Interview – Navnita Chadha Behera

Navnita Chadha Behera is a Professor of International Relations at the Department of Political Science, University of Delhi. She served as the Vice-President of the International Studies Association (2019-2020) and, is an Honorary Director of the Institute for Research on India and International Studies. Prof. Behera has authored and co-authored nearly a dozen books and her most recent research has been published in several international journals including *International Affairs, Review of International Studies, International Studies Perspectives, Security Dialogue* and *Democratic Theory* among others. Her research on IR theory focuses on practices of knowledge building in varied domains including security studies, gender, conflict and peace studies. She also works on the international politics of South Asia specially the Kashmir conflict.

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

There is a growing body of IR scholarship, which is no longer willing to be subjected to given understandings of 'what IR stands for' and 'how to do IR' and, that is quite exciting. As part of such endeavors, I am currently involved in a small albeit diverse collective called 'doing IR differently'. Let me, in fact, take this opportunity to acknowledge and appreciate that one of its first articles on recrafting international relations through relationality, was published by *E-IR* in January 2019. More recently, I, along with Tamara Trownsell and Giorgio Shani have just finished co-editing a special issue on 'Pluriversal Relationality' of *Review of International Studies*.

Scholars working on relational IR call for understanding the impact of our existential assumptions on forms of life, knowing and knowledge production in International Relations. They question IR's ontological commitment to separation as the fundamental condition of existence that generates a world consisting of bounded and fixed entities and, ask what happens if we conceive relationality in a manner that ontologically begins by assuming interconnection as prior to the existence of entities? The idea is to go beyond the confines of western social science by examining how different cosmological traditions in the Americas, Asia and Australia view and practice relationality and yet how do these transcend the specificities of their loci and engage with IR. An engagement with these relational traditions and their conception of space, time, self-other relations, selfhood, praxis and political and social order, we argue, opens the possibility of forging a *pluriversal* research agenda for IR based on uncovering IR's silenced pasts, unsettling hierarchies and examining relational ways of knowing and being. In other words, IR needs to be understood from *different* ontological and cosmological registers, which in turn, entails the reconceptualisation not only of relationality but of the discipline itself.

Another related though much older tradition that I find appealing is that of post/decolonial thought. Drawing on Walter D. Mignolo and Anibal Quijano's work, it's been argued, decolonial thought contests the very proposition of universal epistemes and eschews creating another one lest it forges an alternate, albeit single temporality that is susceptible to being controlled by a new set of gate-keepers. However, as a collective, they are open to cultivating new knowledges from the living traditions, socio-cultural practices, histories and philosophies of people across the globe, albeit *on their own terms*. It does not reject Western knowledge, but nor is it used as the central reference point in creating or judging new knowledges. So, decolonising knowledge calls for 'both its producers and consumers to see through the structuring principle of hierarchising peoples, modes of knowing and socio-cultural practices as indeed the global divisions of labors in knowledge production' but then, they also go on to explore ways for making amends that involves deconstructing and reconstructing global histories in order to recognise that there are several histories, all

simultaneous and inter-connected histories, thus, opening up to voices and spaces that have hitherto been neglected or marginalised or stood silenced and repressed.

What makes these two lines of inquiry stand apart are their distinct approaches to knowledge creation and their focus on understanding *how* to create knowledge before adding or critiquing what/which knowledge. It is imperative to focus our energies on first decoding the rules of the game of knowledge creation: how is knowledge created? how does it become legitimate? who decides? Also, what needs to change? and how?

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

I think my academic life experiences including classroom teaching, interactions with students and fellow scholars, field research and learnings about different knowledge traditions from across the world have altogether helped evolve my understanding of how the world works. If I were to reflect back though, I can think of a couple of milestones that left a mark on my learning curve.

After completing my Ph.D., the first lesson I learnt from doing field research in Jammu & Kashmir through the 1990s was that learning could mean 'unlearning' too and, the importance of cultivating an open mind to 're-learn' from the field. Insights gained from the existing literature were not necessarily applicable or effective in understanding the diverse ground realities. My take-away, however, was not that theory was 'futile' but, theorising was 'part of the problem' in understanding the way world works.

My modest attempts at theorising taught me a second lesson that to do so within the parameters of the dominant realist paradigm of IR was indeed problematic because to me, that amounted to waging an intellectual battle on 'a turf chosen by the west with the rules-of-the game and even tools already designed by them.' This raised new questions about our pedagogic practices as to why, for instance, we never turned to Kautilya to teach realism and relied almost exclusively on Hobbes and Morgenthau and why the foundational concepts of IR such as the state, nation, sovereignty and so on were being taught as having singular meanings even though their praxis proved it otherwise. This led me to try understanding how these discursive forces operated through the knowledge structures, institutional apparatus, pedagogic practices and gate-keeping practices of the academe—all of which were collectively privileging certain knowledge categories while negating others. I have termed this as the 'e-problematique' of IR pointing to its deeply embedded 'Euro-centrism', 'epistemologies' and 'empiricism'.

In the last few years, I am trying to shift my focus from identifying 'what is wrong' to finding out 'how to make amends' because I believe that our rapidly changing world makes it imperative for the IR scholarship to get a make-over by collaborating and co-creating a new corpus of knowledge that speaks to its deeply diverse communities, nationalities and cosmologies.

What motivated you to study the Kashmir conflict and what were the challenges you faced while conducting ethnographic research?

My work on the Kashmir conflict began as part of a larger conceptual inquiry into why political mobilisations by group identities became conflictual and then, why only some political conflicts become violent? This was identified as a case study of religious conflict since the armed militancy in the early 1990s was often characterised as the Muslim-majority Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) state seeking secession from the Hindu India. My early forays of field research in J&K state, however, quashed this thesis because I found a whole array of politically mobilisations along ethnic, religious, linguistic and regional fault-lines were at play—each with its own story that refused to be subsumed within the larger meta narrative. This resulted in a thorough re-working of my research puzzle and over time, also drove home the point that the same set of ethnographic modes of inquiry that were, for example, pertinent for the Valley proved to be of little use in Ladakh and Jammu. So, specificities of the context that varied greatly from one region to another; one community to another and at times, even among themselves had to be kept in mind in re-designing my tools of research. Another challenge was to avoid being labelled as a partisan researcher and safeguard one's autonomy and ability to converse with people across many and often sharp dividing lines, for example, Kashmiri

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Muslim and (displaced) Pandit families; Buddhists and Argon Muslims in Leh, Ladakh; Paharis and Gujjars in the Jammu region and last but not least between militants and security forces and even among different militant groups operating in the Valley. Third challenge, especially in the earlier years, was to learn to work constantly under the shadow of violence and, very high levels of 'trust deficit'. Many locals would refuse to speak and what proved to be even more problematic was that many tailored their narratives based on who they spoke to; in what kind of social surroundings; and depending on the immediate context of meetings that occurred under the watchful eyes of village elders or in the presence of peers in urban areas. Hence, I could not rely on ethnographic methods alone; everything had to be cross-checked through multiple sources—oral and written.

For my second book on *Demystifying Kashmir*, the biggest challenge was sheer lack of access to the areas beyond the Line-of-control that are administered by Pakistan. So, I decided to engage Pakistani researchers to travel to these areas for conducting interviews and collecting primary resources at my behest, which were then mailed to me via third countries. This was a very unusual research exercise.

In the past few years, I have been revisiting my own work on the Kashmir conflict through an entirely different set of research tools and resources. To start with, I am learning to pay much closer attention to the daily lives of Kashmiris and their daily, micro practices of popular resistance. It's been instructive to learn how they have, once again, found alternate spaces to voice their thoughts through graffiti and slogans on the city walls, shutters of shops and even roads; the rap music; literary and, graphic novels; satire and cartoons and a variety of other visual media though many of these specially a lot of graffiti has been wiped off in the public domain in the wake of the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019.

What are the key ethical issues that should be considered when conducting research in a conflict zone? What important steps should one follow when designing the methodology?

Designing methodology for any research in a conflict zone puts extra responsibilities on the researcher(s) as their choices could have serious consequences for the locals. Hence, the need to adopt ethical practices. The first pitfall to avoid is to filter out those aspects of ground realities that do not fit or suit the expected results. As part of my research supervision responsibilities, I always ask students to 'let the field speak' and, when they find their field experiences do not match the initial hypotheses, then should still rely upon the former to problematise their research puzzle or, if need be, re-work their theoretical parameters. In designing the questionnaires for field research it's imperative to scrupulously eschew any leading postulates/choices; ensure an honest, representative sample; and, think through the interview protocols by keeping in mind local customs, norms and practices.

Doing field research in conflict situations poses several other ethical dilemmas. A first step is to always remain cognizant of the gap between the researcher studying violence and those who experience violence. I believe that as researchers, we have an onerous responsibility to not tear such experiences out of context or use these selectively to buttress our arguments. Secondly, it is very important to let people speak in their own idiom, language and dialect. Oral testimonies, subject of course to the interviewee's consent, are best recorded verbatim. Translating these into another language or expressing these in academic terms, however, is a difficult task. I find it's best to seek explicit and written approval of the interviewee for any specific attributions but if the interviewee requests for anonymity, then that must be strictly adhered to because even an inadvertent error could cause serious harm. Personally, I found that it most challenging and perhaps equally rewarding to be able to break through the barrier of 'a label' be that of a militant, terrorist, sympathiser or, a soldier or police constable and speak to them first and foremost as humans. In view of the cyclical nature of violence in Kashmir, for instance, I have witnessed that militants have been both worshipped and ostracized and the local police or army jawans have been viewed as predators and protectors by the same society.

You have always maintained that the Kashmir conflict is multilayered. What impact has the abrogation of article 370 had on the conflict?

The abrogation of Article 370 ending the special status J&K state enjoyed in the Indian constitution may well have a paradoxical impact on the multilayered character of this conflict. While it has sought to disregard internal pluralities of

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J&K's society by dividing the state and downgrading its status from a state to two union territories of J&K and, Ladakh, the possibility of this having unleashed a process that causes further fragmentation and yet brings them together for a common cause, cannot be ruled out in the long run. Though Jammu and Ladakh especially people in the Leh district had strongly supported the move for abrogation of Article 370, their populace in the last three years has become increasingly aware of its possible adverse implications for protecting their share in government jobs, their land rights and growing competition from national-level players in the economic sphere. This gave rise to a demand for domicile certification and notably, this has already been conceded by the central government through notification of 'Domicile certification rules' in 2020. People in Ladakh are also realizing that their hard-fought battle of bringing democratic modes of governance to the grassroots level through the autonomous Hill Councils for Ladakh region also stands much diluted because the real power now lies with the Lt. Governor who is directly appointed by Delhi. Meanwhile, alienation of Kashmiris has further deepened and perhaps, once again, driven underground. The ground has certainly shifted in J&K but due to the seismic nature of these changes, I think it would take a much longer time for its final outcome to become clear.

You have strongly advocated for an alternative non-western IR school. What are the epistemic challenges in introducing an alternative nonwestern IR school? What can be done to overcome them?

Actually, I have always resisted advocating a non-western especially an Indian school of IR. While I deeply value the fellow scholars' contributions on say the Chinese school, the Kyoto school and the Legon school of IR among others, I feel this trajectory inheres a real risk of being caged in a proverbial *ghetto* partly because these are primarily valued for understanding the international politics of that particular region or country *and* only as long as they do not radically challenge the foundational epistemes of mainstream IR. In fact, I would even argue that the latter cannot be challenged by any non-western IR school because this question itself is based on the premise that non-westerns voices are somehow 'missing' and hence need to 'added. I think we need to first understand 'why' and 'how' these have been missing for so long and more importantly, the 'terms' on which they gain an entry/acceptance because that's where the real story lies. I have argued that the 'non-West' was never 'absent' in IR and hence cannot be simply 'added', and that 'it forms the substratum that is perpetually cast in a position of servitude, inferiority and subordination and its agency of retrieving and shaping its own subjectivity has been perennially governed, tutored, directed and ultimately appropriated by the civilized/ modern/ developed 'West''. So, the 'non-West' and 'West' are co-constitutive and have always been so historically in the sense that 'these were never separate spaces governed by their own internal dynamics of development'. That is why, many scholars have been advocating a post-Western IR that forges non-hegemonic spaces and a level-playing field where different knowledge traditions can co-exist*on their own terms.*

In a recent article (co authored with Giorgio Shani) you conceptualised International Relations through the reading of dharma from the Mahabharata. What are the key features of the concept of dharma and how can it enhance our understanding of IR?

We draw upon the relational cosmology of *dharma* in a bid to provincialise the claims of Western rationalist IR by illustrating how the assumptions upon which the latter is based are particular to a specific cosmological tradition: the Judaeo-Christian. The logic of Dharmic thought, in contrast, is profoundly relational in that it eschews the either/or logic of the Western rationalist tradition since it is incapable of accounting for the diversity and multidimensionality of all life. The real import of the dharmic cosmology, we argue, does not lie in offering a specific model or blueprint for the modern problematiques of IR, but in problematising its meta-theoretical assumptions that are embedded in the Judeo-Christian cosmological tradition. Dharmic cosmology offers an alternate mode of understanding four core constituents of Western rationalist IR: time, self-other relations, order, and the sovereign state. By deconstructing and de-essentialising notions of self and other, dharma illustrates how all beings are related to one another in a cosmological order that is governed by a cyclical and heterogenous understanding of time. Dharma places limits on the power of the state to exercise power in a given territory, thus qualifying the principle of state sovereignty that remains the foundation of the Westphalian order and subordinating it to dharma. Understood in this sense, an engagement with the relational cosmology of dharma raises the question of how difference can be articulated and understood in IR. As I said in response to your earlier question, notwithstanding the growing interest in non-European cosmological traditions in IR, these cosmological traditions still struggle to be heard because of the following

quandary: if any particular cosmology radically differs from the 'secular cosmology of IR' then it needs to justify how it speaks to IR. If, on the one hand, it seeks to engage with IR on its own terms, it might not even be heard as IR continues to be articulated in Judaeo-Christian terms. And, if it seeks to draw analogies and identify common ground, then it must bear the burden of explaining and justifying 'what's new?'. As long as the particularities of the foundational logic undergirding Western rationalist IR is not provincialised, 'difference' in IR is likely to be understood in a hierarchical sense with the former remaining firmly entrenched at the apex, as a 'universal' episteme. The relational cosmology of dharma, we argue, makes a case for understanding difference in a fundamentally non-hierarchical manner.

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

As budding social scientists, my advice to young scholars is to cultivate a certain degree of irreverence to the 'received wisdom' being meted out by existing literature, classroom lectures and internet especially social media sites. Another habit to nurture is to ask questions: the more demanding, vexing and uncomfortable, the better! For research students, my consistent advice has been to develop a passion for writing. While most enjoy reading, writing skills need practice, so, write, write and, some more!