invisibilisation of the experiences in the Global South, sometimes systematically perpetrated by the sovereign state itself. It is in the Global South that we see the perversity and dispossession of 'development' manifesting in the form of poverty, inequality, extractivism and the quiet (preventable) deaths, reported only in terms of numbers and trends. It often goes unseen and unnoticed even if felt but becomes the normal and part of the everyday, whereas in the North that becomes a crisis worthy of global attention. This is evident, for example in the recent discussions on the War on Ukraine (vis a vis Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria, South Sudan…) and the racialized frames used in the discourses as I have mentioned in another piece. These frames are dominated by state-based hard security focusing on sovereignty and borders as compared to the global inequality and stratification, overlooking lived experiences of individuals who are actually on the receiving end of conflicts and wars (most of which are happening in the Global South). Unfortunately, there seems to be a hierarchy in responding to the claims of suffering too.

You are currently co-editing the handbook *Peace and Conflict Studies: Perspectives from the Global South(s).* What major themes or findings have come to light while working on this?

The idea of the handbook emerged out of conversations with my colleague Solveig Richter and our common dissatisfaction with the current state of PCS especially how it strengthened asymmetric colonial power structures in the way knowledge was and is produced. As I have said before, the foundations of PCS in the Global North have strongly influenced the theoretical and conceptual frameworks which were used to 'study' conflicts in Africa, Latin America or Asia. There has been a 'unidirectional gaze': peace seemed to be a characteristic feature of the Global North(s) and conflict a feature of the Global South(s). Peace was 'in here' and conflict was 'out there'. Also, individuals/scholars/practitioners from the regions were often considered as "objects" of research or "experts" for interviews and not necessarily as knowledge creators.

The handbook intends to address that gap in knowledge production: It engages in a thorough academic discussion not just *about* the Global South(s) but includes ideas, methodologies and knowledges *from* and *with* the Global South(s). It intends to push for a more systematic integration of diverse perspectives and identification of research agendas which take the agency of scholars from the South seriously. We have tried to make the handbook a dialogic, collaborative and inclusive venture (despite our differences and multiple standpoints) since the composition of various sections and chapters have been developed in close collaboration with junior and senior scholars/practitioners, educated/based both in the Global North and the Global South, namely in Brazil, Colombia, Ethiopia, Germany, India, Kenya, Mexico, South Africa, UK and Uganda among many others. It consists of over 30

contributions with more than 50 contributors (so wish me luck!) and is in its final stages. It shall be out in early 2024 and will hopefully serve as a reference point for any scholar or practitioner who wants to understand the different trajectories of conflict and violence, justice and peace both in the Global North and the Global South. It is one of the first efforts to pave the way for an inclusive academic discussion on a truly "Global Peace and Conflict Studies" (although I don't want to limit it to 'studies' itself).

What is the most important advice you could give to other early career or young scholars?

I am not sure if I believe in 'the most important' but I encourage young scholars to engage in cooperative conversations, as aware and conscious beings, to try to overcome established 'self-versus-other' hierarchies. Reflect on your own entanglements to create knowledge in solidarity with action. This can only be done by moving from 'pseudo-participation' and 'pseudo-representation' to committed and lasting involvement. It is crucial to not only ask questions but question the questions too, in a kind, empathetic and compassionate way, which is often not the case in academic discussions.

On a less serious note (perhaps not), academic life can be lonely, solitary and disorienting at times, especially if you change locations after your degrees. Create a home within yourself and cherish friendships, solidarities and collectives. Remember that the journey is as significant as the destination, as are your co-travellers. It might help to ascertain that we are not solely defined by our work; we define our work and ourselves. We are our stories. Therefore, it is important to express, speak, write, share your own stories and/or listen, read and create spaces for others to share their stories.