

## Interview - Siddharth Mallavarapu

Written by E-International Relations

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# Interview - Siddharth Mallavarapu

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Siddharth Mallavarapu is a Professor at the Department of International Relations and Governance Studies at Shiv Nadar University in India. He is currently co-series editor of *Critical Global Thought* published by Oxford University Press. Mallavarapu has also been a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Global Cooperation, Duisburg and a Guest Professor at Sciences Po, Paris. He contributed to the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* and is the author of *Banning the Bomb: The Politics of Norm Creation*, two co-edited anthologies on *International Relations in India* (with Kanti Bajpai), a co-edited book titled *International Relations: Perspectives for the Global South* (with B.S.Chimni) as well as several journal articles.

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

There is much that is exciting and worth mulling over in the discipline of International Relations (IR). I am interested in the on-going effort to decolonise IR and make it a genuinely more inclusive and global discipline. An effort in this direction warrants interrogating the content of IR, the curricula we teach, the pedagogies we adopt, the narratives we privilege, the methodologies we rely on, the status of our temporal and spatial imaginations and our categories of analysis. The workings of race, class, gender and nation in contemporary world politics also merits closer scrutiny from this perspective.

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

I have learnt over time that it is important to engage with the complexities and nuances of theorists within IR and to situate them in historical contexts. The tendency to label thinkers prematurely as belonging to this or that school of thought is a temptation that must be resisted. Revisionist historiography in IR has thrown fresh light on how we view figures within the classical realist fold. Edward Hallet Carr and Hans Morgenthau for instance turn out to be more complex figures than the labels assigned to them suggest. We must study figures like Kautilya within the Indian pantheon or Sun Tzu within the Chinese pantheon independently, and arrive at a more holistic and situated account of their contributions to strategic thought and statecraft and, ultimately, to IR thinking.

In terms of influences, I am grateful to some very fine minds (former teachers and collaborators) who have left an enduring impact both in terms of ideas and habits of work at crucial stages of my academic socialisation in the discipline of IR. At Jawaharlal Nehru University, Kanti Bajpai taught an extremely popular graduate course on IR theory and was subsequently a wonderful academic mentor to me and several others. I have enjoyed and immensely benefited from insightful conversations with B.S.Chimni about the global south, International Law and IR. In more recent years, I have found particularly instructive the work of Upinder Singh, Ashis Nandy, Pinar Bilgin, Prabha Kotiswaran, Himadeep Muppidi, Siba Grovogui, Amitav Acharya, Elizabeth Dauphinee, L.H.M.Ling, Sanjay Chaturvedi, Jenny Edkins, Shibashis Chatterjee, Iver Neumann, Rahul Sagar, Mustapha Kamal Pasha, Arlene Tickner, Rahul Rao, Ian Hall, Karen Smith, Naeem Inayatullah and Anna M.Agathangelou to name just some in an ever burgeoning list.

### **There is an increasing amount of literature contesting the key dates and debates that are integral to shaping the discipline of International Relations. How relevant is the trajectory the discipline has taken**

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### **to understanding where we are today?**

Deciding on what the landmark episodes or classic moments worth pondering over are has a considerable impact on our mode of socialisation in IR. For instance, the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia as the point of departure to understand modern statehood has been contested by several thinkers including Benno Teschke. The evolution of the discipline in terms of the 'great debates' has come to be viewed with suspicion for some time now. Scholars like Brian Schmidt have demonstrated Realists and Idealists were not neatly divided into camps as the 'ideal type' suggests. We may have also bought in too easily to a notion of epistemic 'progress' in the discipline. Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman have elsewhere audited IR in terms of the Lakatosian criteria of 'progress'.

As a thought experiment, it might be interesting to ask students of IR located in different parts of the world what they regard as the most significant historical events from their specific contexts. We might be led to a more refined understanding of what mattered to whom, when, why and under what circumstances. This knowledge could inform how we may interpret the trajectory of the discipline and examine both the conspicuous and not so conspicuous exclusions in its mainstream Anglo-American telling.

### **How do we build more humane, equitable and inclusive narratives of global order?**

Normativity of one kind or the other is intertwined with all historical global orders. The contemporary global order is no different in that respect. We can build more humane, equitable and inclusive narratives of global order by first acknowledging what these terms mean, circa 2018. The project which came closest to pursuing these questions intellectually (from the late 1960s onwards) was the World Orders Model Project (WOMP) and the journal *Alternatives* often reflected these plural perspectives and debates. There is a great deal of contemporary intellectual ferment and critical thought regarding these questions in diverse intellectual traditions – Third World Approaches to International Law (TWAAIL) is one such fine illustration. It does not treat the world as a *tabula rasa* and scrutinises contemporary manifestations of imperial continuities particularly in the realm of international law. Besides, the surge in scholarship re-visiting the Bandung legacy can be examined closely to better appreciate the histories that shaped political solidarities within the global south. It might also provide us a window into other possible futures.

### **Do you agree with criticism that non-western or indigenous theorising of IR can be ethno-centric or provincial? Can the non-west speak for itself?**

I do agree that there is a risk that theorising from other locales could also be ethnocentric or provincial. However, this need not be the case at all. The global south must speak for itself. To me the real question is how we may contribute to create conditions in the academia that make it easier for scholars in the global south to speak freely. The global south must participate in a larger global conversation but on less asymmetric terms than is currently the norm. It requires outlets, professional associations and journals which take into cognisance the distinct sensibilities that are part of the collective we refer to as the global south, and the willingness to call into question dominant stereotypes of countries and peoples in the global south. Binyavanga Wainaina in 2006 questions stereotypes about Africa with particular irony and effect in his *Granta* piece, 'How To Write About Africa'. A large part of the onus also rests on institutions within the global south to nurture and think through innovations in curricula design, pedagogy and research designs that begin to encourage reflection on the specific ontologies and epistemologies of the global south.

### **You retain a special interest in uncovering the disciplinary history of International Relations in India. Could you expand on the lineages of Indian IR?**

I have enjoyed researching, teaching and writing on developments pertaining to the disciplinary history of IR for over a decade now in India. These have included curiosities about theoretical provenance, institutional contexts, Indian political thought, narratives of Indian foreign policy, discourses around national security and competing Indian conceptions of political order. The two co-edited anthologies on Indian IR and the textbook were also conscious disciplinary contributions to IR in India. Speaking of lineages, one illustration may be found in Indian foreign policy thinking with regard to non-alignment. I have argued elsewhere that non-alignment as foreign policy did raise a number of 'first-order' theoretical concerns worth pursuing for any interested researcher of Indian foreign policy.

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### **How have Indian conceptions helped us to understand global order?**

In a recent chapter titled *The Sociology of International Relations in India: Competing Conceptions of Political Order*, I have argued that there is considerable diversity in the manner in which Indians have thought about global order. However, there are some recurring strains in the manner in which order has been conceptualised. Order has often not been viewed in isolation. It has been closely linked to notions of justice. Power differentials have been a constant consideration in the evaluation of possible orders. There is also recognition of strong normative undertones in the manner in which order tends to be rationalised.

### **What are the pedagogical challenges for teaching International Relations in the Global South? What tools do you employ to challenge the dominant narratives of International Relations in the classroom?**

One of the principal pedagogical challenges for teaching IR in the global south is to avoid reproducing the discipline in its mainstream Anglo-American rendition. Besides, there is an urgent need to write our own textbooks drawing on milieu related examples and illustrations, recovering figures and accounts that have contributed to thinking about IR but have not received their due in the mainstream. My colleague B.S.Chimni and I attempted this when we co-edited *International Relations: Perspectives for the Global South* in 2012. We included distinct entries on colonialism, imperialism, Indian thinking in IR, Gandhi and world politics, race, class and gender in IR, global history, sustainable development and cosmopolitanism among others. There could be more such home-grown endeavours. We need to also encourage theorising while drawing on local empirics and with an eye on possible interconnections.

Prior to this, in 2005 Kanti Bajpai and I co-edited two anthologies on IR thinking in India. The effort here as well was to chronicle a community of IR scholars in India who engaged theory seriously. These volumes were again conceived and produced with the clear intent of eventually contributing to meaningful teaching material in IR where we were anchored. Simultaneously, we sought to arouse the interest of students of IR from other parts of the world.

To challenge the dominant narratives in the classroom, I take recourse to a mix of multi-disciplinary sources and cues – textual and audio-visual. A textual illustration would be to get my students to engage with extracts of Ngūgī wa Thiong'o's *Decolonizing the Mind* alongside Walter Dignolo on the *Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing*. Subsequently, I invite students to reflect on what decolonization as an unfinished project might mean when it comes to a discipline like IR. The discussions are often riveting. I also find students particularly receptive to world cinema, literature, art and theatre when it comes to thinking politically.

### **Recently there have been serious challenges to public educational institutions, such as strikes by teaching staff across the UK and recent protests at Jawaharlal Nehru University. Do you believe a neo-liberal framework has had an impact on higher education? If so, how, and what is your response as a part of the education system?**

Even though neoliberalism is spreading in the global south as well, there have been voices in the south which have been suspicious of neo-liberal frameworks for historical reasons. Higher education does not operate in a political vacuum. It is quite evident that the broader *zeitgeist* percolates to shape the manner and metrics by which educational institutions are assessed. This is especially true of funding priorities and academic programmes that continue to receive support and those that do not. Globally, humanities and social sciences have often been at the receiving end in terms of the allocation of available resources especially vis-à-vis STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics) and also management and legal education.

The academic landscape today arguably warrants greater diversity – perhaps a better mix of public and private institutions. There is nothing intrinsically inimical to the pursuit of academic excellence in either. However, monopolies in any realm atrophy and tend to lapse into complacency. An argument worth considering here is that neither the state nor the market alone be treated as the sole patrons of education. The global empirical record demonstrates that both have shown a propensity to be blinkered in some respects based on their ideological predilections. Perhaps, a public-private partnership (PPP) which balances societal needs (access, inclusivity and affordability especially in uneven societies) with public accountability may be worth attempting. While this

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arrangement again is not likely to be infallible, the quest for better frameworks of educational governance must relentlessly continue.

### **What is the most important advice that you would give to young scholars studying International Relations of, and in, the Global South?**

Every generation eventually figures out what matters in the discipline. Sensibilities from the global south have to be an integral part of a larger conversation. Ultimately, as students of IR, we must strive to open the discipline to hitherto unheard voices and original perspectives from across the globe. This necessitates addressing several facets – the incomplete decolonization of knowledge systems; systemic global power transitions; insular populisms as *zeitgeist*; challenges to political liberalism; and the role of utopias and dystopias in the making and unmaking of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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*This interview was conducted by Ananya Sharma. Ananya is a Commissioning Editor at E-IR.*