



Women and Gender in International Relations: A Vision for India's Leadership

July 3, 2024

Debotri Dhar

Contrary to some popular understanding of interstate relations as an equal playing field, with sovereign nations engaging in independent decision-making free from external pressures, international relations is, in reality, marked by complex geopolitical dynamics, with especially entrenched racial and colonial roots. In India, this process dates back to before the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the morphology of the female body and the feminized body-politic were discursively mapped onto each other such that the body – both material and symbolic – of the Indian woman served as a justificatory ground for the imposition of imperial rule. As one British scholar claimed, “The daughters of India are unwelcome at birth, untaught in childhood, enslaved when married, accursed as widows and unlamented in death.” This monolithic “Indian woman” and her nation were thus homogenized as intellectually and culturally inferior by missionary discourses, European parliamentary debates, and Western scholarship, and used to justify imperial conquest, through which the wealth of colonized nations was extracted for centuries.

It has been more than 75 years since India and other colonized nations in Asia, Africa and Latin America gained independence. Yet, through ahistorical generalizations, cultural stereotyping, and the politics of selective (in)visibility, some of these inequitable dynamics in international relations between the Global North and the Global South, and the often-expedient use of gender issues for global geopolitical agendas continue. This narrative conveniently overlooks the diversity of women's experiences in the Global South, as well as pernicious gender inequities in other, including developed countries, such as gender violence, lack of

reproductive rights and maternal well-being, forced conversions and faith-based discrimination, economic exploitation of women workers including in the unorganized sector, harassment of sexual minorities, inadequate political and diplomatic representation at the highest levels, and diminished opportunities in education and work for many.

Several of my prior publications including “[Teaching Culture in a Globalized Era: Strategies from a Postcolonial Feminist Classroom](#)” in *Transformations*; “[Teaching for the Future: Feminist Pedagogy and Humanitarian Education](#)” (Bloomsbury Academic: London, New York, New Delhi); and *Education and Gender* (Debotri Dhar, ed.) have explored, from a pedagogical perspective, this problematic of global gender issues which, due to our inherited and inhabited histories, skewed knowledge systems, and confirmation bias, nevertheless continue to frame the West as always progressive in comparison to the (not monolithic, and also diverse) non-west.

As a result, and like other hidden figures of global history, the achievements of many Indian women go unrecognized in global spaces, while local Indian advancements in inclusivity and social reform are also hidden from view. These achievements must be highlighted, such as women’s domestic and international policy leadership, women’s entrepreneurship including micro- and nano-enterprises, and in diverse fields like education, politics, economy, the arts, literature, and law, such as the decriminalizing of the colonial article 377 for LGBT rights, the abolition of triple talaq, and other strides forward across communities. Colonial cultural hierarchies also must be addressed such that culture is seen as a resource for, and not just an obstacle to, social justice. This was my argument for an invited seminar on gender violence in South Asia at Harvard University’s Radcliffe Institute, as also for a study to aid the fieldwork of advocates tackling violence against women in the South Asian diaspora in America.

To the extent that all gender-equal ideas are incorrectly seen as always derived from the West, with acceptance or rejection being the only choices for the rest, culturally progressive ideas such as *ardhangini*, *ardhanarishwara*, and vernacular LGBTQIA+ literatures can help address domestic violence, promote gender inclusivity, and engage fluidity. Hybrid solutions suitable for diverse contexts may also be highlighted, along with *samvaad*, dialectic engagement across differences (also see Debotri Dhar, *Feminism, Faith, and Intimate Violence*, Center for the Education of Women, Michigan, 2016; and Debotri Dhar (ed.) *Love is Not a Word: The Culture and Politics of Desire*, Speaking Tiger, New Delhi, 2020). A comparative

politics lens is useful here. For example, my research on rape victims' suicides in India offers not just local critiques but also demonstrates some limitations of Western liberal frameworks and legal rationality as well as instances where Indian judicial discourse compassionately allowed for legal justice in cases which would not even have been admissible in most Western legal systems. Discussions that are more nuanced than just victim-blaming or country shaming allow us to also adopt/adapt useful policy solutions such as financial outlays for victim advocates, digital reforms in criminal justice, and productive public-private sector collaborations including corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives to help government advance gender equality as a sustainable development goal (also see, Debotri Dhar, '[Sexual Violence, Gendered Economies, Risky Subjects](#)'. Ford School of Public Policy, 2022).

These national realities further underscore the need to also include non-western approaches to international relations. Discussions on gender inclusivity can take at least three forms in IR. The *first* advocates for an inclusion of more women, sexual minorities, and others from marginalized backgrounds in international relations, foreign policy and diplomacy. In researching the inadequate representation of women in diplomacy, one of my articles ('[How Diplomacy Remains Male-Dominated and the Need to Make It a Diverse, Inclusive Space,](#)' *Outlook*) found startling similarities between India and America. The *second* pertains to how foreign policies impact women, such as through war and peace studies. While teaching in the United States, I had designed a course on sexual violence in wartime and peace, where for several years students examined numerous historical and contemporary instances, such as South Asia's courtesan culture and its colonial exploitation of women through a battery of imperial laws and projection of desires (on which I also published a novel), sexual violence during the 1947 partition of India, and in rape camps during the 1971 Bangladeshi War against Pakistan, the Japanese army's use of South Korean "comfort women," Cambodia's Khymer Rouge, Uighyr Muslims in China, the Rwandan genocide, Syria, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, as also sexual violence against Native American and immigrant women in the U.S., Canada and elsewhere (also see Debotri Dhar, '[Her Story Needs to Be Told,](#)' *The Times of India*).

This leads into a *third* form of inclusivity – that of epistemology itself. Nondual philosophies in IR, and the contributions of Advaita, Sufism, and Buddhism to IR, are important epistemic interventions. Queer theories that challenge gender binaries is another interesting example. We can also eschew the historic framing of the West as global and non-west as local; we need not see the racialized histories

of the global South as particular, while particular histories of the Global North are considered universal. Addressing epistemic hierarchies and simplistic binaries can broaden IR as a field.

This vision for international relations is inclusive and interdisciplinary, in conversation with fields like history, education, politics, policy, law and literature. It is informed by a knowledge of diverse contemporary and classical languages such as Sanskrit, along with inter-community and interfaith dialogue. It combines economic development with welfare for the poorest locally, and where powerful nations in the Western bloc or in the Indo-Pacific like China do not unilaterally dictate political and economic terms to India globally. As a leading voice for democracy, multilateralism, and the Global South, we have an important role to play in this regard (see Debotri Dhar, *'Time for the Tiger,' The Asian Age/Deccan Chronicle*). Together we rebuild the world, forging reciprocal friendships with nations through wise foreign policy and diplomacy – the topic of my next book – and including women's leadership at its forefront.

Author Biography

Debotri Dhar is an award-winning author-educator, academic, editor, and founder of the Hummingbird Global Writers' Circle and Hummingbird Global Leaders Forum.