# Interview – Manu Bhagavan

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Manu Bhagavan is a specialist on modern India, focusing on the twentieth-century late colonial and post-colonial periods, with particular interests in human rights, inter/nationalism, and questions of sovereignty. He is currently Professor of History, Human Rights, and Public Policy at Hunter College and the Graduate Center-The City University of New York, and Senior Fellow at the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies. Manu is the author or (co-)editor of seven books, including the critically acclaimed *The Peacemakers: India and the Quest for One World* (HarperCollins India/Palgrave Macmillan) and a collection on *India and the Cold War* (Penguin India, UNC Press). He appears frequently in the media to comment on current affairs and was featured in a 2019 comedy roast of the US President as part of the satirical program *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*. He is currently completing a biography of Madame Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, a pioneering diplomat who was one of the most celebrated women of the 20th century. Follow him at @ManuBhagavan.

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

I'm a historian of 20$^{th}$ c. India, with broad interests in human rights, diplomatic history and international affairs, and inter/nationalist thought. Generally speaking, I am struck by the wave of new research on India's engagement with the world. This engagement was in terms of trade, migration, and networks, as well as in terms of colonial and intercolonial spaces. But there was also a concerted effort to think constructively and coherently about foreign policy. And many Indians played important roles in the creation and functioning of key international organizations. What we are finding is that India, and places like it, have made many important contributions to international thought and have not simply stood at the edge of some imagined periphery. This work broadly I find very exciting, but perhaps most so because it is being led by a group of amazingly talented younger scholars, who bring with them fresh perspectives and a needed fearlessness to challenge old dogmas.

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

Though I'm a historian, I'm going to field this question from a contemporary angle. I think I had grown overly comfortable with the idea that rights, once given, were difficult to take away, especially if there were norms and institutions that created a broad base of support for the underlying values. Intellectually, I understood erosion in fact to have occurred historically. Yet I think I lulled myself into believing the narrative of the stability of the post-World War II order.The systems associated with that may have been far from perfect, but they did allow for change. This, however, could take place only incrementally and with wide support. For those of us eager for a better tomorrow, this slow pace could seem disheartening.

Several years ago, in reflecting on what had made the mid-forties so ripe for institution building, I settled on the notion that it was a brief "utopian moment," when there was broad consensus on the need to move things in a new direction that would, at least generally, prevent the large-scale catastrophes of the preceding era. I recall a conversation with a distinguished senior colleague at that time in which we considered this idea of *possibility,* and of *moments* in which such possibilities could be made real. The international order, for all that it provided, remained far too unequal, unfair, and unjust. So we thought about the nature of change and how it might come about. My sense then was that it took great peril to allow for the kind of dramatic change the world had seen after two previous global wars. This was a

disappointing conclusion not only because it meant, at the time, that faster change was not possible, but also because of the fear of what rapid change would also imply.

Over the last seven years or so, this fear has been made real, as global problems involving corporatism, climate, disease, and conflict have eroded popular faith in democracy and led to the return of illiberal strongmen ready to wash away much of what has stood for 75 years. We are now in fact in a moment of possibility. We are also once again in one of great peril.

**To what extent have former colonies in the Global South succeeded in adopting a decolonized outlook in the way they deal with the rest of the World, especially the West?**

This is a very broad but excellent question! With the caveat that specific answers will vary from country to country obviously, I think the general issue here is what we mean by "decolonial." If by this, we mean "assertive, independent, and free to make their own choices," then I think there is certainly an *interest* in doing this throughout the Global South. But if the term is also meant to imply "anti-imperial," then I think the issue gets more sticky. While many countries of the Global South, including large ones like India, may rhetorically push back against Great Power imposition, especially from the West, the question remains how committed they are to resisting intricate forms of control, such as that exerted by powerful multinational corporations or by military alliances. Additionally, countries of the Global South that think strictly in terms of "national interest" may not be willing or able to effectively coordinate amongst themselves to ward off subtle predatory actors. And perhaps most importantly, are countries of the Global South willing to restrain *themselves* from thinking and acting imperially, especially in their own neighborhoods?

Domestically—that is in internal, sovereign spaces—"decolonial" might also be taken as a rejection of all non-indigenous things altogether. This is an extreme reading of the concept that can lead to an abandonment of cosmopolitanism and a hunt for an artificial past of purity, with dangerous consequences. Gandhi, as I've written about, expressly rejected any such interpretation of decolonization. What he wanted to target was the imbalance of power and its application. (Of course, he also warned about the oppressive elements of modernity itself as well, where other anti-colonial peers like Nehru took an opposing view, but that's another story…).

**Do you think interconnected 'global' histories, shared triumphs and humiliations, can help formerly colonized nations to achieve greater cooperation amongst themselves?**

We have "connected histories," it is true. But these very histories are also filled with racial and caste injustice, with colonial exploitation, and with gender inequality. It is not sufficient just to recognize this and move on. We must reckon with the past, and redress what is necessary, before we can truly productively move forward. Otherwise, the past will always exert its grip on us and pull us backwards.

There is a battle over the past being waged today. Reactionary forces seek to shield themselves from any self-reflection and to reassert the very old order that produced so much harm. The careful study of the past, where we allow it to disturb us, is very much a threat to this project. That is why we are seeing a resurgence of book banning, attacks on educators, and curricular restrictions. What is at stake is the Truth itself. And a future where we all belong.

**In your book, *The Peacemakers: India and the Quest for One World*, you highlight 'lead actors' who not only shaped Indian foreign policy but helped build organizations like the United Nations. After the 'fall' of the Nehruvian consensus, how would you typify the makers of Indian foreign policy, and what is their 'worldmaking' project, if any?**

After Nehru's death, the Indian establishment largely committed to a policy of what I have called muscular moralism, ready to preach to anyone within earshot, whether they were willing to listen or not. This approach, pioneered under Indira Gandhi, remained in place, for the most part, until very recently. India spoke platitudes without either an overarching strategic vision or a moral compass. So, although its foreign service was exceptionally talented, it simply was unable to operate in any kind of coherent manner.

It remains difficult to see what exactly is India's plan for the world, and its place in it. Today's establishment speaks about multilateral and bilateral relations and certainly operates from a position of growing confidence. Its commitment to seeing problems from India's locality and not from that of Europe or the United States or anywhere else, and to take each crisis on its own terms, is in a sense a certain kind of continuity with Nehruvian nonalignment.

Yet nonalignment 1.o was something specific to the context of the Cold War, a mechanism to avoid the blocs of a bipolar world, to cool tensions, and to minimize the threat of nuclear annihilation. It was also a means to an end, that being a more united, federalized planet. As talk emerges of a new Cold War, or of a revived old one, involving countries like China, Russia, and the United States, nonalignment 2.0 certainly seems tactically relevant. But to what end?

**In the Indian context, how far has the rise of illiberalism (complementing the rise of Hindu Nationalism) affected the way India approaches the World?**

In international fora, on the diplomatic circuit, India talks the language of liberalism, of rights, institutions, and a rules-based order. It also consistently calls for change in global systems, to distribute power more democratically. It is, in this sense, a good global citizen. Yet there appears to be a growing disconnect between India's official external stances, its stated values, and its growing defensiveness of any kind of criticism of internal matters. At one level, this is understandable, since the most powerful countries of the world have essentially done this very thing for decades, criticizing others while remaining impervious to any kind of effort to reflect the gaze back on themselves.

Impenetrable domestic sovereignty historically was used to defend imperial practice and racist policies. Liberalism in this sense has been rife with contradictions and open to charges of hypocrisy. But India previously saw these inconsistencies as opportunity, driving a wedge between the professed and the practiced and holding everyone to a higher standard.

In today's fork in the road, India has clearly decided that the liberal order of old, stubbornly clinging onto such inconsistencies, must be retired. Now it must choose whether to abandon liberal values altogether, as strongmen from Hungary and Turkey to Russia and Brazil have chosen to do. Or whether it wants to recommit to a reimagined, pluralistic truer postliberal order. The former appears the easier. The latter requires leadership.

**With the rise of populist and authoritarian leaders around the globe, there has been a protectionist inward-looking approach to some foreign policy. Within this context, is 'internationalism' still a viable approach?**

There have always been many forms of internationalism, and many of them have existed dialogically with nationalism. So it is, in this sense, not at all surprising that many on today's far right, even as they cast aspersion on "globalists," are actively coordinating with one another, an international League of Nationalists, as some have called it. The solutions of this tinfoil crew—closed borders, majoritarian politics, homogenized societies with patriarchal hierarchies, and a robber baron economy—are no solutions all, and each will only create a cascade of new troubles. We are already facing massive problems on a global scale, the existential climate crisis paramount among them. Ultimately, we will have to come together, while recognizing and celebrating our differences, if we are to meet the challenges we face. Internationalism of the liberal or progressive variety then is not by any means to be given up on. On the contrary, it remains our only hope.

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

I think students should master their chosen disciplines but then should push relentlessly at disciplinary boundaries, learning about the tools and methods of others as well. I've had numerous IR students express an interest in working with archives, for instance. Young scholars should not be afraid to experiment or to make mistakes. In fact, it is only through this that new knowledge can truly be generated. Unique points of view can creatively approach thorny old problems and help to untangle them. My message in short is that we are waiting for you!