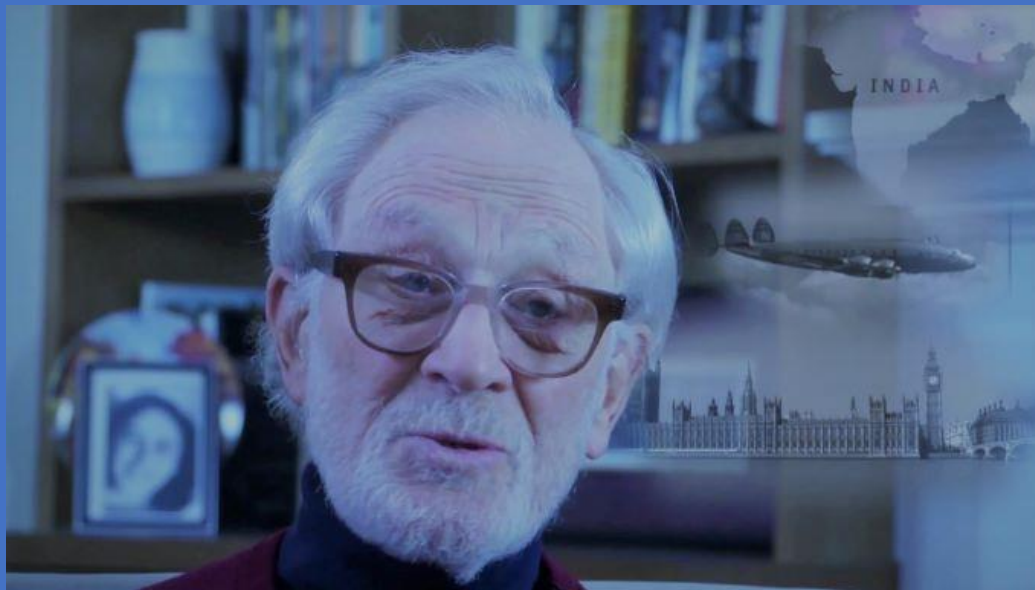




Michael Brecher, India and International Relations (IR)

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Walking down the corridors of the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) library in the 1980s, one could barely escape meeting scholars with intellectual acumen moving around. As a novice in foreign affairs, I too had unintended encounters with many of them. The Sapru House (ICWA building) in New Delhi was already known as an international affairs public sphere, with diplomats and foreign affairs scholars meeting frequently. It also had a cafeteria adjacent to its premises where scholars from the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) also gathered for informal conversations and engagements. IDSA was housed in the Sapru House at that time. Earlier, the Indian School of International Studies (SIS) was also functioning there, until Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) was set up in the late 1960s. SIS was later merged with the JNU faculty.

In the evenings, the lawns of the majestic Sapru House would witness scholars coming for a small break after the day-long

strenuous work in the library. One evening, Professor T.T. Poullose, who had served as Chairman of the Disarmament Division of JNU, approached me with his characteristic smile and asked, didn't you get Brecher's book? In fact, it was his second reminder—knowing my subject of doctoral thesis—to read Michael Brecher's doctoral work, which had come as a book, *The Struggle for Kashmir* (1953). Though I was familiar with Brecher's widely reviewed political biography of Jawaharlal Nehru (1959), I had kept his Kashmir volume pending for one or other reason. Professor Poullose said that it was here, in the Sapru House, that Michael Brecher worked on another volume on V. K. Krishna Menon, in the 1960s, based on his long interviews with Menon. I knew this volume was very important for several reasons, insofar as Menon was almost like a de facto foreign affairs minister, as Brecher said.

The Indian IR scholars of the 1950s and 1960s fondly remembered Brecher for his great works on Nehru, Krishna Menon, Kashmir, and Indian politics. But little did the Indian academia, since then, recognise him as a great scholar of IR with outstanding contributions to the International Crisis Behaviour (ICB) literature. In fact, much of Brecher's academic world, since the 1970s, was devoted to exploring IR as a discipline with rich insights in empirical data, and he sustained this quest for fresh enquires within a liberal-pluralist IR for decades.

However, many would recall that Brecher had an important role in the founding of the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute (SICI), way back in the 1960s. It was Brecher who mooted the idea of

setting up such an institution to the visiting Indian Finance Minister T. T. Krishnamachari who responded to his proposal positively. What followed was an official joint statement in 1967 issued by Canada and India, which eventually resulted in the formation of SICI.

The demise of Professor Michael Brecher—on January 16, 2022—came at a time when the discipline of IR had just passed through its ‘uncelebrated’ centennial across world academia, particularly with the increasing limitations imposed by the pandemic over the last two years. Brecher was the R.B. Angus Professor at McGill University, and he had a long career as an active academic, which spanned over almost seven decades since the mid-fifties. A scholar of international repute, Brecher has been held in high esteem for his immense contributions to the vast corpus of knowledge in International Relations (IR)—from international crisis, war, and conflict to foreign policy and decision making.

Brecher’s Passage to India

It was Brecher’s doctoral research on the subject of the Kashmir conflict at Yale University that later prompted him to visit India. That was the beginning of his deeper interest in decision-making (DM) as an approach to the study of International Relations, especially with the publication of a major volume by Richard C. Snyder, H. W. Bruck, and Burton Sapin on DM. The studies that proliferated since the 1950s branched out under different DM models and theories. Yet, one popular notion shared

by all was ‘field research’—promoting IR scholars to engage with decision-makers/policymakers across the world in understanding the complex situations of conflict, war, and international crisis. This is still a challenging domain of IR studies where scholars rarely get source materials from the horse’s mouth. However, as a young scholar, Brecher was fortunate to have met many—from Lord Mountbatten, Clement Atlee, Jawaharlal Nehru, V.K. Krishna Menon, to Ben Gurion, and a lot of others.

As Brecher himself wrote, it was the Nuffield Foundation as well as the Canadian Social Science Research Council that facilitated his research by providing a travel fellowship to undertake visits to the UK and India in the mid-1950s. Brecher’s stay in India during 1955-56 (and subsequent visits) provided him with great opportunities to interact with several leaders, most prominently with Nehru and Menon. Brecher’s *Nehru: A Political Biography* (1959) was perhaps one of the earliest of several biographies which shed light on many facets of Jawaharlal Nehru’s personality. Having travelled with Nehru and spent long hours and days with him, Brecher had occasions to understand Nehru’s multifaceted personality. Brecher wrote that as prime minister, Nehru was “more the ‘giant among pygmies’ than ‘first among equals’” (Brecher 1959: 15).

The timing of Brecher’s visit was quite significant. The period witnessed several regional and international developments, which included Pakistan’s joining of Western sponsored military alliances, the Bandung Conference, visits of Chinese and Soviet

leaders to India, the Suez crisis, the Hungarian uprising, the Soviet intervention, etc. Notwithstanding differences between India and Canada over a variety of issues during the cold war, Escott Reid, the Canadian High Commissioner to India (1952-57), was quite receptive to Nehru and, inevitably, the bilateral ties between the two countries assumed the character of “a special relationship” (Reid 1981: 24). Later, Reid in his memoirs said that his “views of what should be done to make the world safer and saner were much the same as Nehru’s” (Reid 1989). Brecher and Reid obviously played a significant role in changing Nehru’s perceptions of Canada under the cold war conditions. Yet, both were sceptical about Nehru’s cautious approach to international issues.

Writing on the Soviet intervention in 1956, Brecher noted that initially “the lack of direct knowledge and Soviet flattery inclined (Nehru) to disbelieve Western reports of Russian perfidy and ruthlessness. But as the evidence accumulated, he moved towards a mild censure of Soviet actions, reluctantly it appeared. His performance during this tragic affair disappointed many persons, both within India and abroad” (Ibid: 16). Nehru told Brecher that the Hungarian developments showed that communism, if “imposed on a country from outside, cannot last. I mean to say (a characteristic expression) if Communism goes against the basic national spirit, it will not be accepted. In those countries where it has allied itself with nationalism it is, of course, a powerful force. As in China, in Russia, too (Ibid: 23). Nehru further admitted that he could not see “the value of a military approach to these problems.”

Nehru told Brecher: “This approach can no longer solve any problems. Besides, I do not see why some people in the West think the Russians are out to conquer other peoples. They are not interested in this. It is only when a neighbour is hostile that they try to weaken it. The Russian people want peace. So do the Americans. In fact, they are so similar, the Russians and the Americans. If only they could agree to end the Cold War” (Ibid).

Brecher wrote that “the effect of these crises on the Prime Minister was profound. His buoyant spirit and vivid enthusiasm have been less in evidence since 1956. They have largely given way to a more sober appreciation of the facts of Indian and international life. It is as if Nehru discovered India afresh, not in a romantic setting but in all its harsh realities. With this rediscovery there came deeper insight, a greater awareness of the intractable nature of certain problems” (Ibid:17).

Brecher also made comparisons between Nehru and other leaders. But some of them obviously would have come not from his direct interactions, but from other sources. For instance, Sardar Patel, who died in 1950, figured prominently in his comparison with Nehru. Brecher says: “Nehru is a man of great charm, generous to a fault, sensitive and aesthetically inclined, impulsive and emotional. Patel was generally dour and ruthless, unimaginative and practical, blunt in speech and action, cool and calculating. Nehru disliked political intrigue; he was a lonely and solitary leader, above group loyalties. Patel was a master of machine politics. Nehru was

the voice of the Congress, Patel its organizer (and Gandhi its inspiration).” Elsewhere he says: “Nehru is a master of words and used this technique brilliantly to carry the message of independence and socialism to the far corners of the country. Patel had undisguised contempt for speech-making. He rarely toured the countryside. And except in his native Gujarat he never established a rapport with the masses, partly because of his disdain for the crowd.” He continues: “The only elements in the countryside who looked to the Sardar for leadership were the landlords and the orthodox Hindus. In the cities, too, they commanded the loyalty of different groups, Nehru the radicals and Patel the conservatives. Nehru appealed to the working class, the bulk of the Westernized intelligentsia, the young men and the minorities. Patel drew his support from the business community, orthodox Hindus, senior civil servants and most of the party functionaries. Nehru was (and still is) the outstanding idealist of the Congress and its leading exponent of socialism, a broad international outlook, a secular state and a modern approach. Patel was the realist par excellence, a staunch defender of capitalism, ‘national interests,’ Hindu primacy and traditionalism” (Ibid: 152-53).

Brecher had realistically assessed India’s foreign policy strategy of non-alignment and argued that the country’s “economic weakness and the basic goal of development provide powerful inducements to the policy of non-alignment. The doors must be kept open to all possible sources of aid, Western and Soviet, if the desired economic targets are to be achieved” (Ibid: 216). Brecher,

who had already conducted extensive research on Kashmir, was pessimistic about the state of affairs in India-Pakistan relations. This holds true even after seven decades. According to him, “The price of discord has already been exorbitant. The constant threat of renewed war over Kashmir has resulted in a very high defence expenditure. This, in turn, has had grave economic repercussions, notably the slowing-down of much-needed development programmes in both countries. Tension has also reduced the flow of goods and services, for some time eliminating it almost completely. Propaganda war has been endemic, heightening the sense of insecurity among minorities, and stimulating a continuous migration.”

He says: “What makes the picture especially distressing is that no one seems capable of finding a way out of the impasse.” Brecher writes: “The wounds of Partition are still deep. The secession of Kashmir and its inclusion in Pakistan would, in the opinion of Nehru and others, lead to a strengthening of Hindu communal forces, increasing distrust of the Muslim minority, and a clamour for war with Pakistan. It is this which deters them from carrying out their pledge to hold a U.N.-supervised plebiscite though most Indians remain convinced of Pakistan’s aggression, of the U.N.’s dereliction of duty, and of their legal and moral claim to Kashmir (Ibid: 222).

After seventy or more years, Brecher’s observation remains true as it were: “The prospects for a friendly solution seem no brighter now than at any time in the past. It is pointless at this stage to apportion blame for the dispute. One thing is certain: the

wrangling has accomplished nothing thus far; and in the absence of a bold new approach, the future of India and Pakistan will continue to be plagued by the impasse over Kashmir” (Ibid: 219).

In the *Struggle for Kashmir*, Brecher had already noted that “the failure to bring about a solution of the conflict was due partly to the inept handling by the UN; but he had also felt that the deeper causes of the conflict would make a solution possible only through an effort at direct political settlement between the contestants” (Brecher 1953). The UN also later concurred with this reading when its Representative, Frank P. Graham, submitted his final report to the world body.

Brecher was critical of Nehru in his handling of bureaucracy. He says that though “Nehru himself has frequently criticized the central bureaucracy as ‘an administrative jungle,’” “the blame for this state of affairs rests largely with him. The problem is not that Nehru does not discharge his responsibilities; he over-discharges them” (Ibid: 241-42). Brecher goes on to say: “The fact is that Nehru is an inept administrator. Decisions are concentrated in his hands to an incredible degree. He lacks both the talent and temperament to co-ordinate the work of the various ministries. Nor has he ever shown a capacity or inclination to delegate authority. The result has been the ‘administrative jungle’ which he bemoans” (Ibid).

Had this not paid a heavy price in 1962, when India had to fight a major war with China even as different sections of the government started blaming each other for the lack of coordination?

Doesn’t this appear relevant even after several decades when the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) has “unchallenged power” and “over-discharging” functions?

Brecher’s *India and World Politics: Krishna Menon’s View of the World* (1968) remains one of the most comprehensive works on Krishna Menon. Jairam Ramesh, who wrote another comprehensive biography of Krishna Menon, says that Brecher “had produced an astonishing book which has not been rivalled since” (Ramesh 2019: 648). The major source for book was the record of an extended talk between Brecher and Krishna Menon from November 1964 to May 1965. These lively exchanges were tape-recorded and Menon edited the transcript in 1966. The subjects dealt with in the volume are wide-ranging, from non-alignment to China, Pakistan, UN, Bandung, Suez, Hungary etc. (Brecher 1968). Jairam Ramesh writes: “No student of world history of the 1950s can afford not to read Brecher’s book. There was one topic that Krishna Menon did not speak much about and that was Nehru” (Ramesh 2019: 649). Obviously, Menon knew that Brecher had already made much of Nehru in his biography.

Brecher and International Relations

Michael Brecher had a passion for studying foreign policies and international crises through a modified matrix of DM framework. He spent a lot of time with decision makers across world capitals to study in-depth the context and perceptions in the making of strategic decisions. Way back in 1963, Brecher had raised issues of ‘Levels of Analysis’ in IR studies in his [World Politics](#) article. He pointed out that IR “specialists have all but ignored the relevance of their discipline to Asia” and that the Asian studies “have not as yet, however, applied the insights of international relations to an area framework” (Brecher 1963). Many of his subsequent studies went in that direction. His works on *Israel, the Korean War and China* (1974), *Political Leadership and Charisma: Nehru, Ben-Gurion, and Other 20th Century Political Leaders* (2016), *Crises in World Politics: Theory and Reality* (1993), *A Study of Crisis*, with Jonathan Wilkenfeld (1997), *International Political Earthquakes* (2008), *Dynamics of the Arab-Israel Conflict: Past and Present* (2017) are the best examples.

Crises in World Politics is a significant contribution to the understanding of international crises from different vantage points. He placed the notion of ‘crises’ within a broader setting and processes of factors that are involved in the initiation, escalation, termination, and consequences of international crises. His basic objective was “to create a theory of crisis and crisis behaviour.” Brecher was also trying to help augment policy-makers’ capabilities to manage decision-making under stress. Many scholars considered

Brecher’s ICB project “the most ambitious attempt so far to integrate the multitude of approaches in all the subfields of crisis research” (Brecher 1993).

The volume *Millennial Reflections on International Studies* Brecher edited with Frank P. Harvey (2002) is undoubtedly a rich repertoire of IR studies with 45 renowned scholars having contributed to our understanding of the limits and possibilities of theory and practice in the discipline. The themes discussed are wide-ranging from realism, institutionalism, critical perspectives, feminist theory and gender studies to methodology (formal modelling, quantitative, and qualitative), foreign policy analysis, international security and peace studies, and international political economy. In this volume, Brecher and Harvey were deeply sceptical about the progress and knowledge accumulation in IR studies stating that the scholars seemed to have problem in “agreeing on what they have accomplished” so far. It is obviously for these reasons that many in the volume have put across a synthesis formula—variously referred to as a “paradigmatic synthesis” of IR studies.

Two years earlier, Brecher became President of International Studies Association (ISA), a prestigious global platform of IR Scholars. In his [ISA Presidential Address in 1999](#), Brecher called for a pluralist-synthesis approach in the discipline of IR. The core of his address goes as follows:

The state of International Studies as the 20th century draws to a close is disconcerting. Among the shortcomings are intolerance of competing

paradigms, models, methods, and findings; a closed-mind mentality; a tendency to research fashions; the increasingly-visible retreat from science in International Studies; and the low value placed by most scholars on cumulation of knowledge. Flawed dichotomies are pervasive: theory versus history as approaches to knowledge; deductive versus inductive paths to theory; a horizontal (breadth) versus vertical (in-depth) focus of inquiry, based upon aggregate data (quantitative) vs. case study (qualitative) methods of analysis, using large 'N' vs. small 'N' clusters of data; system vs. actor as the optimal level of analysis, and closely related, unitary vs. multiple competing actors; rational calculus vs. psychological constraints on choice, and the related divide over reality vs. image as the key to explaining state behaviour; and neo-realism vs. neo-institutionalism as the correct paradigm for the study of world politics.

On the eve of a new century, it seems to me important to reaffirm that pluralism is necessary for renewal in International Studies. It would clear the air among argumentative scholars and as such is a precondition to progress. We must recognize that no school has a monopoly of truth and that continuing fratricide among paradigms and methodologies poses a grave risk that the embryonic discipline will implode. However, pluralism alone is not sufficient to achieve our goal. The way forward also requires a sustained effort to move from the thesis/antithesis syndrome to synthesis in every facet of the field—approaches, theory, methods, and empirical findings. Attempts must be made to build upon separate islands of knowledge so as to achieve a theory of how international systems evolve and change, and how actors behave under conditions of stress and in the “normal” course of

interstate relations; we have been locked into the false dichotomies discussed earlier for too long. Without the integration of knowledge, revised from time to time in the light of fresh theoretical insights, improved methods, and new evidence, International Studies is destined to remain a collection of bits and pieces of explanation of reality and behaviour (Brecher 1999).

Years later, Brecher's work *A Century of Crisis and Conflict in the International System* (2018) again reflected many of his arguments that he had made in the 1999 ISA Presidential Address. Brecher reminded that “international stability is—or should be—a high value for all states and nations/peoples in an epoch characterized by weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), the persistence of anarchy despite the proliferation of international and transnational regimes, the increase of ethnic and civil wars, and the growing preoccupation with worldwide terrorism” (Brecher 2018). Justifying the ICB project, he said that its objective “has been to enrich and deepen our knowledge of international crisis and interstate conflict in the twentieth century and beyond.” Analysing the state of affairs in the discipline, he also noted that “prominent advocates of contending approaches in International Studies have not been immune to crass intellectual intolerance.”

Brecher says: “As someone who has learned from many of the pioneers and later ‘schools’ but is a prisoner or apostle of none, I present another answer to this elusive question. In particular, I will examine why this field of knowledge, using the terms, International Relations (IR), World Politics (WP), and International Studies (IS)

interchangeably, has not yet crystallized into a mature social science discipline” (Ibid). Brecher wrote that many years ago he had set out the case for ‘many paths to knowledge’ and had “made a plea for pluralism in International Studies.” He further said that he was “a pluralist in the matter of research strategy: there are, it seems to me, many paths to knowledge; no single path has a monopoly of truth. In this I was influenced by my South Asia experience, especially the Hindu adage that no religion has a monopoly of the truth; all can claim to know only a part of the whole. Translating this to the enduring issue of the optimal path to knowledge, I became committed, very early, to pluralism in methodology” (Ibid).

Brecher put across “in-depth case studies of perceptions and decisions by a single state, using a micro-level model of crisis” that he had “designed to guide research on foreign policy crises for individual states and to facilitate rigorous comparative analysis of findings about state behaviour under varying stress.” He called this approach “structured empiricism” which promotes gathering and organizing “data on diverse cases around a set of common questions, permitting systematic comparison” (Ibid). However, Brecher knew that comparative case study alone “cannot uncover the full range of findings about any phenomenon in world politics.” For this, he suggested “a second path” which should promote “studies in breadth of aggregate data on crises over an extended block of time and space.” Here, he argued, the research programme should be shaped by ‘theory’ and ‘history,’ a synthesis of the two.

Brecher remained convinced that (i) despite the critique of Post-Modernism, Positivism is still a valid basis for creating and accumulating knowledge about state behaviour and international system change” (ii) “nation-states are no longer the virtually exclusive actors in the international system, the status they enjoyed during the three centuries of the Westphalia system” (iii) the end of the Cold War has not ushered in the ‘Nirvana’ of cooperation, as evident in the ubiquity of conflict, crisis, and war between and within states, though the domain of cooperation has dramatically expanded during the past 25 years” (iv) “violence played an important part in world politics in the 1990s and the early years of the new century, as in previous decades, centuries, and millennia, and is likely to continue to do so” (v) “nationalism has re-emerged as a primary force in world politics—in a new form, Ethnicity, which is manifested in the widespread demand for self-determination and secession” and (v) “Parsimony is undoubtedly a high scientific value, and, wherever possible, it should be sought, but it should not be forced on to the data.” Brecher said that the primary goal of all IR research is “not parsimony but accuracy in both the description and explanation of reality. The subject matter of crisis, conflict, and war, and, more generally, of world politics, is extraordinarily complex.” And Brecher “would rather forego parsimony than accuracy in the explanation of any complex issue in world politics” (Ibid).

Michael Brecher was always open and categorical in his position on scientific rationality in IR, which he appealed to scholars to incessantly explore in field studies. T.V. Paul, James McGill Professor of International Relations at McGill University—Brecher’s colleague and successor as President of ISA during 2016-17—said that his demise came after the death of another great scholar of South Asia, Professor Baldev Raj Nayar, in 2021. It was actually Brecher who brought Nayar to McGill. According to Paul, both Nayar and Brecher remained great role models for IR scholars, and they were so committed and meticulous in field research, always willing to take up challenges. As Paul remarked, Brecher’s ability to maintain the trust of leading political figures he met and interacted with was exceptional.

Admittedly, this is still a major challenge for IR scholars across the world—meeting the actual decision makers of foreign policy and bridging the gulf between the world of ‘facts’ and the ‘norms’ of international life. Michael Brecher, an accomplished scholar of great eminence, will remain as an inspiration to generations of scholars in both Political Science and International Relations.

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