

Indology in International Relations: A Theoretical Interrogation

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Abstract

This article presents a nuanced exploration of the intricate relationship between Indology and International Relations, unveiling the profound impact of Indian history, culture, and philosophy on global diplomacy and foreign policy. It meticulously traces the historical genesis of Indology, and elucidates its multidisciplinary essence, and underscores its contemporary significance. The article emphasises how Indology serves as a potent driver of India's soft power, exemplified by the global popularity of Yoga, Ayurveda, and Indic culture. While addressing challenges such as cultural appropriation and Eurocentrism, the article offers pragmatic strategies to mitigate these issues. In an era characterised by heightened global interconnectivity, this examination underscores the pivotal role of Indology in fostering cross-cultural understanding and catalysing international cooperation.

Keywords: Indology, International Relations, Soft Power, Orientalism, Inclusive Approach, Colonialism

1.0 Introduction

Although the 21st century international order is moved by the forces of globalisation, yet the ideas and images of countries driven by their cultural ethos, historical roots and diplomatic patterns play crucial role in shaping international relations. The case of India in this milieu is not an exception. An ancient civilisation enmeshed with rich cultural heritage, historical settings, antique philosophies, India represents mosaic of civilisational heritages, hence a learning place for scholars, travellers, merchants, monks, warriors and diplomats (see Gordon

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2009) from abroad. From among the early scholars, who visited India and wrote on its people and culture, Megasthenes (see Majumdar 1958 and Kalota 1978), Alberuni (see Sachau 1910 and Verdon 2019) and Hiuen-Tsiang (see Hwui L 1914) were pioneers. The knowledge about India and its civilisation is available from the writings of these travelling merchants, scholars, historians, warriors, and monks (see Gordon 2009, Jain & Jain 2011, Singh 2008, Pelger 2002-2003, Smith 1958, Rolland 1930, and several others). Along with individual foreign writings academic fora like *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* have also encouraged and promoted writings on Indology through publications

In later period one also follows in the footsteps of scholars like Max Muller¹ and Romain Rolland (1930), Smith (1958) and several others. In foreign writings India's past is often alleged of being misrepresented and thus misconceived in Western world. In contrast, Indian scholars have made immense contributions by their writings and providing institutional platform to facilitate works on Indology. Most of these writings present India's civilisation in a right perspective from Indians' stand point, while others echo Western logic.

Among native Ideologists Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarkar (see Dandakar 1976), Rahul Sankrityayan (Chudal 2016) and S. Radhakrishnan (1976) have done pioneering works. The *Journal of the Ganganath Jha Kendriya Sanskrit Vidyapeeth*, Allahabd and *Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* were platforms to encourage research and publications on Indology. The glorious history and intercepted horary past of India and its widely established relations with countries of the world give a food for thought on the crucial role of Indology in India international relations. No doubt, Indology is a critical discipline; yet it is important today because India matters to the world. The country offers a unique model—a developing nation, long oppressed under colonial rule, has flourished and thrived against all odds. In this study Indology is examined both in terms of India's context and by situating it in the larger context of orientalism and Asia's civilisational perspective and its connection with International Relations (IR).

As the world's largest democracy, India has successfully excelled at the management of diversity—despite its innumerable languages, and ethnicities; and the country has managed not only to comprehend each of its diverse component, but to move forward with determination and commitment. Defying doubts from the East and West, a symbol emerges that encapsulates the triumphant realisation of shared human dreams.

So much of the answer to this lies in India's history and culture. From religious scriptures and philosophical works to works of literature to art and architecture and music, to dance, drama, and the physical and natural sciences, there is not a single sphere of human activity that has not had a line of development that is uniquely Indian. But in each of those spheres, the growth has never been sterile.

Each successive wave of influence, whether they came through the trader, the scholar, or the soldier, brought with it the promise of new horizons, retaining its essential civilisational core. The territorial and cultural landscape of India enriched itself with what it saw as the finest fragrances from the winds that blew across its length and breadth. In turn, efforts have been made to carry forward many of those traditions over the ages. Today the close ties that India enjoys with the East—South East Asia, East Asia and in many parts of the

West are a testament to the pathways of wisdom that nourished among countries in international relations. This article explores the unique intersection of Indology and International Relations, highlighting how the study of Indian culture, history, and philosophy profoundly impacts global diplomacy and foreign policy. A multi-disciplinary approach is used to examine the historical foundations, soft power dynamics, cultural diplomacy, historical perspectives, and philosophical roots that connect Indology with international relations.

1.1 The Foundation of Indology

As an academic discipline, Indology traces its roots back to the colonial era when European scholars sought to decipher and understand India's rich cultural heritage. It encompasses various disciplines, including linguistics, archaeology, history, and philosophy, making it a comprehensive study of India and its influence on the world. Early European scholars like Max Müller, as has been mentioned above, significantly contributed to the development of Indology. (Dasgupta 2009). The colonial engagement with India acted as the catalyst of the establishment of institutions like the Royal Asiatic Society and the study of Sanskrit and Indian culture. Key figures like Sir William Jones (see Franklin 2002) and Warren Hastings (Kopf 1969) played instrumental roles in promoting the study of Indian languages and texts.

One crucial aspect to note is the role of Sanskrit in the development of Indology. Sanskrit, as a classical language, held great significance for Western scholars. It not only served as a repository of India's literary and philosophical heritage but also represented one of the earliest specimens of Indo-European languages, shedding light on the evolution of this language family. This linguistic and philological foundation, however, became both a strength and limitation of Indology (Rajendran 2011).

Indology's origins can also be traced to the 19th century when European scholars began translating and interpreting Indian texts, such as the Vedas, Upanishads, and epics like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. These early scholars played a crucial role in introducing India's literary and philosophical treasures to the Western world. As Indology evolved, it expanded beyond language and literature to encompass archaeology, history, and philosophy. Scholars like James Prinsep made significant contributions to the understanding of India's ancient history and inscriptions, shedding light on the Mauryan Empire and other historical periods (Shastri 1999).

1.2 Indology and India's Soft Power²

India's soft power characterised by its cultural exports such as yoga, Ayurveda, and Bollywood, has become a significant aspect of its global influence. Indology, through its deep exploration of Indian culture, literature, and philosophy, plays a pivotal role in enhancing India's soft power and fostering positive international relations.

The global popularity of yoga is a prime example of how Indology contributes to India's soft power. The study of ancient Indian texts and practices related to yoga has led to a better understanding of its physical and mental benefits and facilitated its global dissemination. Yoga has become a symbol of India's peaceful and holistic approach to life,

making it a powerful tool for cultural diplomacy (Mahapatra 2016). Ayurveda, India's traditional system of medicine is another area where Indology has played a vital role. By studying ancient Ayurvedic texts, scholars have contributed to the modernisation and global acceptance of Ayurvedic practices and remedies. This has not only benefited India's healthcare industry but has also strengthened India's image as a hub of holistic wellness despite the fact that Ayurveda faces challenges from other systems of medicine (Banerjee 2004).

Bollywood, India's prolific film industry is yet another example of soft power. The study of Indian cinema's history and impact on global entertainment has helped forge cultural connections between India and other nations. Indian films, known for their colourful storytelling and rich cultural elements, have a international audience. Governments and organisations worldwide employ Indology as a tool for cultural diplomacy. Initiatives like international festivals, cultural exchange programmes, and the establishment of cultural centres abroad facilitate the dissemination of Indian culture and strengthen diplomatic ties (Singh 2023).

Cultural diplomacy is a powerful means of building bridges between nations. India, recognising the potential of Indology in cultural diplomacy, has initiated numerous programmes. For example, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) sponsors cultural events, scholarships, and exchanges for foreign students to study Indian art, music, dance, and language. Cultural exchange programmes, often facilitated by universities and research institutions, allow scholars and students from around the world to delve into the depths of Indology. These programmes promote academic collaboration, research, and knowledge exchange, ultimately enhancing international relations (PIB 2022).

The establishment of Indian cultural centres, known as "Indian Cultural Centres" or "Indian Cultural Institutes," in various countries serves as hubs for promoting Indian culture, language, and philosophy. These centres offer language courses, cultural events, and lectures on Indian history and philosophy, contributing to greater global awareness of India's cultural heritage (ICCR 2020-2021 report).

1.3 Indology and International Relations

The construction of the "West" within the field of International Relations is not only polemical but also hegemonic. This means that the West, including Europe and the United States, has historically dominated the discourse, often using its own perspective to rationalise its actions. The West is not a homogenous entity; there are variations within American and European academia in terms of approaches to International Relations (IR). However, the historical and cultural aspects of the non-Western world have been conspicuously absent from IR literature, leading critics to view the discipline as exclusionary, parochial, and Eurocentric. IR has typically applied Western values to categorise itself as superior, civilised, and dominant (the "self") and non-Western cultures as inferior, uncivilised, and subordinate (the "other") (Kristensen 2015). The mainstream IR theories, such as Realism (see for example, Notre Dame International Security, 2022 and Jack 2000) and Liberalism (Koerner 1985) were often positivist, rational, and status quo-oriented, upholding the existing global order of "Great Powers". Critical theory (see Antonio 1983 for a conceptual perspective), while

exposing power relationships, did not necessarily provide a path to freedom or independence for the non-Western world (Narain 2021). IR literature for excluding the study of colonialism and imperialism had played a significant role in shaping Western history. This omission is seen as a form of "selective amnesia" to maintain a focus on modernisation and development, which were framed according to Western standards. This highlights that the post-colonial turn in IR has sparked debates about the epistemological and methodological underpinnings of the discipline, aiming to deconstruct colonial knowledge and reconstruct non-colonial approaches (Narain 2020).

In response to the Eurocentric nature of IR, scholars from both the Western centre and non-Western periphery have explored the possibility of non-Western IR theories. Understandably, Eurocentrism in academia and international relations also pose challenges for the accurate portrayal and integration of Indology (Narain 2015). The dominance of Western perspectives and paradigms in international relations scholarship can marginalise the contributions of Indology and other non-Western fields. The field of International Relations (IR) has been characterised by its Western origins, with claims that it was initially conceived as a tool in the hands of policymakers to foster peace and prevent conflicts. The mainstream IR perspective predominantly aimed at the prediction and prevention of wars, treating states as the primary actors while stripping away individual characteristics. However, when attempting to analyse political phenomena in regions of the Global South through a Eurocentric lens, these endeavours often fell short (*ibid*).

The rational actor model (see Keohane 2002 and Petracca 1991 for a critical perspective), which played a pivotal role in maintaining peace during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, was subsequently extended to regional contexts, such as South Asia. The emergence of the postcolonial perspective in IR has played a pivotal role in sparking debates regarding the field's epistemological and methodological foundations. This shift entails the deconstruction of existing methodologies that perpetuate colonial biases in knowledge and a re-evaluation of colonial practices (Nair 2017).

In response to the Eurocentric underpinnings of the IR discipline, a vast body of literature has emerged, authored by scholars hailing from both the Western core and the non-Western periphery. The west versus east debate raised by scholars like Acharya and Buzan (2007) concerning the absence of a Non-Western IR theory have catalysed the development of various national schools of IR by local scholars. It is essential to recognise that there exists a diverse array of responses to Eurocentrism across the non-Western world. The concept of the "Non-West" is not a monolithic and impenetrable structure; rather, it remains a subject of contestation. Further scrutiny is imperative to unveil the underlying teleology of Western modernity and linguistic constructs that give rise to binary oppositional categories, perpetuating ethnocentrism not only within the social sciences but also within the realm of IR.

In reaction to the Eurocentric foundations of the International Relations (IR) discipline, a substantial body of literature has emerged. Scholars from both the Western core and the non-Western periphery have contributed to this discourse. The debate initiated by scholars like Acharya and Buzan (2007) addresses the absence of a Non-Western IR theory which has spurred the development of diverse national schools of IR by local scholars. It is crucial to acknowledge the multitude of responses to Eurocentrism across the non-Western

world, emphasizing that the concept of the "Non-West" is not a monolithic and impenetrable structure; rather, it remains a subject of ongoing debate (ibid.).

To delve deeper, it becomes imperative to scrutinize the underlying teleology of Western modernity and the linguistic constructs that give rise to binary oppositional categories. This scrutiny not only reveals the ethnocentrism within the social sciences but also within the realm of IR. The examination of these constructs is essential to understanding the dynamics that perpetuate certain perspectives and hierarchies in international relations.

Drawing a link to Indology, the study of Indian history, culture, and philosophy, is particularly relevant in this context. Indology provides insights into alternative perspectives and philosophies that challenge Western-centric narratives. By incorporating indological perspectives, scholars in international relations have enriched the discourse, fostering a more inclusive and diverse understanding of global dynamics. This interdisciplinary approach encourages a broader exploration of ideas beyond the Eurocentric framework, contributing to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of international relations.

Edward Said is widely acknowledged as the originator of the terms Orientalism and postcolonial studies. According to Said, Orientalism represents a deliberate amalgamation of theories and practices that fabricate images of the East, specifically tailored for Western consumption. The portrayal of the East as exotic, possessing feminine qualities, and being inherently weak and susceptible is instrumental in shaping the Western perception of itself as rational, masculine, and powerful. These generalizations permeate diverse realms, including language, historical narratives, cultural practices, and religious beliefs, thereby establishing a profound division between the Western and Eastern geographic entities (Osborne nd.). This highlights the importance of avoiding Orientalist biases and embracing diverse perspectives for a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of global dynamics in international relations. In doing so, we gain a more nuanced view that goes beyond traditional Western narratives.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* is a groundbreaking work that critically examines the way Western scholars, writers, and artists have traditionally portrayed the East, particularly the Middle East and Asia. Published in 1978, the book challenges the Eurocentric perspective that has often dominated Western discourse about the Orient. Said argues that Orientalism is not just an academic discipline but a form of cultural and political domination. He contends that Western depictions of the East are not neutral or objective but are deeply influenced by power dynamics, imperialism, and colonialism.

Said's work has had a profound impact on postcolonial studies and cultural criticism. It encourages a re-evaluation of Western narratives and calls for a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of non-Western cultures. "Orientalism" remains a key text in discussions about representation, power, and cultural imperialism in academia and beyond (Said 1978).

Even though it was completely disproved during the "Great Debates, it is now widely accepted and acknowledged by academics from the West and other cultures that realism can be traced to its roots in the *Arthashastra*, a political treatise (Shahi 2014). References to other ethical systems like the Jewish, Chinese, Indian, and Islamic ones would need to be permitted

by a genuinely global IR. The Non-West must be included as subjects in the creation of knowledge rather than remaining the subject of knowledge. Greater investigation into the West and Non-West categories is required to close the gap between the centre and the periphery. A construct in epistemology is eurocentrism. If the "difference" or the oppositional characteristics with the Non-West are underlined, the West may be understood as a construction better. The hierarchies are supported by the binaries, which build atop one another. Therefore, if the gaps are to be filled and the IR historical narrative is to be understood in a single voice, an analysis that interrogates beyond the binaries is essential. This necessitates rewriting and reinterpreting the histories of IR as a cross-cultural and civilisational activity that also encompasses other 'third' locales rather than as constrained regions of the West and the Non-West (Narain 2021).

1.4 Challenges and Critiques

Despite its merits, Indology faces challenges, including cultural appropriation, Orientalism, and Eurocentrism. Critics argue that a Western-centric perspective can distort the understanding of Indian culture and its impact on international relation (Narain 2021). One of the primary challenges faced by Indology is the risk of cultural appropriation. While the study of Indian culture is important, there is a fine line between appreciation and appropriation. Critics argue that Western scholars have sometimes oversimplified or misinterpreted Indian cultural practices and philosophy, leading to a superficial or distorted understanding.

1.4.1 Decline in Funding and Academic Support

The decline in funding and academic support for humanities disciplines, including Indology, as a critical issue. This challenge is not limited to a specific region but extends to universities worldwide. The article astutely observes that humanities subjects often face questions about their practical relevance in today's fast-paced world.

1.4.2 Loss of Traditional Knowledge

In post-Independence India, traditional knowledge systems and *gurukulas* are vanishing. This is a significant concern as it threatens to erode valuable indigenous knowledge.

1.4.3 Lack of Interdisciplinary Engagement

By focusing primarily on texts, Indology may miss out on valuable insights from anthropology, sociology, and other fields. The somewhat isolated nature of Indology, marked by its predominant emphasis on textual analysis, presents a limitation in achieving a well-rounded understanding. While the in-depth examination of ancient texts is undoubtedly valuable, this approach may inadvertently neglect the rich insights that could be derived from interdisciplinary engagement. The holistic comprehension of Indian history, culture, and philosophy could be significantly enriched by incorporating perspectives from fields like anthropology and sociology. By fostering a more collaborative and interdisciplinary

approach, Indology has the potential to uncover deeper layers of meaning and contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the intricate dynamics within the cultural and social fabric of India.

1.4.4 Neglect of Modern Aspects

Some Indology departments are focusing more on modern languages and cultures, which is seen as a necessary diversification. However, there's a worry that this shift might sideline the classical heritage. It's important to find a balance between exploring contemporary aspects and preserving the valuable classical traditions in Indology.

1.5 Reinventing Indology: An Inclusive Approach

The proposed strategies, as presented below, to address these challenges are well-reasoned and pragmatic:

1.5.1 Contextualization

This means expanding the scope of Indology to encompass medieval and modern languages and cultures. This broader perspective would provide a more comprehensive understanding of India, acknowledging its rich heritage and contemporary relevance.

1.5.2 Interdisciplinary Collaboration

This requires encouraging collaboration with experts from various fields, such as anthropology, archaeology, and sociology, is a crucial step in bridging the gap between traditional and contemporary studies. This collaborative approach promotes a holistic understanding of India's complex cultural tapestry.

1.5.3 Philological Excellence

Retaining both the strengths of philology and text-critical analysis while broadening the field's focus are imperative. The indispensability of critical editions and textual analysis persists as tools for understanding India's literary and philosophical heritage. These traditional methods not only maintain their relevance but also function as foundational pillars for a more comprehensive exploration of the diverse facets within the realm of Indian literature and philosophy.

1.5.4 Global Perspectives

Indology must adapt to global perspectives and engage with contemporary issues while drawing from India's classical past. This approach ensures that the discipline remains relevant in today's interconnected world.

1.6 Future Prospects and Conclusion

The future of Indology in international relations is promising. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, a deeper understanding of India's culture, history, and philosophy is indispensable for fostering diplomatic relationships and promoting global peace. Indology is poised to play an even more significant role in international relations in the future. As globalisation continues to advance, nations are seeking ways to enhance cross-cultural understanding and collaboration. Indology, with its comprehensive study of Indian culture and history, is well-positioned to contribute to this endeavour. In an era where diplomacy is not limited to state actors but also involves non-state actors, the insights provided by Indology can be invaluable. Non-governmental organisations, cultural institutions, and grassroots movements can benefit from a nuanced understanding of India's cultural contributions to the world.

In conclusion, the nexus between Indology and international relations is a dynamic and multifaceted field. It illuminates the interconnectedness of cultures and the profound impact that the study of India's culture, history, and philosophy has on global diplomacy and foreign policy.

Notes

1. Friedrich Max Muller edited Asian religious texts (including one index volume) in 50 monumental volumes entitled *Sacred Books of the East* between 1879 and 1910. (The volumes were published by Oxford University/ Clarendon Press. Out of 49 volumes 21 on Hinduism, 10 on Buddhism, 08 on Zoroastrianism, 06 on Taoism and Confucianism, 02 on each Jainism and Islam (see Molendijk 2016). Except Taoism, Confucianism, Islam and Zoroastrianism other religious texts are largely on religious traditions of India. Even Islam and Zoroastrianism bear mark of India's heritage. The volumes relating to India shows its glorious religious tradition, which is only one aspect of India's great civilisational tradition.
2. During the 1980s, Joseph Nye Jr., (1990) a political scientist, coined the term soft power, defining it as a persuasive power, nation's ability to influence others without resorting to coercive methods like war or economic sanctions (also see Nye 2004). In practice, this involves countries' projecting their values, ideals, and culture—originating from non-governmental entities like schools, religious institutions, and charitable organizations and taking shape through cultural elements such as music, sports, media, and significant industries like Silicon Valley and Hollywood—globally to foster goodwill and strengthen partnerships (Foreign Policy 2023).

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