

Interview – Sankaran Krishna

Written by E-International Relations

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Sankaran Krishna teaches politics at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa in Honolulu where he has lived since 1990. His interests are in global political economy, South Asian studies, and critical International Relations. As befitting someone with an undergraduate degree in Chemistry (from Loyola College in Chennai), a Master's in Modern History (from JNU in Delhi) and a doctorate in Political Science (from Syracuse University, New York), he does not set much store by disciplinary boundaries and works on whatever interests him at a given point in time. He is the author of *Postcolonial Insecurities: India, Sri Lanka, and the Question of Nationhood* (1999) and *Globalization and Postcolonialism: Hegemony and Resistance in the 21st Century* (2009). His other publications, both academic and otherwise, can be accessed here.

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

There are so many areas in which I am sure exciting research and debates are happening – and I can only mention those that happen to be within my areas of interest and those that I am aware of. I think we are finally witnessing a decisive coming to terms with the fact that the global interstate system that we see today emerged out of a centuries-long process of empire, settler-colonialism, patriarchy, homonormativity and related events/processes. For far too long conventional International Relations has focused on matters such as national security, diplomacy, trade regimes, alliance formations, balance of power politics and related matters as if they were somehow dis-embedded from these longer histories of empire and racism. The white locus of enunciation that characterized IR for the longest time is now under critical scrutiny and it has unleashed a lot of excellent scholarship that enhances our understanding of the making of the modern world system. There is a cohort of younger scholars trained in a multiplicity of disciplines who bring those insights to bear on what has been for the most part a very straitened, abstract, ahistorical and deeply Eurocentric way of talking about issues such as global inequality, security, migration, trade, refugees, environmental crises, etc.

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

Let me ignore the distant past (for instance, how my first reading of Karl Marx absolutely blew my mind back when I entered the Master's program in Modern History at JNU in Delhi) and focus on more recent epiphanies in answering this question. For me, at least, there has been a growing realization that so much of what I have said and written about the amnesia of International Relations as a discipline on the issue of race and colonialism is mirrored in the way caste as a hierarchizing principle is not given adequate attention when it comes to a society such as India. In some ways, my work in IR has forced me to turn my analytical lenses back on my home society and understand the myriad ways in which so much of the scholarship on India is written by, for and of the upper-castes and their lives and histories. I cannot put my finger on a single "aha" moment but the work of a scholar like the late M.S.S. Pandian impelled me to look within and to then start re-reading B.R. Ambedkar, Periyar and others who were 'otherwise' than the nation. I began to read them not in the register of tragedy or the minority viewpoint or false prophets out of step with their times as I had done before but rather as those who had a keen and prescient eye on the dangers of nation-building on majoritarian lines without addressing caste inequality and oppression.

A second major impetus for rethinking all I thought I knew of the world was living and working in Hawai'i. The

Interview – Sankaran Krishna

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50th state is not only the most militarized state of the Union that is the USA, but also where the genocidal and suicidal impulses of a settler colony are evident all around. My department has some of the world's best scholars in indigenous politics and their presence and work have made me question everything I thought I knew about international politics. Once again, for me, the quest for indigenous sovereignty by native Hawaiians reminded me of what I had been educated to forget while growing up in India: the phenomenal cost paid by India's Adivasis and indigenous peoples in our drive for "development," to the point where we do not even have an audit of the numbers of millions dead or displaced multiple times as a consequence of our economic plans. This disappearance of the indigenous has only accelerated since the liberalization of the Indian economy since 1991. At the same time, in the 32 years I have been at the University of Hawai'i, I have watched our own native Hawaiian undergraduate students go on to do doctorates from prestigious universities and programs, and become professors, public intellectuals, and path-breaking scholars. So that tells me resistance to settler-colonialism and victories against domination are possible and are happening every day.

In your book *Globalization and Postcolonialism Hegemony and Resistance in the Twenty-first Century*, you have discussed how postcolonial theory critiques 'methodological nationalism'. How can a postcolonial approach help us analyse the rise of 'new nationalism'?

One of the most striking things about the "new nationalism" as you describe it is its global ambit. We are seeing the rise of authoritarian, populist, hyper-nationalist "strong" leaders and parties across a variety of highly different societies: Duterte in the Philippines, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Erdoğan in Turkey, Modi in India, Orbán in Hungary, Trump in the US, even Boris Johnson in the UK. What is striking about many of these movements/leaders is that they ride on a populist, anti-elitist anger against neoliberal globalization with other sentiments such as homophobia, majoritarianism, misogyny, anti-foreigner or anti-immigrants, and many (if not all) arise out of a process of democratic elections and party competition. I think in many ways we are on new terrains here and I can only list some authors and books who have worked on these matters and from whom I have learned a great deal: Ravinder Kaur's *Brand New Nation*, Vince Rafael's *The Sovereign Trickster*, Thomas Blom Hansen's *The Law of Force* and Pankaj Mishra's *The Age of Anger*, to mention a few. While there are distinctively "national" dimensions to each of these movements, it's also obvious that there are powerful transnational and global forces in operation as they occur in such widely differing contexts.

What do you think are the biggest obstacles to decolonising the university curriculum today?

At this point in time, the obstacles are rather formidable, certainly way more formidable than they were in the last decades of the 20th century. The university or the higher education sector cannot, in the long run, remain immune to the politics of the larger capitalist world-system that surrounds it. The trends over the last couple of decades have been clear: an already sizable and still growing fraction of courses are taught by precariously employed "faculty" on short-term contracts; the tenured professoriate is on the way to obsolescence in many parts of the world; at least in the US, higher education has become unaffordable for too many, especially first-generation immigrants and racial minorities; a corporate or managerial ideology regards the university as no different from any other segment of the economy; and there is a rising tide of patriotic sentiment that sees terms like decolonization, multiculturalism or critical race theory as anathema. These, and other factors, make the struggle to decolonize the curriculum harder. Self-censorship alloyed with the precarity of contracts and insecurity of employment can be lethal to freedom of thought and scholarship/pedagogy that questions the status quo. This is not to say the battles should not be joined or that defeat is inevitable, but rather to acknowledge the ground realities and realize that it's going to be a long haul with uncertain prospects.

How can western researchers undertake decolonial research without inflicting epistemic violence and silencing the protagonist?

This is an issue not just for "western researchers" but for anyone engaged in social research of any sort. There are profound differences in terms of class, caste, race, symbolic or cultural capital (like academic credentials, fluency in metropolitan languages, or theoretical facility), positionality, and a host of other factors that separate the researcher from their objects/subjects of inquiry. Rather than answer this at some abstract or theoretical level, I offer an example

Interview – Sankaran Krishna

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from my own research. My first book (*Postcolonial Insecurities: India, Sri Lanka and the Question of Eelam*, 1999) was written based on, among other things, extensive interviews with militants, bureaucrats, politicians, military personnel, human rights activists, displaced refugees, intellectuals, journalists, and others in India and Sri Lanka. After the spells of intense field-work, after transcribing all my audio tapes and my field notes, as I was “writing up” my findings sitting at my home in Honolulu, I kept imagining some of the people who had been so generous with their time and hospitality when I had interviewed them – I kept imagining them as standing behind my shoulder and watching the words as they formed on my computer screen. How might they react to the sentences? Am I presenting a story that they would recognize as fair and honest and authentic? I would especially imagine those from the non-elite segments of society (both in Sri Lanka and in Tamil Nadu/India): How am I representing them and their struggles? I found that this kept me anchored in a way that was productive and ethical. I think each person has to find their way through a problem that is inextricable from the very enterprise of scholarship itself.

What is your assessment of the state of democracy in India today? What impact does Hindu nationalism have on political institutions and freedom of speech in India today?

I do not think it is any longer accurate to describe India as a democracy – we crossed over into an authoritarian society sometime in the last few years. The media is overwhelmingly corporatized and with a few courageous exceptions is largely and blindly pro-Modi; the judiciary has, again with one or two honorable exceptions, bent over backwards to please the regime and has rendered the Constitution practically a dead letter; the rights of the underclasses and especially the Muslims are not just being violated every day with impunity, they are being robbed, lynched and looted by goons affiliated with the BJP; and on and on. Even elections are compromised when one party can outspend any rival by a 50:1 margin or more if need be, and the Election Commission is bullied by the ruling party. Huge changes are being made to the rights of States (Kashmir, most notably), to the definition of citizenship, to the secular ethos of the Constitution, to university and school curriculums in subjects such as History, to the National Archives and institutions such as the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library – across the board, really – with barely any debate in Parliament. Institutions built up over decades are being “privatized” to crony-capitalist groups and the degree of inequality is rising steeply in a country that is already home to the largest population of the destitute in the world. I am worried that we may have already passed a point of no return on some of these matters, and for how long some of the incredibly courageous journalists, judges, human rights activists, and others can hold their own against such odds keeps me up at night.

You have been living in the US since the early 1980s. With the emergence of new technologies and social media networks, how do you see Indian diasporic communities engaging with the politics of their homeland?

I think there are all sorts of contradictory tendencies in this regard. Certainly, the interaction between people in India and in the diaspora is thicker than ever thanks to social media. In addition, if you compare air-ticket prices for travel to India now with what prevailed back in the 1990s they are so much cheaper and the options so much more. I am struck by the degree to which the BJP is able to get its version of matters across far more effectively than any other group in India, and its orchestrated campaigns to shut down any academic or other forms of dissent is only growing. It is striking to see the same phrases and script being adhered to by friends and relatives back in India and people in the US invariably circulated through WhatsApp and Twitter. Those of us committed to a pluralistic and secular idea of India need to do way more to mobilize and resist this onslaught by the Hindu right.

You have extensively written columns on cricket, traditionally an English sport. In the context of Indian cricket, Arjun Appadurai has termed the sport to be a ‘hard cultural form’. How do you perceive the indigenisation of cricket in the subcontinent?

As you well know, world cricket exists today because of Indian money power. The Board of Cricket Control in India (BCCI) is one of the richest organizations in a very poor country, meaning its inevitable politicization. Today, the head of the BCCI is a young man who is the son of the Home Minister and has no credentials of any sort to occupy that position. Indigenization of cricket in India in earlier decades might have meant the spread of the game from out of its urban, middle-class and upper-caste moorings to a much wider and inclusive provenance. Today, indigenization

Interview – Sankaran Krishna

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means the growing influence of the Hindutva brigade on all aspects of the game, from its governance to the hysterically jingoistic reactions to victory and defeat. The only form of the game which interested me was the test match, and I think its days are numbered.

What is the most important advice that you would give to young scholars?

I would narrow it down to these three: (a) read extensively outside disciplinary IR: when I look at the canonical works in history, anthropology, sociology, comparative literature, philosophy, and other fields and compare them to the so-called canon of IR, it's honestly embarrassing; (b) make writing a habit and not an event – write every single day, no matter what; and (c) be organized about your work habits: make notes about things you read, know where to find an article or a book when you need it, when someone you respect recommends a book or a film or an article, track it down right away – that sort of thing. I must end with this: other than (a) above to some extent, I have been seriously remiss when it comes to (b) and (c) – and I have serious regrets about that. So, in the words of my wonderful colleague Kathy Ferguson, I offer this advice in the spirit of “if you cannot be a shining example, at least be a cautionary tale”.