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India's counterinsurgency knowledge: theorizing global position in wars on terror

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ABSTRACT

Within recent critical debates about the geographies and circulations of counterinsurgency knowledge, scholars have focused primarily on dominant centres of power and authority in the global North. Building a framework drawn from critical geography, this article decentres these locations and actors by exploring the global production and circulation of counterinsurgency knowledge from the vantage point of Indian strategic thinkers. Focusing on the work of the Indian think tank the Institute for Conflict Management (ICM), the article traces how Indian counterinsurgency knowledge has been produced, packaged and circulated transnationally since the late 1990s. It argues the power and utility that forms of counterinsurgency knowledge command – Indian or otherwise – are never reducible to the essential features of what actors or texts say. Rather, it suggests that counterinsurgency knowledge is produced through particular relations and locations of power-knowledge that define *what* they represent and *where* they fit in. It theorizes forms of counterinsurgency knowledge as positions within broader transnational forces, entwined with colonial histories of pacification. In doing so, it illuminates the contestations and forms of work involved in staging or organizing the world through practices that make some forms, actors, and locations important and relegate others to the peripheries of global politics.

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What makes methods of counterinsurgency or counterterrorism global? For many security experts and state officials, the reason is the threat, which is global, thus requiring a wide-reaching and universally applicable response. After 11 September 2001 this argument became commonplace, found in frequently issued statements from the George W. Bush administration about the character of terrorism.

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Terrorism is method that recognises no limits of law and knows no constraints of morality, of honour, of human compassion, or even minimal rules of warfare. Crucially, it transcends all international boundaries, and returns to consume the very systems and societies that create, support and sponsor it. [...] A victory for terrorism *anywhere* in the world is a victory for terrorism *everywhere*.¹

Yet, this paragraph was published a year before the so-called US-led 'war on terror' formally began. And it was not the work of Bush's speechwriters. Rather, it was written by Kanwar Pal Singh Gill – better known as K.P.S. Gill, the infamous retired Director General of Police (DGP) in the Indian state of Punjab. Gill wrote this together with the Indian strategic thinker Dr. Ajai Sahni in the introduction to their co-edited *Terror and Containment* published in 2000.

In India, Gill's legacy in fighting secessionist militants seeking an independent state of Khalistan in Punjab is well-known and remains highly controversial, even among Gill's own peers.² The insurgency in Punjab resulted in the estimated deaths of tens of thousands³ and the torture of countless others, atrocities that Gill had a direct hand in. The violence in Punjab played a key role in justifying the state of emergency imposed by Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi between 1975 and 1977; the institution of sweeping anti-terrorism laws; Gandhi's assassination by her Sikh bodyguards in 1984 and the wave of anti-Sikh pogroms following her death. The Khalistan movement and its surrounding violence transformed contemporary Indian society profoundly. Indeed, it represents an example of what Veena Das terms a 'critical event' in the sense that it reconfigured traditional categories of life, heroism and identity, which were in turn acquired by particular communities and actors and mobilized in the service of their political projects.⁴

During his life, Gill tirelessly promoted himself as an expert on counter-terrorism and counterinsurgency. Gill's supporters have credited him for being India's 'supercop' who singlehandedly crushed the movement for Khalistan. Before his death in 2017, Gill worked as a security advisor to current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. A 2018 popular biography portrays Gill as a national hero comparable to Gandhi, noting that 'If there is any cop who is a universal benchmark for great policing, he is Mr. Gill. His methods and policing techniques are panacea [*sic*] for all the law and order problems which are troubling the nations presently'.⁵

Beyond India, Gill's legacy is mainly known within diaspora communities as well as strategic and media circles. Gill's public image has been promoted through the Institute for Conflict Management (ICM), which Gill co-founded with Sahni in New Delhi in 1997. Though the international dimensions were already in place before the September 11th attacks, the universalist aspirations of the ICM's work became more explicit thereafter. An article published by the ICM in 2008 presents Gill's ideas as a specific counterinsurgency 'doctrine' and 'model for 21st century counter-terrorism', arguing: 'The

uniqueness of the Gill Doctrine lies in the fact that it offers a template for counter-terrorism which is potentially applicable across time and space'.⁶ In this sense, to theorize a 'global' counterinsurgency approach requires a local template whose particularities can be emphasized or de-emphasized as needed, including by traversing points on the military-police continuum. ICM is exemplary in its self-positioning with global circuits of counterinsurgent knowledge production.

Global South figures like Gill and Sahni rarely appear in critical scholarship on counterinsurgency and circuits of policing expertise, which have primarily focused on dominant centres of authority, albeit with recent exceptions.⁷ As a result, critical scholars in the global North can unwittingly reproduce the very colonial gaze they seek to undermine. At the same time, assertions of global or universal applicability are crucial for counterinsurgency experts to attempt to achieve legitimacy with domestic audiences, as they engage in internal bureaucratic and regional contests for hegemony. Building a framework drawn from critical geography, this article decentres dominant locations and actors by exploring the global production and circulation of counterinsurgency knowledge from the vantage point of Indian strategic thinkers. Extending insights of Joseph Ansorge and Tarak Barkawi,⁸ I show that the power and utility that forms of counterinsurgency knowledge command – Indian or otherwise – are never reducible to the essential features of what actors or texts say. Rather, I suggest that counterinsurgency knowledge is produced through particular relations and locations of power-knowledge that define *what* they represent and *where* they fit in. Thus, I theorize forms of counterinsurgency knowledge as positions within broader transnational forces entwined with colonial histories of pacification.

I argue that shifting the focus away from centres of empire to seemingly more peripheral sites, practices and actors is analytically and politically productive in pushing debates about the transnational production and circulation of war-police knowledges further. This makes visible the often-overlooked contestations and forms of work in staging and organizing the world.⁹ Specifically, I argue that although Indian strategic analysts present Indian counterinsurgency doctrines as unique, *sui generis* and a far more sober and sophisticated alternative to US approaches, it is this very presentation that enables US counterinsurgency discourses to converge with Indian ones. The doctrinal specificity or accuracy of India's counterinsurgency approaches is an important debate in its own right,¹⁰ though not one which I evaluate here. Rather, shifting the focus away from this comparative frame to a relational analytic, my focus on the ICM's work reveals a core tension in its desire to articulate universalist claims from a unique, situated vantage point outside of dominant (western) forms of knowledge. This tension is a productive one. By attempting to design a suite of security tools and methods that are both exceptional and universal, ICM sustains Indian counterinsurgency's position as an alternative to western counterinsurgency approaches, in spite of their common colonial and imperial genealogies and contemporary

convergences and aspirations to globally authoritative status. By tracing ICM's work, this article draws attention to the multiple and overlapping temporal, geographic and doctrinal origins of the war on terror but also the boundary-drawing practices at work in global counterinsurgency discourse.

I begin by conceptualizing the geographies of counterinsurgency knowledge. I then situate ICM's work within practitioner debates on Indian counterinsurgency. Following this, I trace ICM's knowledge-making practices, focusing on three dynamics. First, I grapple with how these practices have negotiated India's post-independence *location vis-à-vis* 'western'/international counterinsurgency knowledges. Second, I examine ICM's efforts to *position* India's long-standing counterinsurgency experience as part of global knowledge. Finally, I show how ICM materials have found their ways into centres of US empire. I conclude with a discussion about how an examination of ICM's work might further critical scholarship on global counterinsurgency.

Theorizing position

Over the last decade, there has been a renewed critical interest in the geographies and circulations of counterinsurgency knowledge. Extending earlier accounts of imperial and colonial policing and their global reverberations,¹¹ this body of literature provides empirically textured accounts of knowledge transmission, violence and race-making under empire.¹² The closely connected literature on pacification¹³ has developed powerful analytics to theorize the historical precursors of contemporary global policing projects. Thinking pacification trans-nationally and trans-temporally has troubled the fetishism of 'new' forms of violence and the problematic spatial binaries underpinning them. As Stuart Schrader argues, rather than representing them as ontologies, the 'foreign' and 'domestic' represent 'contested outcomes of social, political, and economic processes', which should be held 'together in a single analytic frame'.¹⁴

These discussions have geographic constraints. Their prevailing focus on experts and circuits of knowledge emanating from hegemonic centres of global power like the US, France, the UK and Israel makes sense, given the sheer intensity, reach and duration of these empires' pacification campaigns. Consequently, other counterinsurgency theatres have received more limited attention. Moreover, while reference to circulation, mobility and location are at the centre of rethinking the interfaces of war and police power, the ways that certain figures and places become central or peripheral is less well elaborated. At times, 'location' is presented as a stand-in for authoritativeness rather than a question to be interrogated.

Authoritative knowledge often aspires to placeless, but it is always necessarily located. As John Agnew notes, 'what knowledge becomes "normalized" or dominant and what is marginalized has something to do with who is doing

the proposing and where they are located'.¹⁵ What, then, is an authoritative location, or position, and how is it produced? 'Location', as Neil Smith and Cindi Katz note, 'fixes a point in space', typically through reference to latitude/longitude. 'Position', conversely, is inherently relational because it 'implies location *vis-à-vis* other locations and incorporates a sense of perspective on other places'.¹⁶ For this reason, India's position in global discourses of counterinsurgency knowledge is valuable because of its perpetual status as outlier or outsider. Location, as in fixed coordinates in space, is crucial for counterinsurgency as practice, but by looking at knowledge production this article has a different aim: to analyze how a counterinsurgency doctrine becomes global or universalizes its particularities, which requires analyzing its position in broader ensembles of located discourses and doctrines.

In furthering this relational focus, postcolonial and decolonial scholarship provides key insights. Challenging the Eurocentrism of security and war studies, such approaches have grappled with questions of location.¹⁷ Scholars have not merely suggested that location shapes interpretations of violence but also crucially that locations are themselves dynamic and politically contested.¹⁸ These studies have provincialized the west and developed alternative worldings of conflict that present 'east and west, orient and occident, first and third worlds, metropole and postcolony, north and south, as spaces that are non-foundational and constantly reproduced in relational terms'.¹⁹ Moreover, by decentering dominant sources of authority, these literatures provide alternative vantage points from which to theorize the transnational remakings of police power.²⁰

Inspired by Darryl Li's recent interrogation of location in jihad, I contribute to these discussions by attending to how universalist claims are articulated in relation to violence by foregrounding voices not typically associated with the universal. Rather than taking the universal and the particular 'as categories with fixed referents in the world', Li grapples with the drawing of a boundary between the two and 'the contests over how that line is drawn and redrawn'.²¹ Developing a robust relational understanding of position in discussions of global counterinsurgency knowledge enables us to conceptualize how disparate sites, knowledges and actors of counterinsurgency are stitched together whilst recovering the oft-overlooked tensions therein. Moreover, rather than approaching the relations of Indian counterinsurgency *vis-à-vis* other forms and locations as stable or pre-determined, my relational theorization enables a more dynamic understanding of how positions emerge as alternative *perspectives* on global counterinsurgency.

Positioning India's counterinsurgency experience

This article is part of a broader study of Indian counterinsurgency knowledge. Here I focus on ICM. I draw on an interview I conducted with Sahni and practitioner texts such as ICM books, journal articles, memoirs and briefings. Through this material we can trace how Indian counterinsurgency knowledge is produced, packaged and circulated transnationally.

Within mainstream and practitioner scholarship on Indian counterinsurgency, India's position *vis-a-vis* the west has long been cited as a key puzzle. This work has attempted to categorize the counterinsurgency doctrines of the Indian army²² and Indian police institutions.²³ While national in focus, this work has sought to integrate India's counterinsurgency 'experiences' into debates beyond South Asia. As Rajesh Rajagopalan has argued, 'The Indian Army has had more experience in counterinsurgency than almost any other country in the world'.²⁴ 'Despite such vast experience' Rajagopalan notes, 'little scholarly attention has been paid to the Indian Army's counterinsurgency experience and doctrine'.²⁵ Others more recently argue that despite the 'frenetic interest in COIN [counterinsurgency] theory', India's counterinsurgency 'experience' is 'Curiously missing' within these discussions.²⁶ In response, a number of strategic scholar-practitioners have attempted to analyse the 'Indian experience' of counterinsurgency as a source of 'lessons learned' for the world,²⁷ sometimes drawing on ICM's work.

ICM has sought to codify and represent India's counterinsurgency experience as a body of practice and expertise. And while a number of think tanks in India today focus on closely related topics,²⁸ ICM remains one of the most substantial, valued and influential. Since 1997, it has published materials including books, threat maps, databases, case studies, reports and articles in its flagship journal *Faultlines*, edited by Sahni and hosted on ICM's website the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) (<https://www.satp.org>). The SATP provides an open-access archive of such knowledge, offering in-depth, empirically grounded research from the vantage point of South Asia. Some of these works are couched in a language of 'counterterrorism' and others in that of 'counterinsurgency'. Some are also more concerned with military over police institutions and vice versa. These distinctions are not entirely insignificant and correspond to the various fads around how forms of state violence shift in naming over time.²⁹ Rather than treating these descriptors as reflecting separate and distinct phenomena or definitive shifts in discourse, I group them together under the banner of counterinsurgency, acknowledging that operational differences always arise, creating mismatches with knowledge products that produce further so-called 'innovations'.

Making Indian counterinsurgency knowledge

In this section, I trace ICM's knowledge-making practices beginning in the late 1990s through to the present and their uptake beyond South Asia. While the orientation and objectives of these practices have shifted over time, they have always been irreducibly transnational.

Challenging 'convention'

ICM's work represents a self-conscious attempt to codify and represent 'Indian experience' as a source of valuable lessons in fighting terror, terrorism and insurgency. When I spoke with Sahni in 2019, he described this work as follows:

We would like to extract these trends and patterns of terrorism and counter-terrorism, so that they become an integral part of policy evaluation and formulation.

Early ICM materials suggest that this core imperative was in place from the outset. As the SATP's launch statement notes, 'if you wish to change the world, you must first accept and understand it as it is. The SOUTH ASIA TERRORISM PORTAL is an endeavour to achieve such an understanding of the world of terror'.³⁰ *Terror and Containment* similarly positions terrorism as the 'greatest affliction of our age'.³¹ It targets strategic thinkers and practitioners involved in policy reform across South Asia:

[T]he present volume is an effort to goad decision-making on conflicts in and around India in the direction of coherence and rationality, and to elicit, both from governments in the region and [...] what passes under the fiction of the 'international community', responses that are proportionate to the enormity of the actual challenge that the world today faces on terrorism".³²

In key respects then, ICM's early publications are primarily national in scope and intended audience.

As *Terror and Containment's* references to the 'international community' and 'the world' indicate, however, ICM's mission was never strictly parochial. It has been concerned with representing India's practices of fighting its wars and police operations to international audiences, thereby negotiating criticisms from foreign states, human rights organizations, scholars and activists. Gill's writings featured centrally in this aspect of ICM's early work. After having been appointed DGP in Punjab in 1988, Gill's tenure was defined by his tendency to lash out at anyone raising concerns over human rights abuses, advocating for a 'hard policing' approach.³³ In his post-retirement writings, Gill took this mission further, promoting his legacy in Punjab as an unmitigated success story. In his *Punjab: The Knights of Falsehood*, Gill challenges the political legitimacy of the Khalistan movement and discredits the paradigm of

'root causes' of violence.³⁴ Gill extended these claims in 'Endgame in Punjab: 1988–93' published in *Faultlines* (1999).³⁵ He represents the Khalistan movement as a terrorist 'menace' to humanity:

The Movement for the creation of Khalistan was one of the most virulent terrorist campaigns in the world. Launched in the early 1980s by a group of bigots [...] this movement had consumed 21,469 lives before it was comprehensively defeated in 1993.

Gill maintains that coercion is the only way to achieve true success against such 'terrorists', arguing that any talk of winning hearts and minds is but a 'euphemism for a policy of appeasement'.³⁶ He defends his own personal record and the 'duty' of the Indian state to carry out violence against its enemies.

In these writings, Gill also makes claims about the parameters of knowledge-production on Indian counterinsurgency and perceived limitations thereof. He argues that the success of his campaign in Punjab has been misunderstood and devalued by critics. As he notes: 'The campaign that eventually crushed this menace [the Khalistan movement], as dramatic as it was significant received little systematic attention'.³⁷ Gill argues that his success in Punjab requires more 'systematic attention', to make its key insights more legible as an unparalleled success story and challenge (unwarranted) criticisms about his methods and reasoning.

To these ends, Sahni followed with a *Faultlines* article in July 2001. He elaborates the core importance of conducting 'objective' research as a means of pushing back against human rights concerns and scholars sympathetic to 'terrorists'. He accuses 'supposedly "objective" writers and intellectuals from Punjab' as being 'slovenly about facts', calling for a shift in approach within 'social science research on conflict' beyond arm-chair analysis.³⁸

In making the case for this new agenda, he articulates it as an explicit counter to how South Asia/India have been situated 'at the periphery' western debates on political violence, calling out various misleading dimensions of western accounts. For instance, he argues that 'literature on "Islam as a threat" that currently abounds in Western academia', problematically focuses on its (supposed) 'geographical location [...] to the exclusion of its ideological moorings and state sponsors, or their intended targets and proclaimed goals'. Indeed, as an explicit counterpoint to 'western' ideas on terrorism, Sahni asserts that 'extremist Islam' needs to be understood primarily as an 'ideology' and terrorism as but a 'method', neither one of which can be contained in place.³⁹ In other words, if terrorism represents a 'method' that has no geographic specificity, efforts to fight it must also necessarily be placeless, a claim that has a long history within US counterinsurgency thinking.⁴⁰

The west's misguided approach to the "Islamic threat", according to Sahni, reflects a much deeper problem stemming from the predominance of the 'American research paradigm' and its undue influence on security studies. This paradigm's 'geographical loci' of US "strategic interests", according to Sahni, has eclipsed India's key experiences – as a leading victim of international terrorism and a vanguard standing against it.⁴¹ Despite this neglect, Sahni maintains that South Asia/India, are 'uniquely placed' to offer a counter to the 'exclusive and dominating [western] frames of reference'.⁴²

Thus, ICM's knowledge-making practices were always irreducibly transnational and relational. Their attempts to codify India's counterinsurgency 'experience' went hand-in-hand with positioning these forms of knowledge *vis-à-vis* others, elsewhere. Attention to ICM's early texts makes clear that its purview was never rigidly national. ICM outputs pushed back against human rights reports, critical academic writing and controversies surrounding Gill's record. They also notably seek to counter 'western' imaginaries and ideas about counterinsurgency, portrayed by ICM publications as hegemonic but out of touch. They make allusions to general lessons. As Sahni explained in our interview, 'Our purpose was to extract, from across South Asia, the experiences that were possible to extend into other theatres'. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, ICM publications had yet to explicitly represent Indian counterinsurgency as a global exemplar. Post-9/11, however, ICM publications began to strategically position Indian counterinsurgency as such.

India and 'global' terrorism

Given the war on terror's focus on key tropes like state-sponsorship, de-territorialization and identity/religious-inspiration, ICM's work almost immediately sought to shape these emerging debates. For instance, in October 2001, ICM organized the three-day international policy conference 'The Global Threat of Terror: Ideological, Material and Political Linkages' held in New Delhi. The conference proceedings were published in a co-edited volume by Sahni and Gill, featuring strategic thinkers and state officials from India, Australia, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Russia, the UK and Israel.⁴³ Echoing ICM's prior work, the collection critiques the 'root causes' paradigm and rails against the unwillingness of major powers to wage a war against the *true* centre of terror in the world, namely Pakistan. It also raises some more interesting concerns. A chapter by George Fernandes, India's former minister of defence asks: 'Where does India stand in all this [i.e. the war on terror]?' Fernandes further states that this is 'a difficult question to answer, in such circumstances. India has offered its support to the U.S. in its missions to

defeat terrorism [...] Yet there is no commitment made by the US to be part of the war that India has been fighting against this terrorism for over a decade'.⁴⁴

The volume partially answers Fernandes' question, with contributors suggesting that India's location in the war on terror (in the eyes of the US at least) is not where it deserves to be and that Pakistan is enjoying the role that is rightfully India's. For instance, in chapter 11, Sahni laments that the emerging US-led consensus about Pakistan's status as a 'frontline state' against global terrorism is highly misleading.⁴⁵ As earlier, Sahni mobilizes this critique of US foreign policy to challenge hegemonic imaginaries of what 'global' terrorism is and what India's experiences offer in fighting it more effectively. Here Sahni challenges the prevalent idea in US 'strategic perceptions' that the September 11th attacks signify some radical shift in the 'locus' of terrorism, arguing that India's own experiences belie any suggestion to this effect.⁴⁶ Sahni further critiques 'the Western orientation' to counterinsurgency on a doctrinal level, noting that 'the projected two years that the Americans believe their Afghan campaign will last' is naïve. Thus, while repeating key themes in prior ICM publications, *The Global Threat of Terror* seeks to more fundamentally challenge prevailing western imaginaries of the war on terror, presenting India's experiences as a more sober perspective from which to develop strategic thinking going forward.

ICM's concerns with India's position in the war on terror took other more concrete forms as well, such as Gill's US tour in the summer of 2003. The brief that accompanied his tour, makes little reference to Punjab. Instead, it situates Pakistan as the primary source of 'international terrorism' and India as its primary victim.⁴⁷ While lamenting that 'India has lost approximately 71,000 lives to terrorism and extremism over the last decade', the brief reassures its audience that across most of its territory, 'India has remained by and large free of the modern-day scourge of terrorism, as of insurgency and other patterns of extremist political violence', citing ICM databases and threat maps as evidence.⁴⁸ The key take-away from the brief is clear: Pakistan is the *true* epicentre of 'international' terrorism and India deserves to be at the table in any attempts to combat it.

In 2007, however, the ICM's interventions into the geographies of the war on terror again return to Gill's tenure in Punjab. They represent it as an unparalleled and under-appreciated success story and source of exceptional doctrinal lessons. A *Fautlines* article authored by Indian strategic analyst Prem Mahadevan, then a graduate student at Kings College, London lauds Gill's legacy in Punjab as a 'spectacular success of Indian counter-terrorism', which achieved 'sheer attrition of the terrorist movement'.⁴⁹ In a follow-up article in 2008, Mahadevan argues that Gill's approach represents a distinct 'doctrine' and an unparalleled example to emulate:

The defeat of politico-religious terrorism in the Indian state of Punjab represented a spectacular counterterrorist success. For the first time in history, the security forces of a democracy were able to comprehensively defeat a terrorist movement, instead of just containing it.⁵⁰

Mahadevan explains that Gill 'moulded the Punjab Police into India's most effective counter-terrorist force', codifying Gill's practices and thinking in Punjab as 'a discrete counter-terrorist doctrine'.⁵¹

Mahadevan situates Gill as a pathbreaking doctrinal innovator whose thinking and record presents a radical challenge to prevailing dogmas about conflict and its resolution. For instance, Mahadevan highlights Gill's emphasis on 'purely kinetic' operations as a counterpoint to an orthodox focus on redressing 'the "root causes" of militancy'. Mahadevan further stresses that Gill's experiences enabled him to map out the 'comparative advantages' of police vs. military operations. Mahadevan attributes Gill's success to his intellect and persona but also to his cultural knowledge as a Jat Sikh, presenting the Gill Doctrine as a 'blueprint' for fighting terrorist movements based on identity. Indeed, Mahadevan represents Gill as an unparalleled visionary who transcended the 'intellectual confusion' and surrounding dogmatic idea of 'popular support' as the basis of terrorist movements. He attributes this 'confusion' to a range of sources, including the importation of 'Western counter-insurgency theories' to India in the 1950s and 1960s. Although lauding the Gill Doctrine's radical exceptionality, Mahadevan insists that this is precisely what makes it an example to follow.⁵²

Subsequent ICM publications further these efforts to universalize the particular. A 2011 *Faultlines* article authored by Indian Wing Commander Anant Mathur positions Gill's experiences as a source of global lessons. Mathur spells out the specific relevance of Gill's insights to global circuits of counterinsurgency expertise and argues that Punjab holds the prospect of a 'bright future' for US-led counterinsurgency operations abroad:

Punjab now enjoys security and prosperity. The anti-terrorist campaigns provide dramatic lessons for current and future COIN [counterinsurgency] operations. If the US learns the lessons offered by the successful COIN campaign in Punjab, a similar bright future awaits Iraq and Afghanistan.⁵³

Likewise, when I asked Sahni to elaborate on *what* India specifically offered the world on counterinsurgency, he responded:

The Indian [counterinsurgency] model has been extraordinarily successful. Not swift, but successful. It has worked across theaters. The regions in which we have been most successful . . . have been regions where the police-led response has succeeded.

While these figures seek to carve out an 'Indian' approach and have begun to define its specificity, ICM's work has sought to do so by inserting itself into hegemonic discourses of the war on terror. As a result, much of what ICM texts say is not necessarily all that distinct or unique. Indeed, there is a core tension within ICM analysts' desire to position Indian counterinsurgency as an alternative to western approaches and their underlying anxiety about being left out of global security debates. This reflects the more general '*postcolonial anxiety*' experienced by Indian state elites and educated classes, namely that India's past, present and future are but mimetic replicas of experiences of the west, prompting these classes' efforts to re-fashion India in the image of an efficient, homogenous and hypermasculine nation-state.⁵⁴ Yet, to the extent that they are able to define an Indian 'model' or approach to counterinsurgency campaigns, it is as a counterpoint to (western) doctrines. For instance, Gill's representation of Khalistan militants as 'bigots' motivated exclusively by fanaticism is presented as a more sober alternative to the (western) 'root causes' paradigm. Likewise, it is no accident that ICM publications attribute Gill's success to its 'kinetic' focus as a counterpoint to the US focus on cultural sensitivity and 'winning hearts and minds' in the war on terror, spurring the rise of 'mercenary anthropology'.⁵⁵ ICM publications present police-led counterinsurgency campaigns as key to success, arguing that intelligence combined with less spectacular forms of coercion is what really works, specifically as a counterpoint to the US' military-led quagmires. These claims are already present in earlier ICM publications but become more explicit in later works.

Since 2001 ICM has worked to codify and position the 'Indian experience' as a unique perspective and source of concrete and replicable doctrinal insights, specifically as an alternative to hegemonic 'western' orthodoxies. A close read of these strategies and documents shows consistencies and variations over time. Key themes such as Islamophobia, lashing out against Pakistan, the legitimization of purely kinetic operations and distinctions between Indian vs. western conceptions of terrorism, insurgency, counterterrorism and counterinsurgency are through-lines in this work from the late 1990s onward. Yet *what* the Indian experience represents to and for the world at large shifts. The primary focus in initial years after 2001 is on India's victimization by 'international' terrorism and pushing back against the perceived ways in which India has been overshadowed by Pakistan. As US-led counterinsurgency operations overseas become quagmires, however, Mahadevan and Mathur present Gill's legacy as an 'innovative' template for major powers to finally 'win' some of their global battles, shifting in emphasis from a language of counterterrorism to one of counterinsurgency. In this sense, Gill's 'model' is valuable to others because of its relational character. These shifting points of emphasis further reflect the importance of motion

along the police-military continuum. As I explore next, this motility is reflected in how the Indian counterinsurgency knowledge is valued by counterinsurgents beyond India.

Counterinsurgency knowledge in motion

When I asked Sahni about ICM's role in projecting India's counterinsurgency knowhow abroad, he demurred: 'We don't have an outreach program. We don't associate with other institutions ... We don't do contact jobs. We don't go to conferences, or very few'. Sahni instead claimed that foreign actors come to him:

I get six million hits a month on my website [<https://www.satp.org>]. We are read by every intelligence establishment that I know of, at least in the west. If you are studying terrorism and insurgency in South Asia, you can't do it without coming to our site. That's a very sweeping claim. It may sound arrogant, but it's a statement of fact.

A close reading of ICM activities largely affirms but also complicates this picture. As we have seen above, figures like Gill and Sahni have undertaken deliberate efforts to position their knowledge abroad. Sahni's broader claim that ICM has become an important source for foreign states, scholars and policy experts, however, is undeniable. ICM's website has a dedicated page to tracing its own national and international media influence, documenting wide-ranging citations of its work, including everything from mainstream international publications like the *Washington Post* to right-wing platforms like Breitbart as well as to Pakistani publications (<https://www.satp.org/icm-media-2021>).

I also found uptake of Sahni and Gill's work in strategic circles in the global North. Through Google Scholar citations I traced a number of master's theses from US military academies, such as the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California and the School of Advanced Military Studies in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, which cite ICM texts⁵⁶ as do reports by the RAND Corporation.⁵⁷ An analysis by C. Christine Fair written while she was employed by RAND additionally cites personal interviews conducted with Gill.⁵⁸

These texts replicate key claims of ICM publications, including that the Indian experience is under-valued in the global North, that the Punjab campaign was an unmitigated success story and that certain of Gill's doctrinal 'innovations' can complement conventional/western approaches, employing Gill's ideas and terminology to make arguments for transforming US strategic thinking. For instance, Fair's report not only cites Gill's work and interviews at length. She also replicates his terminology and conclusions almost word-for-word:

The insurgency in Punjab took more lives than the [India's] combined wars with Pakistan [...] yet this conflict has not drawn the attention of [international] terrorism analysts. [...] This case merits further study not only because of the movement's scope and lethality, but because it was one of the few insurgencies that has been systematically defeated.⁵⁹

Fair further suggests that Punjab holds lessons for US global and domestic security challenges:

This study [...] raises important questions for policing in urban areas. Some of this may be valuable as the United States engages in global policing operations. [...] The Indian experience also identifies several problems that may exist within the domestic security apparatus of the United States. It also offers insight into the types of apparatus that the United States and its partners may seek to establish in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁶⁰

Another 2009 study by a European strategic analyst proposes that Gill's record in Punjab offers 'A lesson for Europe'.⁶¹

Following Gill's death in 2017, the ICM published a collection of essays in Gill's memory edited by Sahni.⁶² It features strategic analysts based in India, the US, Denmark, France, Switzerland, Singapore and Finland. It presents Gill as a visionary, with authors quoting from his writings. One chapter is authored by Peter Chalk, an adjunct professor of political science at the RAND Corporation who gave the Memorial lecture in honour of Gill in 2018. The volume suggests that Gill cultivated a considerable range of foreign admirers, including some in the very centre of US strategic thinking.

ICM's work has also been picked up by popular media in countries including Australia, the US and Canada. They present India as a key location of counterinsurgency with important lessons to be learned. Some articles cite Gill as an inspiration. For example, a 2008 *Toronto Star* column suggests that there is a 'Punjabi lesson for Afghanistan'.⁶³ This column was later parodied for glossing over the basis of Gill's expertise, namely his role in the killing, systematic torture and demonization of Khalistan activists, their allies, and other Punjabis.⁶⁴

Together, these materials – military academy theses, think tank reports, newspaper articles, and edited essay collections – illustrate how Indian counterinsurgency knowledge circulates beyond South Asia and has been taken up as a source of valuable lessons. Whether Gill's 'lessons' were put into practice is beyond the scope of this article. What concerns me here is the flexibility of *what* foreign strategic analysts extract from Gill's record and ICM publications. Here there is variation too. For instance, in her writings around 2003–4 Fair is most interested in Gill and Punjab *vis-à-vis* the emerging US focus on Military Operations in Urban Areas. Gill's status as a peripheral figure is part of what makes him useful to Fair in developing her own 'innovative' recommendations on US strategic thinking. Claims that Gill and Punjab have

been overlooked by other analysts are crucial to the project of recovering his experience as a hidden gem that will help the US (finally) win at counterinsurgency abroad, and potentially rethink its 'urban problems' at home. Yet, a decade later in her co-edited volume with two case studies on India,⁶⁵ the specific value of the 'Indian experience' has shifted slightly. The volume's focus is on the success of police-led operations as an alternative to the prevailing focus on military-led counterinsurgency operations. The key point, then, is although the uptake of ICM materials and figures cites common themes and case studies over time, its proposed specific utility to security agencies in core states varies according to shifting strategic goals and tactical repertoires. In this sense, there is no essential Indian model to adopt but rather distinctive details drawn from ICM's intellectual products that can be adopted as needed. The essence of the Indian model is not its operational details but its position, its status as peripheral within global counterinsurgency discourses, not simply its location.

The war on terror's multiple origins

Twenty years into the US-led war on terror, its aesthetics of destruction and 'collateral language' continue to wreak havoc on the world.⁶⁶ This war has become endless but also seems boundless and all-encompassing, remaking the world in its image. When examined from the vantage points of Indian strategic thinkers and their activities, however, the war on terror's pretences to radical novelty, singularity and specificity come to look rather less assured and straightforward. Yet there are also stark convergences to be observed. The peripheral position of Indian counterinsurgency knowledge can surprisingly reaffirm US counterinsurgency approaches by providing seemingly external validation.

Without exceptionalizing and fetishizing India's counterinsurgency 'experience', attention to the work of ICM-affiliated actors yields insights into how universalist claims and forms of worlding are produced through the reproduction of violence. They show us that the war on terror does not have one single point of origin – temporally, geographically or doctrinally – but rather multiple ones. There are not just multiple origins but multiple wars with often common histories of colonial and imperial conquest. As a result, they often share a great deal of overlap. Indeed, Gill's explicitly anti-political motifs have striking echoes of what Ranajit Guha calls the 'prose of counterinsurgency', namely the language used by the British Raj to code motivations and consciousness of the uprisings against it in such a way as deprive these struggles of any political character.⁶⁷ Likewise Mathur's promise of the 'bright future' that awaits US counterinsurgency campaigns if they adopt lessons from Punjab resonates with historical pacification campaigns' focus on promoting a 'brighter and nicer new life'.⁶⁸ And despite ICM publications' efforts

to situate kinetic operations as definitive of Indian counterinsurgency success and as an alternative to a (western) 'policy of appeasement', imperatives of 'development' and 'winning hearts and minds' have been present in certain Indian counterinsurgency theatres.⁶⁹ Indeed, while counterinsurgency campaigns in post-independence India are connected through a common imperative nation-building, there has been and remains significant tactical variation across its multiple geographies of police-military violence. India's assertions of sovereignty through counterinsurgency campaigns trouble the conventional west/non-west binary and the boundaries between the colonial, imperial and postcolonial.⁷⁰ These battles and locations feed off one another and cultivate mutual resonance to fabricate common enemies and interests. Yet, they also have dissonances and contradictions. They are not all one and the same. To the extent that they work in tandem, they need to be continuously stitched together but also differentiated, and simple insider/outsider or core/periphery models of counterinsurgency knowledge fail to appreciate these constantly shifting geographies and relations.

I take seriously ICM's contention that India's experiences should be considered part of global forms of counterinsurgency and theorized as such. Because of its colonial and imperial origins, Indian counterinsurgency has never been parochial or tangential to global politics. Moreover, their fraught attempts to codify and position the 'Indian experience' on global maps and within global discourses of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency hold important insights for thinking about the shifting police-military continuum. In this case, a single set of experts identifies with multiple points along this continuum, and they make their claims to globally authoritative knowledge based on a variety of experiences.

Where I depart, however, is in my analysis of the political purposes that telling these stories might serve. Whereas Sahni and Gill are interested in gaining international recognition for India's supposedly unique 'innovations' in coercion in order to inspire more efficient counterinsurgency campaigns elsewhere, for me the point is instead to de-exceptionalize these practices, situate them in the long histories of imperial and state violence and show how they become legible as unique and 'innovative'. I argue that the power and utility that forms of counterinsurgency knowledge command – Indian or otherwise – are never reducible to their accuracy. Rather, this article has shown how counterinsurgency expertise is produced relationally through particular relations and locations of power-knowledge that define *what* they represent and *where* they fit in. Thus, I locate counterinsurgency models as positions within broader transnational forces in Smith and Katz's sense, rather than freestanding entities that exist independently.

The point of attending to seemingly peripheral actors and locations is not simply to create a more accurate or complete map of global counterinsurgency knowledge. Rather, it seeks to make visible the contestations and forms of work in staging or organizing the world through practices that

make some forms, actors, and locations important and relegate others to the peripheries of global politics. This relational account of global authority also invites thinking about new possibilities for transnational organizing. While much of world's attention in 2020 rightly focused on the extraordinary uprisings against racist police violence in the US following the deaths of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and so many others at the hands of police, these ongoing efforts to challenge police power also have long antecedents in India. These reflect Guha's discussions of how those struggling against empire found ways to break free from the codes of counterinsurgency's prose. As Gagan Preet Singh has recently argued, people in colonial India, particularly in Northern regions like Punjab came to harbor a deep distrust of the police and avoided it. They reluctantly engaged with police and developed alternative strategies to protect and recover their property.⁷¹ In doing so, they relegated police to a marginal role and thereby subverted its scope and authority. Even today in India, police power remains less than self-assured, although profoundly violent.⁷²

Notes

1. Gill and Sahni, "Introduction," 15.
2. Julio, *Bullet for Bullet: My Life as a Police Officer*, 3rd ed.
3. Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities*, 113.
4. Das, *Critical Events*.
5. Chandan, *KPS Gill*, 14.
6. Mahadevan, "The Gill Doctrine: A Model for 21st Century Counter-Terrorism?" 19 (April 2008).
7. Sen, "The Colonial Roots of Counter-Insurgencies in International Politics", 209-223.
8. Anson and Barkawi, "Utile Forms: Power and Knowledge in Small War," 3-24.
9. Machold, "Reconsidering the Laboratory Thesis," 88-97.
10. Rajagopalan, "'Restoring Normalcy': The Evolution of the Indian Army's Counterinsurgency Doctrine," 44-68; Rajagopalan, "Force and Compromise: India's Counter-Insurgency Grand Strategy," 75-91.
11. Anderson and Killingray, eds., *Policing the Empire: Government, Authority and Control 1830-1940*.
12. Khalili, *Time in the Shadows: Confinement in Counterinsurgencies*; Schrader, *Badges without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing*; Seigel, *Violence Work: State Power and the Limits of Police*; Belcher, "The Best-Laid Schemes", 258-263. "Sensing, Territory, Population", 416-436.
13. Neocleous, "A Brighter and Nicer New Life," 191-208; Neocleous, *War Power, Police Power*.
14. Schrader, *Badges without Borders*.
15. Agnew, "Know-Where: Geographies of Knowledge of World Politics," 139.
16. Smith and Cindi Katz, "Grounding Metaphor: Towards a Spatialized Politics," 68.
17. Barkawi, *Soldiers of Empire*; Barkawi and Laffey, "The Postcolonial Moment in Security Studies," 329-52; Barkawi, "Decolonising War," 199-214.
18. Barkawi and Laffey, "The Postcolonial Moment in Security Studies," 331.

19. Krishna 1999 p. xxi
20. Hönke and Müller, eds., *The Global Making of Policing*.
21. Li, *The Universal Enemy: Jihad, Empire, and the Challenge of Solidarity*, 56.
22. Rajagopalan, "Restoring Normalcy"; Rajagopalan, "Force and Compromise".
23. Chima, *The Sikh Separatist Insurgency in India*.
24. Rajagopalan, "Restoring Normalcy", 44.
25. Rajagopalan, 44.
26. Ganguly and Fidler, *India and Counterinsurgency*, 1.
27. Fair and Ganguly, *Policing Insurgencies: Cops as Counterinsurgents*, Chima, "Controlling the Sunni Insurgency in Iraq," 615–37; Ganguly and Fidler, *India and Counterinsurgency*.
28. Some of these include Indian military think tank the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), founded in 1965 and the Observer Research Foundation (ORF). There are also a range of related publications including *Journal of United Services Institution of India*, *Indian Defence Review* and *Journal of the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses*.
29. Michaels, "An Education in Counterinsurgency," 11–20; Erlenbusch-Anderson, *Genealogies of Terrorism*, Stampnitzky, *Disciplining Terror*.
30. 'Statement on the Launch of South Asia Terrorism Portal', <https://www.satp.org/satporgtp/kpsgill/terrorism/Mar11.htm>.
31. Gill and Sahni, "Introduction," 6.
32. Gill and Sahni, 16.
33. Dhillon, *Police and Politics in India -Colonial Concepts*, 498.
34. Gill, *Punjab: The Knights of Falsehood*.
35. Gill, "Endgame in Punjab: 1988-93," *Faultlines* 1 (May 1999), <https://www.satp.org/faultline-chapter-details/volume-1/endgame-in-punjab-1988-93>.
36. Gill.
37. Ibid.
38. Sahni, "Social Science and Contemporary Conflicts: The Challenge of Research on Terrorism," *Faultlines* 9 (July 2001).
39. Sahni.
40. Schrader, *Badges without Borders*, 53.
41. Sahni, "Social Science and Contemporary Conflicts".
42. See note 39 above.
43. Gill and Sahni, eds., *The Global Threat of Terror: Ideological, Material & Political Linkages*.
44. Fernandes, "The Global Fight Against Terrorism," 13.
45. Sahni, "South Asia: Extremist Islamist Terror and Subversion."
46. Sahni, 183.
47. 'Brief on Islamist Extremism & Terrorism in South Asia – for K.P.S. Gill's Tour of USA' (The Institute for Conflict Management, August 2003), 7.
48. 'Brief on Islamist Extremism & Terrorism in South Asia – for K.P.S. Gill's Tour of USA', 75.
49. Mahadevan, "Counter Terrorism in the Indian Punjab: Assessing the "Cat" System" 18 (January 2007).
50. Mahadevan, "The Gill Doctrine: A Model for 21st Century Counter-Terrorism?"
51. Mahadevan.

52. Ibid.
53. Mathur, "Secrets of COIN Success: Lessons from the Punjab Campaign," *Faultlines*, January 2011.
54. Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities*.
55. González, "Towards Mercenary Anthropology? The New US Army Counterinsurgency Manual FM 3–24 and the Military-Anthropology Complex," 14–19.
56. Latimer, "What Can the United States Learn from India to Counter Terrorism?" (Masters, Monterrey CA, Naval Postgraduate School, 2004); Coloe, "Government Actions in the Demise of the Thugs 1829–1835 and Sikh Terrorists 1980–1993 and Lessons for the United States"; Rana, "Analysis of the Indian Army's COIN Experience."
57. Fair, *Urban Battle Fields of South Asia*.
58. Fair, "Military Operations in Urban Areas: The Indian Experience," 49–76.
59. Fair, "Urban Battle Fields of South Asia," 72.
60. Fair, 98.
61. Kiss, "Counterinsurgency in the Punjab – A Lesson for Europe," *CEPOL E-Library* 2009 (1 January 2009).
62. Sahni, *The Fragility of Order: Essays in Honour of K.P.S. Gill*
63. Cohn, "A Punjabi Lesson for Afghanistan," *The Toronto Star*, 16 December 2008.
64. "KPS Gill Labelled as a Hero by The Torontostar"; SikhNet, 3 January 2009.
65. Fair and Ganguly, *Policing Insurgencies*.
66. Sen and Collins, *Globalizing Collateral Language*.
67. Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," 194–238.
68. Neocleous, "A Brighter and Nicer New Life".
69. Bhan, *Counterinsurgency, Democracy, and the Politics of Identity in India*.
70. Osuri, "Imperialism, Colonialism and Sovereignty in the (Post)Colony," 2428–43.
71. Singh, "Property's Guardians, People's Terror," 54–74.
72. Jauregui, *Provisional Authority: Police, Order, and Security in India*; Khanikar, *State, Violence, and Legitimacy in India*.

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