

## Interview – Aseema Sinha

Written by E-International Relations

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Dr. Aseema Sinha is the Wagener Chair of Comparative Politics and George R. Roberts Fellow at Claremont McKenna College in California, USA. She previously taught at University of Wisconsin-Madison and was a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center in DC. Her research interests relate to political economy of India, federalism, India-China comparisons, Globalization, International Organizations, and the rise of India as an emerging power. She has authored a book, *The Regional Roots of Developmental Politics in India: A Divided Leviathan* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2005), which received the *Joseph Elder Book Prize in the Indian Social Sciences*. Her book titled, *Globalizing India: How Global Rules and Markets are Shaping India's Rise to Power* was published by Cambridge University Press (2016). She is also author of journal articles on the WTO, trade policy, political economy of India, federalism, subnational comparisons in India, India and China, business collective action in India, and public expenditure across Indian states. Her articles have appeared in the *British Journal of Political Science*, *World Development*, *Polity*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *Comparative Politics*, *Business and Politics*, *Journal of Democracy*, *International Affairs*, and *India Review*.

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

My research relates to Indian and global political economy, emerging powers, and the changes in the global order with a focus on the World Trade Organization (WTO). I have also done work on India-China comparisons, Hindu nationalism, and Indian foreign policy. Most of the exciting areas of research lie at the intersection of domestic politics and political economy and international political economy or analysis that explores the connections between global flows and local struggles. As India has become more integrated with the world economy, transnational forces and actors have begun to shape domestic aspirations, and economic policies. The global world links with domestic concerns as both a set of constraints and opportunities, and especially as a set of linkages of authority, people and interests.

Scholars have tried to assess why Modi did not implement economic reforms as expected when he came to power. Since 2016 or so, India's growth has been slowing down and many promised reforms have not taken place. Focusing on this question has led scholars to examine the political drivers of many of the economic initiatives introduced by the Modi government such as the demonetization policies, Make in India program etc. These analyses have focused on how his government has re-ordered the role of the state and how a variety of economic actors have responded. In 2016-2017 many international indices downgraded Indian democracy labelling it an electoral autocracy. Developments surrounding the health and quality of Indian democracy has led scholars to assess how Indian democracy is changing and shifting. Some have argued that India has diminished its democratic credentials to become a competitive authoritarian regime; others have labeled India as an ethnic democracy. The insights of this new area of research urges more research into the nature of the evolving democratic regime in India focusing not only on institutional procedures but also democratic practices.

Another area of new research is conceptualizing the change and continuities in Indian foreign traditions and policies as India confronts a more unstable, and an uncertain world with a global backlash, the transformation of China into a more assertive power, and new border conflicts. Will India deploy time-tested foreign policy ideas such as non-alignment and 'strategic autonomy' or seek to enter new alliances and new global roles? These questions now animate students of Indian foreign policy.

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

Changes at the global level have been one of the significant developments even as the eyes of scholars like me were focused on what happened within countries. Initially, the 1980s and 1990s saw the onset of a new era of globalization as closed economies such as India, but also China, began their entry into global markets. The post-cold war order initially saw unipolarity with the US as a rising hegemon but soon a group of emerging powers joined the global order of rules and markets. China, India, Brazil and a declining but erstwhile great power were considered to be emerging powers, and together combined to create an enduring multipolar system despite the dominant military power of the US.

Yet, starting in the late 2000s and the 2010s, a new shift began. More protectionist and populist leaders came to the fore and simultaneously a backlash against the globalization era began. Then, Covid-19, the emergence of a new cold war between the US and China, and now the war in Ukraine have completely changed the global order of things, creating a more uncertain and tumultuous world. The liberal global order with its attendant rules, international organizations and the era of prosperity and peace is over.

I began to realize the significance of these trends as I started work on a project on the WTO and deglobalization, which seemed to overturn the era I had analyzed earlier in my book on Globalizing India. The war in Ukraine combined with the continuing fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic will further consolidate this retreat from globalization even as the need for global cooperation and global interdependence becomes more urgent to address climate change, future pandemics, and the threat of revisionist actions such as Putin's war.

**In your book, *The Regional Roots of Developmental Politics in India: A Divided Leviathan*, you explore the reasons for the persistent variation in achieving developmental failures and success. How does this help us better understand developmental politics and political dynamics in India?**

Understanding the processes and institutions that lead to persistent variation in achieving developmental success is at the core of comparative method and comparative politics, which is the study of the politics across the world. Even as the global level is important as I argued above, the study of global phenomenon must attend to crucial variations in how countries, communities and groups respond and shape global forces, making the study of variation necessary and intrinsic to political analysis. This mode of analysis also allowed me to hold the national context as constant and use a subnational comparative method.

India and also other large and internally varied countries cannot be understood with only a national analysis and we must analyze how different regional actors respond and modify central policies. So, a purely national account of India would remain drastically incomplete or inaccurate. Overall, we need to do more bottom-up analysis of India without ignoring the federally determined central interventions. These considerations allowed me to extend that approach to the study of developmental politics in India.

**You propose an analytical framework to study the politics of economic policy in large and multileveled politics in *The Regional Roots of Developmental Politics in India*. What is the significance of this approach?**

The framework that I proposed engaged in both multileveled analysis as well as subnational comparative analysis of three regions. This framework relied on the idea that all large and/or federal countries encapsulate both federal-state interactions as well as infra-national actions to pursue industrial development. The framework focused on subnational elites and institutions but understood them within a larger federal and national framework. Such an approach can also be applied to a variety of sectors within countries (e.g., telecommunications, garments and textiles, pharmaceuticals) and their variable and differential strategies of technological adjustment and global patterns of engagement. So, it has wide applicability and is quite useful.

**You analyze India's economic transformation in *Globalizing India*. What factors encouraged India to**

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### **participate in the global market?**

Both domestic aspirations—the need to grow more rapidly than the slow Hindu rate of growth of the 1960s and 1970s—and compete with rising powers at that time (South Korea then, China now) led India to seek to change its economic policies in the early 1990s. Yet, domestic goals and purposes coincided with a monumental shift in the global order with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989/1990 and India's participation in international governance structures such as the WTO. India began an arduous journey to integrate itself with global markets and global institutions while seeking to imprint India's changing power and status onto those global forums and arenas. Both domestic changes, for example, the emergence of domestic MNCs such as Ranbaxy and Sun Pharma, but also global systemic changes combined to ensure that India rose while crafting its rise nested within global supply chains and institutions. My book, *Globalizing India*, analyzed the nature of these changes, suggesting the need to focus on statecraft and tradeecraft pursued by newly integrating countries like India, and the deeper process of compliance and implementation underway in a country that had resisted global forces for a long time. The combined effect of these changes has been quite consequential with India's aspirations and capacities fundamentally transformed.

### **How does understanding India's economic transformation enrich ones' understanding of Indian politics and International Relations in Asia?**

India's population is large and its destiny is tied with global destiny. Despite recent diminution of its democratic character, India's promise as the world's largest democracy with open and democratic values holds a beacon of light to the rest of the world. India's experiment of combining democracy –however flawed—with markets and global openness is also rare in Asia and offers fascinating lessons to countries seeking a pathway combining the two.

### **As a professor at a liberal arts college in the U.S., how do you address the Eurocentric biases in standard IR theories in your curriculum? What challenges did you encounter when teaching South Asian politics and development?**

My role as a women of color teaching about the world and South Asia is to help students understand the role of historical factors such as colonialism and how cumulative inequalities of race, class and gender affect our personal lives as well as the destiny of nations. If I can generate an interest in complex interactions related to colonialism, developmental processes and how a variety of individuals and countries navigate those complex transitions, I would be happy as a teacher!

### **What is the most important advice you could give to early practitioners and scholars of international relations?**

Even when the world is turning away from globalization, I would urge you to expand your horizons and go out and understand unfamiliar lands and countries. Try to learn new languages and immerse yourself deeply in a country of your interest, especially non-western countries. The pathway to understanding current trends would be made easier if we have a new generation of students of international relations seeking to understand the world beyond our borders.