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Review Essay 74

Rahul Sagar, ed., *To Raise a Fallen People: The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Indian Views on International Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022. xiii + 289 pp. \$35, paperback, ISBN 9780231206457

Reviewed by **Martin J. Bayly**, London School of Economics and Political Science

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Scholarship on Indian international political thought has, until recently, been defined by a relative degree of paucity and narrowness. The reasons for this are familiar. The Eurocentrism of the history of international political thought and its disciplinary ally, International Relations, bears some share of the blame, even if this is changing. Another limiting factor is a tendency to focus on so-called “great men” (and they have mostly been men) of the Indian independence movement, notably the lawyer and anti-colonial nationalist Mohandas Gandhi; the Indian National Congress leader, and India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru; the activist, poet, and writer Rabindranath Tagore; and perhaps more recently the figurehead of the Hindutva movement, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. Added to this has been an undue emphasis on the 1947 independence moment.¹ Here lies a pernicious presumption that India and Indians only really began to think “internationally” at the moment at which they gained control of their foreign policy, and that at most, “internationalism” in the Indian context only began to register amidst Indian intellectuals in the period leading up to this. One consequence of this has been an Indian National Congress Party (INC) bias in the development of Indian foreign policy thinking and, as a result, a failure to fully grasp the historical lineages that have shaped contemporary Indian international practice and foreign policy thinking under the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

But this picture has changed markedly in recent years. A raft of new intellectual biographies has diversified the pool of great men and (at last) added some women too. Recent works, for example, on the anarchist revolutionary M.P.T. Acharya; the nationalist activist and leader of the Indian National Army, Subhas Chandra Bose; the social reformer and anti-imperialist, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay; the feminist writer and activist, Hansa Mehta; the diplomat, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit; the sociologist, Benoy Kumar Sarkar; the revolutionary Bhagat Singh; and the spiritual leader, Swami Vivekananda,² have joined the works of

¹ Pallavi Raghavan et al., “The Limits of Decolonisation in India’s International Thought and Practice: An Introduction,” *The International History Review* 44: 4 (2022): 812–18.

² Ole Birk Laursen, *Anarchy or Chaos: M.P.T. Acharya and the Indian Struggle for Freedom* (London: Hurst & Co., 2023); Sugata Bose, *His Majesty’s Opponent: Subhas Chandra Bose and India’s Struggle against Empire* (London: Penguin, 2013); Shruti Balaji, “From Colonial Subjecthood to Shared Humanity: Social Work and the Politics of ‘Doing’ in Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay’s International Thought,” *Global Studies Quarterly* 3:1 (2023): <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksad019>; Khushi Singh Rathore, “Excavating Hidden Histories: Indian Women in the Early History of the United Nations,” in Rebecca Adami and Dan Plesch, eds., *Women and the UN* (London: Routledge, 2021): 39-54; Satadru Sen, *Benoy Kumar Sarkar: Restoring the Nation to the World*, Kindle (New Delhi: Routledge, 2015); Chris Moffat, *India’s Revolutionary Inheritance: Politics and the Promise of Bhagat Singh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Kama Maclean, *A Revolutionary*

intellectual historians and others who have explored the (global) intellectual histories of political violence, liberalism, cosmopolitanism, and more.³ The rupture moment of 1947 has also been called into question, and as a result we are gaining a deeper appreciation of the longer-standing histories in the development of Indian political—and specifically *international*—thought and practice.⁴

At the forefront of this movement has been Rahul Sagar’s tireless work over more than two decades to excavate and interpret the archives of Indian political thought throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. As Sagar reminds us in the introduction to this edited collection, one of the reasons for the underdeveloped nature of Indian international political thought is that scholars have not been looking closely enough at the material that is available on this topic,⁵ partly because it is hard to find and often in a parlous state as a result of underinvestment in archival preservation. But also, perhaps, because of the presumption that English-language material in particular resembles a derivative discourse of imperial logic and therefore should be disregarded. Reflecting a similar observation that Nalini Bhushan and Jay Garfield made in their recovery of the Indian philosophical renaissance,⁶ the consequence of this is the ignorance of a vast archive of Indian international political thought.

To Raise A Fallen People helps to address this shortfall, presenting a selected anthology of English-language sources drawn principally from Indian periodicals. Aside from the opening essay, which offers an overarching interpretation of the edited material, Sagar lets the essays speak for themselves. A range of perspectives is included. Familiar names are present, including Mohandas Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, alongside Princely State elites such as the Diwan of Baroda, T. Madhava Rao, or Prime Minister of Hyderabad State, Salar Jung II. Figures who were prominent in Indian literary, journalistic, and legal circles also feature: the pioneering Marathi journalist, Bal Gangadhar Shastri Jambhekar; the barrister and founder of *The Madras Standard*, G. Parameswaran Pillai; and the writer and composer of *Vande Mataram*, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, among them. Some of these were affiliated with the independence movements of the late nineteenth century, and fellow travellers originating from outside India also feature, such as Jamaluddin Afghani and Annie Besant. But also included are those who were more embedded in the ideas and institutions of the colonial state, such as missionary Reverend James Long and his essay on the position of Turkey in relation to India, or the essay by the British Indian Association on British versus Russian rule.⁷ Taken together, then, this collection offers a striking insight into the wide-ranging republic of letters that was building up around questions of India’s role in the world throughout the nineteenth century. This ongoing work of recovery offers a major contribution to the histories of Indian international thought, at a time where there is growing appetite for such a survey.

Following Sagar’s introductory essay, the collection orientates its texts around three general themes, with sub-thematic sections organizing the selected essays. Part 1 of the collection, “Regaining Greatness,” contains

History of Intervar India: Violence, Image, Voice and Text (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Ruth Harris, *Guru to the World: The Life and Legacy of Vivekananda* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022).

³ Shruti Kapila, *Violent Fraternity: Indian Political Thought in the Global Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021); C.A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Sugata Bose and Kris Manjapra, eds., *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones: South Asia and the Global Circulation of Ideas*, 2010 edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁴ Ali Raza, Franziska Roy, and Benjamin Zachariah, eds., *The Internationalist Moment: South Asia, Worlds, and World Views 1917–39* (Delhi: SAGE, 2014); Raghavan et al., “The Limits of Decolonisation in India’s International Thought and Practice.”

⁵ Rahul Sagar, “Introduction,” in Rahul Sagar, ed., *To Raise a Fallen People: The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Indian Views on International Politics* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2022), 3.

⁶ Nalini Bhushan and Jay L. Garfield, *Minds Without Fear: Philosophy in the Indian Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁷ James Long, “The Position of Turkey in Relation to British Interests in India,” in Sagar, ed., *To Raise a Fallen People*, 149–52; British Indian Association, “Why Do Indians Prefer British to Russian Rule?,” in Sagar, ed., *To Raise a Fallen People*, 126–28.

essays on “English Education” (in India) and includes important outputs that emerged from travelling Indians “Crossing the Seas.” Part 2, on “Critiques” showcases the multiple ways in which observers of Indian international politics (Indian, European, and non-European alike) engaged with policy issues of the day. Indian-centric perspectives on the standard fare of nineteenth-century foreign policy debates are included here, including chapters on “The Great Game,” “The Eastern Question,” and “Free Trade.” But also included are essays on “Racism,” and “The Opium Trade.” Part 3 on “The Great Debate” moves onto those works that sought to invert the European orientalist gaze. The section titled “To Learn from the West,” includes an essay by Baman Das Basu, “What Can England Teach Us?” (1897)⁸: a deliberate inversion of German orientalist Max Müller’s (in)famous treatise “India: What Can it Teach Us?” The final chapter, “To Teach the West,” takes this further, including a foretaste of the Pan-Asianism that would shape later INC views on India’s world role after independence, as with Keshub Chunder Sen’s essay on “Asia’s Message to Europe” (1883).⁹

As the subtitle of the collection suggests, the transformative impact of the nineteenth century on Indian conceptions of international politics comes through loud and clear. The nineteenth century may have signalled a great transformation and divergence in global power relations, but those who lost out did not go quietly into the night. The acceleration in patterns of mobility, and with it, intellectual exchange, presaged a rise in international consciousness, even if this took place within imperial circuits. As David Armitage has pointed out, there are few things more “international” than the history of ideas,¹⁰ including those produced by these mobile Indian scholars and observers of India. As part 2 of this collection highlights, the so-called Great Game, the Eastern Question, and the issue of Free Trade, which are so often read as imperial debates, drew disparate regions together in shared imperial geographical imaginaries. Many observers recycled the policy logics of this imperial geopolitics, but as some of these essays show, such visions were contested and argued against from within, as it were. This was an example of a form of “counter-knowledge,” and even an anti-imperial geopolitics. Jamaluddin Afghani’s “Letter on Hindustan” (1883)¹¹ and Salar Jung II’s “Europe Revisited” (1887)¹² both reimagine the geopolitical space connecting India and the Ottoman Empire as defined in confessional terms, a harbinger of later articulations of Pan-Islamism that would agitate colonial officials well into the twentieth century.

Indeed, showcased in these essays are examples that illustrate what George Steinmetz refers to as the “relational whole”¹³ of empire in its colony-metropole relations, including relations of ideas and political activism. As this collection highlights, the reports of Christian missionaries on the devastation wrought by opium consumption found their way back from China to Britain via anti-opium societies, and from there to India through (among others) the historian Shoshee Chandra Dutt (45), whose essay “British Opium Policy and Its Results” (1880) features here.¹⁴ These reverberations were also apparent in the debates over the extent of, and limits to, India’s capacity to “learn” from Europe and America. T. Madhava Rao’s “An Essay on Native Education” (1846)¹⁵ and Chandranath Basu’s “High Education in India” (1878)¹⁶ provide examples of how Indian observance of European culture could produce instances of “auto-orientalism”¹⁷ and the self-

⁸ “Indo-Anglian” [Baman Das Basu], “What Can England Teach Us?,” in Sagar, ed., *To Raise a Fallen People*, 252-56.

⁹ Keshub Chunder Sen, “Asia’s Message to Europe,” in Sagar, ed., *To Raise a Fallen People*, ed (257–62).

¹⁰ David Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹¹ Jamaluddin Afghani, “Letter on Hindustan,” in Sagar, ed., *To Raise a Fallen People*, 52–55.

¹² Salar Jung II, “Europe Revisited,” in Sagar, ed., *To Raise a Fallen People*, 55–57.

¹³ George Steinmetz, “Social Fields, Subfields and Social Spaces at the Scale of Empires: Explaining the Colonial State and Colonial Sociology,” *The Sociological Review* 64:2 (2016): 98–123.

¹⁴ Shoshee Chunder Dutt, “British Opium Policy and Its Results,” in Sagar, ed., *To Raise a Fallen People*, 213–20.

¹⁵ T. Madhava Rao, “An Essay on Native Education,” in Sagar, ed., *To Raise a Fallen People*, 77–82.

¹⁶ Chandranath Basu, “High Education in India,” in Sagar, ed., *To Raise a Fallen People*, 82–87.

¹⁷ Arif Dirlik, “Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism,” *History and Theory* 35:4 (1996): 96.

stigmatization of Indian intellectual culture. Engagement with European works would, for Rao, help to “burst the clouds of superstition and prejudice...to raise a fallen people high in the scale of nations” (81).

Yet these perceptions were productive of cultural essentialisms on both sides. For Basu, Europe was “essentially scientific” (86), whilst India had been in the past “profoundly metaphysical and spiritual” (86). Others, such as Bishan Narayan Dar, reached alternative conclusions, recovering through the study of ancient Indian histories a lost culture of masculine martial prowess, which had since been obliterated by the corrupting influence of “modern civilization.”¹⁸ Such narratives were later extracted by figureheads of the early Hindu-nationalist movement. Meanwhile, observers such as the lawyer, Nagendra Nath Ghose, and social reformer, Ramabai Sarasvati—who feature in the section “To Learn from the West”—were both inspired by the example of UK and US society, as well as appalled by its hypocrisies.¹⁹

These examples remind readers that the production of Indian visions of international politics was not a uniquely “Indian” process, but one of intellectual co-production occurring through complex multi-scalar interactions between the local, regional, imperial, and global. Major events such as the Second Anglo-Afghan war and longer-running dramas such as the decline of the Ottoman Empire were not necessarily responded to through a distinctly “Indian” cultural framework, but rather were contingent upon historical contexts and India’s particular location at the confluence of multiple movements of people, ideas, commodities, and interests. Efforts, then, to define an Indian strategic “culture,” or to identify transhistorical tendencies in India’s foreign policy tendencies, fall afoul of the richness in ideas that these essays portray. They also showcase the often-overlapping and sometimes contradictory positions that many took, including those who have later been pigeonholed as either nationalist, Hindu-nationalist, anti-colonial, and/or anti-imperial. For example, debates over reform of the Indian army stressed the need for greater financial support for a specifically Indian national defence force—an apparently nationalist argument, showing how imperial defence debates fostered the crafting of an “Indian” national military consciousness. Yet these arguments necessarily overlapped with social hierarchies (including caste) fostered in part by imperial rule. For example, G.V. Joshi’s essay on “The Native Indian Army—Reform or Increase?” called for a “Native Army ... filled up by none other than Indian races.”²⁰ Yet this was justified on the basis of the “rapidly-gathering clouds of trouble and difficulties on our North-West and Eastern frontiers, consequent on close contact with populations, divided from us by deep differences of race and creed, of thought and sentiment, and particularly with that large zone of Mohammedan fanaticism” (134).

Indeed, the themes that divide these chapters are better seen as placeholders for topics and debates that frequently converged. The essays on racism, for instance, highlight the important role that the treatment of Indians overseas, including indentured labourers, played in radicalizing opinion in India against the hierarchies of race and class that pervaded in the colonies, as the essays by Mohandas Gandhi and G. Parameswaran Pillai demonstrate.²¹ These show how those “crossing the seas” were not only educated elites seeking engagement with alternative intellectual and political communities beyond imperial circuits, but also those subjected to new forms of bonded labour. The growing racialized division of communities in East and South Africa with respect to land rights, settlement rights, and democratic rights prefigured the racist segregationist policies that lasted beyond the nineteenth century, and in the case of apartheid South Africa, beyond imperial rule.

¹⁸ Bishan Narayan Dar, “Some Characteristics of Indian English-Educated Youths,” in Sagar, ed., *To Raise a Fallen People*, 94.

¹⁹ Nagendra Nath Ghose, “Indian Views of England,” in Sagar, ed., *To Raise a Fallen People*, 229–36; Pandita Ramabai [Ramabai Sarasvati], “The Ruin of the Native Americans,” in Sagar, ed., *To Raise a Fallen People*, 247–50.

²⁰ G. V. Joshi, “The Native Indian Army - Reform or Increase?,” in Sagar, ed., *To Raise a Fallen People*, 136.

²¹ Mohandas K. Gandhi, “Grievances of Indian Settlers in South Africa,” in Sagar, ed., *To Raise a Fallen People*, 198–206; G. Parameswaran Pillai, “Grievances of Indian Settlers in South Africa,” in Sagar, ed., *To Raise a Fallen People*, 206–10.

One of the stated ambitions of this collection is to better contextualise contemporary Indian foreign policy and defence debates. As Sagar puts it: “The conjecture this volume offers is that when we stand back from explanations about why a particular decision was made, and ask why that decision was considered *a good idea*, the trail of answers is likely to lead to an idea originating in nineteenth-century India” (57). Perhaps, but this does rather suggest a teleology linking contemporary debates with their historical antecedents. This is important, but intellectual history need not justify itself simply in terms of the degree to which it informs contemporary policy. In extreme cases this may even lead us to a type of presentism and selectivity that undermines efforts to explore the history more fully in the first place. One of the benefits of engaging with the material on offer in this collection is precisely the way in which it *challenges* preconceptions of how these ideas developed historically, and reveals those aspects that may have been forgotten about along the way.

There are, as with all texts, minor gripes. One might query the number of contributions to this volume that voice the logic of imperial officials (even when critiquing it). This, it might be supposed, is a product of the period under study—one in which anti-colonial and anti-imperial publishing houses had yet to come into their own. Later sections in the volume go some way to balancing this out, and a following collection that Sagar promises, covering the twentieth century, will surely address this given the dramatic shifts that the opening decades of this century heralded in terms of anti-colonial movements and the fracturing of European imperial supremacy. More background information on the contributing essayists—even a few brief biographical details, for those seeking to learn more—would have been useful. That said, the further reading provided for each individual essay in the bibliography offers a wealth of further research. One thing that cannot be denied is the sheer herculean effort that this volume represents. The yields of these efforts Rahul Sagar continues to share through his online database²² demonstrating a laudable intellectual generosity. This is in addition to his ongoing and admirable advocacy for better preservation of Indian historical archives. As anyone who has spent time in Indian archives will be aware, this is a vital task in protecting the wealth of Indian contributions to modern political thought. On this final note then, Sagar’s scholarship offers nothing short of a profound intellectual service to South Asianists, intellectual historians, and International Relations scholars alike.

Martin J. Bayly is an Assistant Professor in International Relations Theory at the London School of Economics and Political Science where he works on historical International Relations, empire, and South Asia. He is currently working on a global history of Indian international thought in the first half of the twentieth century.

²² See: <https://www.ideasofindia.org/>