

Transcending Postcolonial Essentialism in Global Governance: A Global IR Alternative

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Abstract

This paper explains how the geo-culturally motivated postcolonial views on global governance produce an essentially dichotomous notion of the non-Western agency defined in terms of “silence versus defiance”: habitually, the agency of the non-West is reduced to either “silence” (under hegemony) or “defiance” (under counter-hegemony) often postured in an opposition to the West. This phenomenon is embodied in the mainstream readings of global governance that reduce India’s agency to its spectacular gestures of defiance within the institutional structures of the New International Economic Order (NIEO), the G77, and BRICS. By contrast, this paper evokes an instance of a complex trajectory of “polymorphous non-Western agency,” i.e., the agency of a subnational political-epistemic community in the Indian region of Kerala that framed a highly influential basic needs approach to global governance in the 1960s-70s. This paper spells out how this still-relevant “basic needs approach” to global governance moves beyond the postcolonial geo-cultural essentialism and reveals a “West–non-West relational agency,” thereby bridging the cognitive gaps between the West and the non-West and serving as a prototype for expanding the horizons of the Global IR research programme.

Keywords: Global IR, global governance, postcolonial, decolonial, Indian IR

1. Introduction

One of the primary preoccupations of the writings on Global IR is the critical analysis of different approaches, different methods, and different concerns related to global governance. The conversations on the advancement of Global IR as a research programme disapprove the geo-cultural essentialism inherent in the approaches of both Western IR and non-Western IR. Several scholars have detailed how non-Western IR, including the postcolonial approach, maintains the same dualist frameworks of Western IR as it solidifies geo-cultural situatedness, thereby reinforcing divisive self-other interactions between numerous temporally-spatially separated binary groupings, e.g., the “West versus non-West.” Alarms have been raised against the political dangers of such divisive West–non-West interactions in global governance. In the context of contemporary India, a few scholars have articulated suspicions that an “uncritical romanticism about the non-West” could steadily lead to a “co-opting of decolonising to justify Hindu supremacy by right-wing intellectuals and authoritarian regimes” (Menon, 2022), or allow the “postcolonial populists” to dress up

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“authoritarian politics as a project of decolonial liberation,” thereby marketing “decolonial Hindutva to serve nationalistic, nativist and conservative ends,” albeit using the “left-wing language of anti-[Western]-imperialism (Huju, 2024). Although the tendencies of geo-cultural essentialism in postcolonial discourses have been theoretically problematized, their implications for the functioning of global governance remain largely underexplored. Given the centrality of global governance in the study of IR, this lacuna is particularly glaring. This paper attempts to fill in this lacuna. It demonstrates how diverse postcolonial perspectives on global governance produce an essentially dichotomous notion of the non-Western agency defined in terms of “silence versus defiance” (Hobson & Sajed, 2017, p.547): the agency of the non-West is reduced to either “silence” (under hegemony) or “defiance” (under counter-hegemony) often postured in an opposition to the West. This phenomenon is best exemplified by the official/academic accounts of global governance that reduce India’s agency to its spectacular gestures of defiance within the structures of the New International Economic Order (NIEO), the G77, and BRICS. Alternatively, this paper evokes an instance of a complex trajectory of “polymorphous non-Western agency,” i.e., the agency of a subnational political-epistemic community in the Indian region of Kerala that framed a highly influential basic needs approach to global governance in the 1960s-70s, which was touted often as an alternative to the NIEO (Jolly et al., 2005). The paper spells out how this basic needs approach to global governance moves beyond the postcolonial geo-cultural essentialism and reveals a West–non-West relational agency, thereby serving as a prototype for expanding the horizons of the Global IR research programme. Such a mode of polymorphous agency could emanate from both the West and non-West and serve as an invaluable theoretical tool in the quest to disrupt, if not dispense with the binary. The paper is divided into three sections. The first section provides an overview of the scholarly interventions that problematize postcolonial geo-cultural essentialism in the study of IR. The second section proposes a truly “Global” agenda for global governance by advocating a “relational agency” aimed at reconciling the binary postures of the “West verses non-West.” Instead of a linear determinative trajectory, the polymorphous non-linear relational agency operates through a dizzying range of connections, entanglements and encounters spanning scholarly networks and political projects of the West and the non-West at national, subnational and global levels. The working of this relational agency in global governance is demonstrated through the initiatives of a subnational political-epistemic community in the Indian region of Kerala, whose commitment to egalitarian developmentalism was exemplified at two historical moments – 1968 and 1971. These historical moments played a critical role in reorientating the discussions on global governance along the lines of the basic needs approach, especially through its deliberations on the “Kerala model.” Finally, the third section adds some cautionary notes to the usage of this kind of subnational approach for the study of global governance. In this effort, it suggests the pathways to eliminate methodological nationalism while making attempts to integrate diverse regional dynamics into the study of Global IR. The paper draws on archival and official documents from a wide range of local and global institutions of global governance between the late 1960s and the early 1980s. Besides backing the ideas of globalizing IR, the paper augments a nascent debate on globalizing IPE by focusing on the place of “regional IPE” (Deciancio & Quillconi, 2020), and the role of “subnational entities” within the broader discipline (Cornago, 2010; Kuznetsov, 2014; Plagemann & Destradi, 2015; Chatterji & Saha, 2017). While the paper rises above the familiar dualist inside-outside approach regarding

India's role in global governance (Sinha(a), 2022; Sinha(b), 2022), it opens up a vibrant dialogue on the prospects of nonessentialist, or say, nondualist positioning of sub-national entities in the Global IR research programme.

2. Understanding the Problems of Postcolonial Essentialism

The origins of the Global IR research agenda are often traced to a forum published in the journal *International Relations of the Asia Pacific* (2007); a forum that posed the question "Why is there no Non-Western International Relations theory?" (Acharya & Buzan, 2007). This forum was followed by various discussions on the "globality" of IR. The early scholars who tried to bring in elements of "non-Western IR" to the study of globality used the West/non-West binary as an entry point for validating their cases. But a few contemporary scholars began to treat the terms "the West" and "the non-West" as substantial entities that existed independently of each other (Eun, 2022). Additionally, there is a growing Global IR literature that emphasizes the "dialogic potentials beyond the West–non-West distinction" (Ersoy, 2023), thereby censuring all binary understandings that thrive on the compartmentalized knowledge-forms of both Western IR and non-Western IR. One way of achieving these dialogic potentials is to develop Global IR as an integrated "research programme" that remains committed to reconciling the binary understandings of world politics (Shahi, 2023). For reconciling the binary understandings of world politics, it is important to investigate the "relational agency" of the West and the non-West. The recognition of this relational agency challenges the geo-culturally confined, and, therefore, dichotomous notion of agency stated in those postcolonial narratives that essentially situate the non-Western silence/defiance against the Western hegemony/dominance. In what follows, the paper explains how the study of this "West–non-West relational agency" toward the systematic restructuring of global governance can overcome the problems of postcolonial essentialism.

While the central concern of IR is to develop an understanding of how the world is governed, the term "global governance" specifically emerged in the 1990s to capture the post-Cold War zeitgeist which "enabled IR scholars," including the postcolonial researchers, "to begin to grapple more fully with how the world is organized in all of its complexity" (Weiss & Wilkenson, 2018). By and large, the postcolonial perspectives emerged in response to the acknowledgement of the limits of Western analytical categories in the conditions of post-colonial life-worlds. They showed the continued persistence of "coloniality" that, even after the official demise of colonialism through the process of decolonization, retained many socio-political and economic relations of the systems of power instituted during the colonial era. They further sought to challenge the intellectual and epistemic universality of the West by providing a holistic view of IR incorporating local narratives pertaining to the non-West (Seth, 2013). However, toward this end, they added to the problem of essentialism in myriad ways. Essentialism posits the notion that the geo-cultural entities, such as the temporally-spatially separated groupings of the West and the non-West, have certain fixed "fundamental properties" (Mena, 2020). The West and the non-West are thus reduced to "fixed, internally coherent, and bounded social forms" (Barnett & Karakol, 2023). While the intentions to accentuate such fundamental properties by the formation of national IR schools (e.g., "Chinese IR school," "Korean IR school" or "Kyoto IR school") have been well problematized in IR literature, the considerations that the postcolonial scholarship is also prone to similar slippery

slopes of fundamentalism/essentialism remain poorly documented. Some scholars have argued how the postcolonial debate has insufficiently challenged the “presentist” (modern European) conceptions of history, thereby continuing to uphold the ideational and material hierarchies imposed by the Eurocentric capitalist modernity (Duzgun, 2024). They have pointed out how the reactionary postcolonial response to the universalist claims of the West often involves an equally strong assertion of the non-Western local/regional peculiarities (Shahi, 2020). This kind of postcolonial contention, in turn, fosters an exceptionalist political view that remains. As this kind of postcolonial contention appropriates the “local” for itself, it inadvertently ends up perpetuating “regional inwardness” and “local exceptionalisms.” (Shahi, 2023). Thus, even if the postcolonial discourses offer a critique of the processes of “othering” by the predominant Western structures of imperialism, they continue to entrench the reactionary non-Western essentialist modes of othering, thereby mirroring the same dualist theoretical propensities of Western IR that they intend to surpass.

In practice of global governance, the dualist theoretical propensities of postcolonialism underline an inevitability of a “dualist political agency.” While the Western agency resembles hegemony/dominance, the non-Western agency displays either defiance/resistance or compliance/silence. The divergent streams of Critical International Relations Theory (CIRT), including its postcolonial and decolonial variants, reduce the non-Western agency to either “an overt collective defiance of powerholders” or “a complete hegemonic compliance” within the oppositional posture vis-à-vis the West (Sreekumar, 2023). Particularly, the decolonial perspectives illustrate the non-Western agency as a “revolt against the West” (Adebajo, 2018). Given that the non-Western agency is often highly complex and polymorphous, the postcolonial or decolonial attempt to reduce the non-Western agency to the extreme dichotomy of defiance and silence, or to the extreme condition of revolt, is flawed, especially because it turns a blind eye to a “wide spectrum” of instantiations of non-Western agency between these extremes, thereby misrepresenting all actual or potential West–non-West interactions in terms of divisive self-other interactions. On one end of the spectrum, the postcolonial discourses construct a view of global institutions that serve the ends of the “(neo-)colonial Western self” by silencing the “non-Western others.” (Barnett & Duvall, 2004). As such, the “non-Western others” are characterized as the struggling “objects” under the subordination of the “(neo-)colonial Western self” who, as the “subject” of global governance, seeks to preserve colonial governance regimes (Muppidi, 2004). On the other end, these discourses narrate the resistance of the “non-Western others” against the “(neo-)colonial Western self.”

In IR, this spectacular mode of resistance during the 1960s and 1970s constituted the project of the New International Economic Order (NIEO). During this period in time, a wide number of critical perspectives on global governance focused on the colonial underpinnings of the prevalent international economic order, which was contested by the non-Western agency that pledged commitments to the NIEO (Nicholls, 2019). The NIEO was formed as the most radical anti-colonial worldmaking project claiming to establish “international economic non-domination” (Getachew, 2019), a critical non-Western response to the unequal terms of the Western-centric world trade system. The postcolonial approach demanded “international welfarism” through the NIEO movement. The vital aspects of the NIEO were the leadership of Prebisch in the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order (1974), and the Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States (1974-75) (Getachew, 2019). The

decolonial approach mobilized the NIEO platform for the purpose of attaining “economic decolonization” by organizing a continued revolt against the West (Adebajo, 2018). The revival of the spirit of Bandung (Ndloyu-Gatsheni, 2020), and the recovery of dependency theory were integral to the NIEO (Antunes de Oliveira & Kyangrayen, 2023). Regarding India’s role in global governance, most of the postcolonial and decolonial readings appreciate how it contributed to the drafting of the NIEO and the establishment of the G77. Some go further to argue that India’s involvement within the UNCTAD and BRICS signified an effort toward “de-Westernization,” a strategy inextricably linked to decolonization (Mathur, 2023; Abebaio; Zondi, 2015; Oloruntoba, 2015). Today, India’s international economic diplomacy is avowedly framed in decolonial terms by many influential think tanks that work closely with the government, thereby indicating a resurgence of the rhetoric of decolonization in India’s official foreign policy pronouncements (Huju, 2024).

To reiterate, what is common in all these postcolonial and decolonial readings is the inclination to reduce India’s agency to either silence or defiance. This “either-or” dualist understanding of India’s agency upholds the substantialist ontologies of mainstream Western IR thinking, whereby the essentialized geo-cultural properties of the West and non-West are reified (Bayly, 2023). Combined with the divisive modes of West–non-West interactions, such a heuristic makes it difficult to comprehend the complex entanglements between the West and the non-West. Moreover, these postcolonial and decolonial readings suffer from the problem of “methodological nationalism” – the strategy that “exceptionalizes certain national contexts,” specifically the ones marked by authoritarian regimes, as “isolated from global linkages.” (Zhang, 2023). According to the principle of methodological nationalism, the nation-states are assumed as the key political actors, and it is the diplomatic interventions of nation-states that define the functioning of multilateral forums. Alina Sajed and John Hobson (2017) elucidate:

If we confine our analysis of non-Western agency only to moments of grandiose collective resistance, then we squeeze out the humdrum exercise of non-Western agency that occurs much more frequently. For a key problem that emerges... is that only certain types of actors/ actions count as performing agency – including the likes of the reformist strategies of the G77, Bandung/the Non-Aligned Movement, the 1974 Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order... [and so on]. (p. 563)

According to the postcolonial and decolonial narratives, the NIEO was the prominent manifestation of non-Western agency during the 1960s-70s. This non-Western agency met with a tragic demise following the ascendance of the West-led neoliberal market fundamentalism. Against the popularity of these narratives, there remains a stark omission of the alternative traditions of global governance, such as the basic needs approach. Although the mention of this basic needs approach exists in mainstream development literature, it is merely considered as a that means no more than a combined expression of the Western (especially American) anxieties (largely spearheaded by Western scholars) over the persistence of the issues of poverty, race and inequities, the general disillusionment with the American dream, and the debacle of Vietnam (Arndt, 1992). Against this backdrop, the non-Western agency is perceived as a near-unanimous opposition of the “American model” by the Third World. In this oppositional portrayal of the West–non-West interactions, the essentialist logical tropes of the “West versus non-West” are reified or homogenized, and a mistaken impression is cultivated that the Western and non-Western “categories of knowledge operate

in silos, impermeable to traditions elsewhere.” (Bayly, 2023). By homogenizing the agency of the varied clusters of non-Western and Western actors, it also runs the risk of enforcing methodological nationalism in global governance. This, in turn, forecloses the possibility of knowing many complicated instantiations of non-Western agency that straddle the conventional geo-cultural categories of West and non-West along non-determinative lines, in no preset order, or without any telos (Bayly, 2023). To overcome the problems of geo-cultural essentialism and methodological nationalism, it is necessary to invent innovative pathways to reconcile the West-non-West binaries.

3. Reconciling the West–Non-West Binaries: The Study of “Relational Agency”

Within the agenda of globalizing IR, multiple pathways have emerged that differently aim at reconciling the West-non-West binaries, including inter alia synthesis, hybridity, eclecticism, connectedness and relational sociology. For instance, certain strands of post-Western IR and global history focus on foregrounding the inherent hybridity within Western/non-Western modes of culture (Shani, 2008), ideologies (Sreekumar, 2022), institutions (Philips, 2016), knowledge, and ways of thinking about global politics (Bilgin, 2008). While I acknowledge the inherent hybridity within the Western and non-Western worlds, I proceed with the assumption of their differences in this paper. Drawing from Yong-Soo Eun, Peter Marcus Kristensen, and Deepshikha Shahi (2025), these are not essentialist geographically bound and endogenously generated differences, but those pertaining to the dynamic and transient assemblages actualized in specific spatio-temporal contexts of time and space. In this regard, this paper builds on the analytical framework of “relational sociology” that discusses the “global origins of IR” to grasp global governance (Bayly, 2023). By focusing on the ongoing, connected, and the configurational nature of knowledge construction, it discloses that knowledge practices are far from siloed; rather, they are dynamic, impure, and miscegenated. Going beyond the essentialist dualist categories, this framework revolves around ever-shifting non-essentialist categories that emerge as an array of momentary expressions within the broader “monist continuum” of global interconnections (Shahi & Ascione, 2016). Various modes of relationships thus constitute and produce entities impacting “organizing logics, positions, and sense of the world” across the West and non-West” (Barnett & Zarakol, 2023). Practically, this framework appreciates the non-Western agency beyond the polarities of silence/defiance. It transcends the closed compartmentalized entities of West and non-West to take note of the myriad ways in which these entities inflect each other, a process that unfolds through the connections between diverse political projects expressed across the geo-cultural West and non-West at “multiple sites and imbricated within global scholarly networks, fostered by social movements” as well as state initiatives (Bayly, 2023). Logically, it surpasses the formulaic postcolonial and decolonial defiant mode of non-Western agency to indicate a complicated “dialogical-developmental notion of non-Western agency” that defies “mechanical and linear trajectories of causation” and remains “devoid of any telos or particular order to constitute various intellectual traditions” (Bayly, 2023). The successive segments of the paper apply this framework of relational sociology to analyze the polymorphous form of non-Western agency illustrated by Kerala’s subnational approach, i.e., the basic needs approach that evolved alongside the international networks of global governance in the 1960s-70s. A comprehensive study of this approach shows how it is

possible to overcome the forms of essentialist spatial dualist categories, e.g. “national versus international,” “provincial versus global,” and “first/second versus third worlds” thereby developing a novel way to grasp global governance that prevents reinforcements of a West-non-West divide.

Shaped by a critique of the colonial experience and the Cold War dynamics, the emergent Indian state project under the leadership of the Jawaharlal Nehru-led Indian National Congress, in the wake of independence, was built around the legitimizing discourses of “self-reliance, economic development, protecting individual rights, internationalism, responsible governance and democratic accountability” (Chacko, 2015). This formed the core of India’s state institutions built around a social democracy with a federal polity. This was the culmination of a stretched anti-colonial struggle dominated by the Indian National Congress (INC) – a national political party composed of various leftist and rightist thinkers and activists. Nevertheless, throughout the struggle (and even after India’s official independence in 1947), the dominance of the INC was contested by various political formations on the left and the right. The major challenge came from the Communist Party of India (CPI). The CPI was the second largest opposition party in the national elections of 1951 (Gupta, 1972). Enthused by the Communist internationalist ideological currents of the Soviet Union (Sreekumar, 2025), the CPI (successor of the Congress Socialist Party that operated within the INC) won Kerala’s first state elections. Kerala was formed as a state within India’s federal polity in 1957 by amalgamating the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, as well as the Malabar region from the British province of Madras. Characterized by the one of the earliest democratically elected Communist government and one of the largest communist movements in the democratic world, Kerala has often been a site of scholarly fascination (Mattumanni, 2024). Despite the dominance of the INC at the national level as well as increasing factionalism that plagued the CPI, the broad Communist project, signified by the CPI and the CPI(M),¹ exerted a largely uncontested mode of hegemony within the subnational region of Kerala between the 1930s and the 1970s. This hegemony was based on consensual support from the workers’ and peasants’ social movements that worked under the auspices of the Communist party formations from the 1930s onward (Mannathukkaren, 2021). Though the CPI opposed the civilizational exceptionalism of the INC (Haug & Roychoudhury, 2023), its subnational project, riding on “egalitarian developmentalism” and “socialist leftism,” remained driven by various thoughts that did not fundamentally challenge the broader nation-statist project in which they were imbricated (Devika, 2007). Rather, it fashioned a subnational development project that evolved both “concomitantly with” and “differently from” its national counterpart (Rosa, 2014).

Inspired by the Marxist-Leninist discourses from the Soviet Union, the CPI connoted the future of Kerala in terms of “the inexorable but disruptive development of industrial capitalism, the making of the working class, the inevitability of class struggle, and gradual progress toward a socialist future” (Damodaran & Ali, 1975). Though the Communist parties did not enjoy unquestioned political power, their imagination of egalitarian developmentalism was visible in their consistent emphasis on the “welfare statist” and “redistributionist”

¹ The CPI(M) (Communist Party of India (Marxist)) was formed from the split of the CPI in 1964 in the wake of the 1962 Indo-China War. While both competed against each other in Kerala in the 1960s and 1970s, their primary disagreement was tactical in terms of their orientation vis-à-vis the INC. Both however were unified by the broader ethos of subnational egalitarian developmentalism (Hunter, 1972).

policies within the region of Kerala (Devika, 2007). The sustained connections with the workers' and peasants' social movements resulted in constant pressures for significant budgetary allocations for "health" and "education" (Prakash, 2007). Besides, the Communist parties' continual agitation and administration policies led to a broad consensus in Kerala over the need for "land reforms," i.e., the legal efforts to create a more equitable ownership and regulation of land in India. Despite deep-rooted class interests, the support of the Communist parties to civil society demands for land reforms resulted in the most radical land distribution interventions in the country (Oommen, 2018). While the initial views of Kerala's CPI accorded a predominant role to class struggles in opposition to India's centralized planning process, the electoral gains of the CPI followed by a brutal suppression of violent Communist class struggles by the Indian nation-state between 1948-51 led to its progressive deradicalization (Prashad, 2007). The growing proximities between India and the Soviet Union under Nikita Khrushchev, and the adoption of socialist aspirations in the Indian constitution further mellowed down CPI's radical gestures (Gupta, 1972). All these advancements increased the engagement of the CPI with the Indian nation-state within the ambit of democratic communism. This indicated an acceptance of the role of national government in Kerala's subnational project. By the end of the 1960s, this subnational project began to explore the modes of state-led egalitarian developmentalism involving social welfarism, economic growth, and redistribution, primarily aided by the experts (Devika, 2007).

At the national level, the Nehruvian vision of democratic planned development became vulnerable to multiple contestations, e.g., the subnational contestations from Kerala by the late 1960s (Chacko, 2018). The then CPI(M) chief minister of Kerala, E. M. S. Namboodiripad, voiced several grievances against the centralized planning process in India (e.g., the centralized fiscal powers hampering the development of Kerala), the inefficiencies in implementing the social welfarist policies related to health and education, and the class character of the Indian nation-state hindering nation-wide land redistribution attempts. To initiate a debate on these issues, Namboodiripad organized a conference that was attended by politicians and dissident experts who represented the prominence of socialist leftism in Kerala's egalitarian developmentalist project (Kerala State Planning Board, 1968). This egalitarian developmentalist project emphasized the role of "economic experts" who constructed the world in technocratic terms (Mudge, 2018). It is important to recall that the specialization of "economics" as a discipline was followed by the "the framing of public policy in the language of this discipline" in the first half of the 21st century across the West (Tribe, 2021). This corresponded to the rise of crusade-like narratives of economic experts who sought to act as "apolitical forces" in materializing economic development in the increasingly decolonizing Third World. This was instrumental in forming a "positivist" view of economic development in the 1950s-60s whereby the goal of development was "economic growth." "Poverty" (or lack of development) was conceptualized as "income" and "consumption" related policy-problems (St Clair, 2004). Due to the legitimized role of economic experts in planning and supervising economic growth, many nationalist non-Western leaders invited the expertise of Western social democratic thinkers (Webster, 2011). The planning process of India was no different as it embraced the inflow of "top statisticians, scientists, planners, economists and econometricians" who were guided by sheer solidarities with democratic planned development (Saith, 2008). The central government's designing of

five-year plans for development and the establishment of national institutes like the Delhi School of Economics and the Indian Statistical Institute consolidated the prominence of economic experts in securing economic development across the country, including Kerala.

However, the inadequacies of democratic planned development devised by economic experts came under critical scrutiny within the epistemic communities in the 1960s. The amplified focus on industrialization (at the expense of agriculture) and the persistence of mass poverty along with youth unemployment led to academic disagreements among economic experts (Chakravarty, 2024). This was intricately connected to the general developmental crises across the globe. During the 1960s, the dissatisfaction with the continuity of global poverty led to widespread criticism of “economistic growth paradigm.” It paved the way for inaugurating the distinct field of “development studies” with the founding of the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex in Britain (Harriss, 1998). Even in India, multiple scholarly networks emerged that vigorously contested the Nehruvian vision of democratic planned development (Kerala State Planning Board, 1968). While their grievances with the Nehruvian vision of democratic planned development were diverse, they were united in deriving lessons from the vantage point of Kerala’s subnational project. After the conference organized by Namboodiripad, the politicians as well as epistemic communities agreed that the inefficient enforcement of redistributive land reforms, the laggards in providing social amenities of health and education, and the inadequate politico-economic federalization impeded economic development (Harriss, 1998). In 1968, for the first time it was possible to witness a crystallized political-epistemic convergence on the issues of egalitarian developmentalism. This coincided with the formation of the state planning board in Kerala. In 1971, another defining moment in this convergence emerged with the launch of the Centre for Development Studies (CDS).

The CDS was established under the leadership of K. N. Raj, a charismatic economist who was the vice chancellor of the Delhi School of Economics and represented the strand of dissident socialist leftism in vogue, highly critical of the national planning process (Kannan, 2011). The CDS received the patronage of the then Communist chief minister of Kerala, C. Achutha Menon, who played a major role in institutionalizing the distinctive discipline of “development studies” in India. With the formation of a state planning board in Kerala in 1968, the CDS started to assist Kerala’s developmentalism. The economist K. N. Raj discerned, “while working with his new team of researchers at the Centre, that Kerala had very high levels of literacy and commendable achievements in the field of health” regardless of its apparently low per capita income (Kannan, 2011). These observations found resonance against the new backdrop of the weakening economistic growth paradigm and a broader consensus on the need for redistribution and fulfilling basic needs (Kannan, 2011). In due course, these observations contributed to the co-creation of Kerala model and the basic needs approach to global governance. Noticeably, even as the preliminary thinking on the Kerala model remained rooted in a non-Western region of India, its formation featured a “West–non-West relational agency” intersecting political and scholarly networks across the world. Apart from engaging with the internationalist socialist concepts anchored in the Soviet Union, Kerala’s political-epistemic community was linked to the scholarly networks straddling the West and the non-West. K. N. Raj, for instance, completed his PhD from the London School of Economics (LSE) and was affiliated to the scholarly networks of development studies in the UK, US, and Sri Lanka (Centre for Development Studies, 2021). His worldviews were

shaped by multiple stints at various institutions of global governance, including the ILO and the World Bank (Centre for Development Studies, 2021). Strikingly, the co-creation of the Kerala model and the basic needs approach to global governance refutes the regular clashes that occur along the polarities of “national versus international,” “provincial versus global” and “first/second world vs third world.” In so doing, the Kerala model thwarts methodological nationalism and puts forward an alternative subnational approach to global governance that strengthens the non-essentialist outlook of the Global IR research programme.

4. A Subnational Approach to Global Governance: The Move Toward Global IR

Far from the silos of the West and the non-West, it was the West–non-West relational agency that propelled the complex trajectory of Kerala’s subnational approach to global governance. This approach reflected a drastic shift in worldwide global development thinking. The persisting problems of poverty and unemployment in the Third World despite the increasing rates of economic growth occupied the centre stage in the global governance debates in the 1960s-70s. Several intellectuals located in global scholarly circuits of development, e.g., Dudley Seers, Mahbub Ul Haq, and David Morse, started to question the foundations of economic growth paradigm. This, in turn, resulted in a search for new alternatives to “development beyond growth.” The ideas of “employment, equality, poverty eradication, and basic needs fulfilment” molded the new development strategies (Arndt, 1992). These ideas were circulated through the key sites of global governance like the World Bank, the ILO and the UNDP (Arndt, 1992). While these key sites are well recognized in mainstream development literature, another critical site of the Committee for Development Planning (CDP) remains often understated. With the decade of 1971-1980 designated as the second UN development decade, the CDP was established as an advisory body of experts for development planning in 1966. K N Raj, the founder of Kerala’s CDS, was also a member of the CDP from 1969 to 1977. During his personal communications, Jan Tinbergen, the Nobel-Prize winning economist who was the chairman of the CDP, encouraged K. N. Raj to pursue his research on the development experience of Kerala.

The CDP was tasked with the review and commissioning of the development studies that could be pivotal for the UN policy plans (United Nations, 1975b). The CDP began seminal debates on basic needs fulfilment and its linkages with redistribution. The 1972 CDP report not only discussed the scourge of mass poverty but also explained how the assurance of minimum level of living required redistribution of income and consumption, including the measures of land reforms (United Nations, 1972). While Kerala’s land reforms had already attracted international attention (Chenery et al., 1974), K. N. Raj’s social capital as an economist resulted in the UN financing of a study titled *Poverty, Unemployment and Development Policy: A Case Study with Reference to Kerala*. The report on the findings of this study was published in 1975. The report alluded to the benefits of Kerala’s subnational project, especially its public health services, educational mechanisms, and food distribution provisions. Despite the absence of an explicit reference to the Kerala model, the study argued that the “experience of Kerala, which is a relatively poor region in India,” made impressive advances in the spheres of health and education...the experience of Kerala offered “some lessons for similar societies seeking social and economic advances” (United Nations, 1975b). This landmark report, that played a critical role in legitimizing the basic needs approach to

global governance, stated:

There is much to be said in favour of a pattern of development which gives attention to these minimum essentials of life...to include items such as educational and health services which help to build up human capital and make important qualitative differences to the whole process of development. (United Nations, 1975b)

The report is often credited as bringing a sea change in global development thinking as it reduced the obsession with income- and consumption-led economic growth while mainstreaming the ideas of equitable growth and basic needs fulfilment (S. M. Naseem, 2010). In 1976, the ILO's canonical report titled *Employment, Growth and Basic Needs: A One World Problem* firmly entrenched similar notions of targeted satisfaction of the basic needs through various measures, including the land reforms (United Nations, 1978). Kerala's imaginative interventions in the basic needs approach were also mentioned in the influential publications of the World Bank (Streeten & Burki, 1978; Streeten et al., 1981). It is no coincidence that the 1975 CDP report deemed the need for "internal subnational redistribution" as equally (if not more) paramount than "external global redistribution," as emphasized by the NIEO (United Nations, 1975a). In so doing, this report added a nuance to the Indian inputs to global development thinking that goes beyond the orthodox postcolonial state-centric inside-outside approach. Although the basic needs approach faded with the arrival of the phase of neoliberal market fundamentalism, the Kerala model survived (Shah, 2010). In the 1990s, the ideas allied to the basic needs approach were integrated into a "single coherent philosophical framework" focusing on "human development" and "capabilities approach." The capabilities approach was more radical than the original formulation of basic needs, going beyond the analysis of poverty and deprivation, to focus on well-being generally (Clark, 2008). With the sustained dissemination of these ideas through conferences, journals, books and professional associations (Arndt, 1992; Shah, 2010), the Kerala model represents an often ignored non-Western polymorphous political-epistemic agency that inflected and, in turn, got inflected by the local, national, and global networks of knowledge-based experts that collectively and continuously shaped the global governance discourses.

Within the framework of the Global IR research programme which endeavours to bridge the cognitive gaps between the West and the non-West, the methodical examination of this kind of non-Western polymorphous political-epistemic agency holds special significance, especially because it can effectively subvert the dangerous theoretical and practical implications of both geo-cultural-essentialism and methodological nationalism in multiple ways.

Firstly, the study of non-Western polymorphous political-epistemic agency in Global IR can surpass the essentialist dichotomy that postures the non-Western silence/defiance vis-à-vis the Western hegemony/dominance, thereby providing a more complex and accurate instantiation of political agency. The 1968 conference organized by the chief minister of Kerala was a defiant subnational expression contesting the Nehruvian national developmentalist project. But this defiant subnational expression was not a collective mode of resistance vi-a-vis the West; rather, its opposition was confined to the reformation of the universalist planning process by adding the particularist subnational view of egalitarian developmentalism. In this reformation, the strategy of defiance constituted momentary expressions of a broader polymorphous agency whose major operation occurred through

global flows of ideas, peoples and finances.

Secondly, the incremental integration of the findings of this kind of non-Western agency into Global IR can bring to the forefront even the untargeted political-epistemic outcomes that are not instrumentalist in orientation, and, therefore, remain overlooked. The basic needs approach was far from an instrumentalist strategic plan of action, unlike the NIEO. Obviously, Kerala's political-epistemic community did not deploy their subnational project to intentionally shape the basic needs approach. Far from a determinative line of causation, this subnational project delivered contingent political-epistemic outcomes, facilitated by the parallel conjectures of the ongoing global developmentalist crises whose results were largely unplanned or unknown.

Thirdly, the exploration of the West–non-West relational agency in Global IR can challenge the reified and homogenized geo-cultural binaries of the West vs the non-West. Even when the economist K. N. Raj remained geo-culturally rooted in a subnational space in the Global South, i.e., Kerala's political-epistemic community, he concurrently worked as the active member of Kerala's provincial institute of CDS as well as the UN's global organization of CDP, thereby pursuing a peripatetic nature of research, linking scholarly networks and governmental bodies in the UK, US, Sri Lanka, and so on, not just India, spanning the ILO, IDS and the United Nations, among others. This was also no different for the other members of the epistemic community who had stints had international organizations and worked across universities and research institutes in the West or 'First World'. As mentioned before, the political community of Kerala also had strong traditional links with the internationalist currents emanating from the Second World, thus challenging the spatial binaries between the first, second and third worlds (Mukherjee et al., 2020; Sreekumar, 2025).

Fourthly, the analysis of the West–non-West relational agency in Global IR can enable us to appreciate the continued relevance of certain approaches in contemporary world politics that are otherwise declared redundant in mainstream literature. The Kerala model continues to be an alternative test case as it faces new challenges from the incursions of neoliberalism. Since the basic needs approach survives in various academic and programmatic forms, it cannot be dismissed as an erstwhile expression of Western anxieties over the mid-1960s developmental crises (Arndt, 1992). While the Western anxieties in this regard cannot be denied, the continued presence of robust non-Western agency in shaping the basic needs approach should be recovered.

Finally, the focus on the West–non-West relational agency in Global IR can facilitate a rereading of the realities of world politics that does not reduce non-Western agency to the individual/collective embodiment of political resistance exclusively riding on the shoulders of nation-states. The project of Kerala included political actors who were not just confined to the subnational or national domains but also navigated through the transnational spheres of developmentalist agendas, thereby dynamically making back-and-forth movements across the circuits of global governance that spanned the nation, the sub-nation and the trans-nation.

5. Conclusion

The postcolonial treatment of non-Western agency often ends up situating the multifaceted global governance discussions on state-centric interventions, for instance, the NIEO venture carried out during the 1960s-70s. This, in turn, reduces the ideational inputs of the non-Western nation-states to a defiant gesture against Western hegemony/dominance. As a

corrective to these postcolonial reinforcements of a West–non-West divide in the study of world politics, this paper advanced a “Global IR alternative” grounded in the “relational sociology framework.” The relational sociology framework facilitated an understanding of the repetitively emerging contradictory and complementary moments in the West–non-West entanglements that shaped the global governance discussions in the 1960s–70s. In so doing, it did not lose sight of the subnational and transnational standings that continually operate in tandem with the national (state-centric) forces while collectively infusing the West–non-West entanglements as they determine the all-inclusive global governance agenda. To illustrate these points, the paper evoked an India-based subnational development project, i.e. the Kerala model. The analysis of the Kerala model in this paper disclosed the continued relevance of the basic needs approach as it informs the “human development” and “capability approach.” One can further explore the combined constitution of varied subnational projects alongside the global deliberations on “human capital” in the 1980s–90s. A study of this kind of “West–non-West relational agency” can assist in appreciating the complex non-Western agential instantiations in different corners of the world without immuring them under the dichotomy of silence/defiance vis-à-vis the Western hegemony/dominance. As part of the Global IR research programme, the careful interweaving of the seemingly disjointed arenas of the national, subnational, and transnational can go a long way in integrating regional dynamics into the study of global governance without succumbing to the postcolonial rigidities of either provincialism or globalism.

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