

REPORT

**“Alternative Cosmologies and Knowledge Systems in International Relations”
Senior Scholars Workshop
9-10 January 2016**

**“Alternative Cosmologies and Knowledge Systems in International Relations”
Junior Scholars Workshop
11-12 January 2016**

**“Inculcating Ontological Competence: Seeing the World/Cosmos through
Multiple Ontological Lenses”
Exploratory Workshop
13-14 January 2016**

**All held at
India International Centre, New Delhi, India**

**Sponsors/Organizers:
International Research on India and International Studies (IRIIS)
World International Studies Committee (WISC)
Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIS)**

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I would first like to express my gratitude to all sponsors for providing a very intellectually stimulating set of workshops in Delhi, India from January 9-14, 2016. I participated in the first two workshops and led the third. The whole experience was extremely enriching since each workshop provided a distinct angle from which to grapple with questions regarding international relations theory from the perspective of the Global South. Overall the first workshop provided an important forum for rigorous exchange among scholars who have spent a great deal of time already engaging with the contours of the field; the second provided the opportunity to encourage other scholars to continue pushing the theoretical and methodological envelope within the discipline through a critical review of their papers developed for this theme; and the third workshop examined the ontological suppositions made in order to constitute the “international” as an area of study.

WORKSHOP #1

The first workshop consisted of 11 scholars who prepared papers for presentation. Two days of very intense discussions highlighted several important aspects when thinking about how to do IR differently.

First, methodological concerns were shared across the spectrum. These ranged from the basic assumptions of methodology to more practical concerns about legitimate sources for research. A related limitation consistently raised throughout the workshop involved the adequate translation and availability of disparate perspectives. From here arose the complementary observation of the inadequacy of the discipline's categories when dealing with disparate empirical realities and the discomfort generated when students try to force data to fit these categories so that they may "speak" to the field of IR. One suggested way of showing students how to approach the empirics differently is by taking an issue-based approach pedagogically, such that a variety of perspectives can be brought to shed light on the issue.

The policing practices of IR, including activities surrounding methodological options for graduate research, publishing, and hiring, were generally asserted and lamented, but most scholars buffered these concerns when addressing how they work with their own students. While most workshop participants encourage them to think "out of the box" in their own way, they all admitted to engaging in a practice of "self-policing" in the sense that they would not encourage their students to be too radical in order to help them become successful in the field. Other related pedagogical concerns included strategies for engaging more mainstream forms of IR while at the same time encouraging students to "allow the local reality to disrupt the field's taken-for-granted concepts" and ways of responding to the rather ironic student demand for theoretical and methodological orthodoxy in higher education institutions in the Global South. These pedagogical concerns were simply touched on, and it was generally agreed that we should dedicate at least one day at some point to addressing related issues, ideas and strategies from the particular sensitivity embraced in all three Delhi workshops.

Another commonly shared theme regarded how the historical construction of the field has systematically excluded historical particularities that could re-write how the Global South has been portrayed and conceptualized within the field. In addition to the field's historic track record as a colonizing discourse about the international, several others focused on how a particular ontological approach has been used in the establishment and practice of this social science to the disregard of other ways of conceiving one's hook-up to the world/cosmos and how this practice is limiting in terms of the kinds of knowledges we are able to conjure. (Here I am not referring to the hegemonic notion of ontology focused on debating over what is "real" but to the earlier ontological moment where one supposes a particular primordial condition of existence).

Overall the participants shared a general resolve to make other perspectives available that re-shape/extend/question the boundaries of the field especially in the wake of Amitav Acharya's "Global IR" theme promoted in/through ISA. In this spirit, the Delhi group coined the title of the final collective project as "Re-imagining the International: Just Do It." I truly look forward to doing my part to contribute to this and several other projects discussed at the end of the second workshop.

WORKSHOP #2

The second workshop maintained the momentum of the first workshop and intensified some of the observations already made in the first simply due to the particular configuration of actors and their proposed work.

Personally I very much enjoyed interacting with those students who were working on their dissertation proposals or engaging in their field research and was impressed with the complexity of some of the themes being examined. It was clear that many students that attended already have a penchant to do critical work in the field of IR. One tension already mentioned above came between students' desire to "do IR differently" and their practical concern of wanting to get a job when they graduate. While I do believe that more space exists for engaging in non-traditional work in the global south, the aforementioned appreciation of more orthodox approaches to IRT among the students themselves generates a fear of having to respond in kind in terms of one's research. Several of the "senior scholars" even expressed concern about pushing this group "too far" at this stage in the game. As a future endeavor, it might be useful to examine this tension more carefully from the perspective of the sociology of IR.

By the end of this workshop, the whole group brainstormed various ways of furthering the momentum through products. It was beautiful to watch how the group, whose members are all at different stages in their development and in different phases of production, generated a variety of products with a variety of timelines in such a way that everyone could play a part in contributing, whether that be in the immediate sense like the creation of a website where we could post announcements of our work or in a long-term sense like taking the lead to propose a whole special topic issue for a peer-reviewed journal.

I have one curious observation about the "inexactitude" of the workshop titles. It was clear by the constitution of the two groups that some of the so-called "younger scholars" were actually more established in the field than myself for example who also participated in the first more "senior" workshop. In this sense the empirical reality disrupted the construction of "mentor" and "participant." It would be useful to find another way to address the differences between the two types of workshops if in fact the "Delhi Group" re-convenes.

Overall in both workshops, the supportive environment allowed for the frictions among the scholars to be actually quite productive in terms of clarifying issues,

boundaries and comfort zones. I found both groups' tolerance level to friction to be particularly enjoyable and insightful.

WORKSHOP #3

While this workshop was not anticipated to be part of the whole encounter I found it particularly insightful to watch how participants grappled (or not) with identifying the assumptions they make about existence and how these assumptions give shape to how they conceptualize what they are doing as scholars of international relations. Involving between 23-26 participants this supplementary activity seemed to have spurred a great amount of reflection about what the scholarly enterprise of engaging in IR means to them and about how their participation gives shape to the very enterprise itself. Overall it was a great honor and privilege to be able to interact in such an intensive manner on this topic and I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to practice verbalizing my ideas and watching how they land differently in a very different cultural context from my own.

I personally remain inspired by the whole experience and look forward to continuing to work along these lines in my future writing projects. I would be happy to answer any questions of clarification and/or requests to work on any of the topics/issues mentioned above for future gatherings.

Kind regards,



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