

INDIA'S IDEA OF ASIA: UNITING DIVERSITY

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(Salutations)

I am honored and privileged to have this opportunity to present the King Hussein Lecture today. The memory of King Hussein is deserving of our upholding and preservation. He was a man of courage and vision, tirelessly steering till the end, his country through very difficult and complex situations in a very sensitive region of the world. In the decade and more since his death, we have seen the region of West Asia go through so many shocks and revolutions, we have seen resurgence and regression, violence and death, and the steady, sustained rise of the carving out of Islamic identity in a violent and aggressive manner. The ideals of tolerance and moderation that King Hussein stood for are being destroyed.

Turning to the topic I am speaking on today, let me begin with a quotation from Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister speaking at the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi in March 1947, on the eve of Indian independence.

“We are of Asia and the peoples of Asia are nearer and closer to us than others. India is so situated that she is the pivot of Western, Southern and Southeast Asia.”

Theories of what constitutes a definition of Asia come fast and furious these days. Two and half decades ago, during the visit of the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to Beijing, China's supreme leader at that time, Deng Xiaoping, referred to an Asian Century whose composition would never be complete without the fulsome participation of both China and India. Observers rightly note that definitions of Asia have to proceed from within and not without, and that a vision of Asia with Asian characteristics can be created only by Asians themselves. We search, therefore, constantly for such an architecture, open, pluralistic, not rigidly but flexibly structured, imbued with Asian values and priorities, and articulated through the voices of leaders from Asia. We search for an idea of Asia.

Such a quest is rendered even more necessary at a time when the lessons of history are easily forgotten in the politics of the everyday and the fluctuations of economic growth and trade flows, the steady encroachments of globalization, and the imposition of agendas that seem often out of sync with life cycles created through millennia. The question often asked is how is Asia able to shape the course of resolving global challenges, and influence the direction of global affairs? Are Asian leaders “thought leaders” within their

own geographical sphere as well as beyond? Added to this is a melange of regional ascriptions to what the template for an uninterrupted view of Asia should be – are we talking of the Asia-Pacific, the Indo-Pacific, the ASEAN and its various dialogue and summit partners, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, East Asia, the Indian Ocean world – there exists a plethora of such terminologies that crowd a map of Asia today.

There is all the more reason therefore for us to pause and take stock of Asia's inheritance of a brave new world in the mid-twentieth century, as colonialism faded and sovereignties were regained by myriad states in Asia, and there was a distinct imprint on world affairs of Asian leaders whose vision and charisma radiated far beyond geographical borders giving rise to an idea of Asia that rejected the inventions of colonialism. That idea of Asia was very different from what the French scholar Francois Godemont once described as an idea associated with “a fantasy seemingly woven from a Baudelaire poem, a melody by Ravel, a short story by Somerset Maugham and a James Ivory film.” One has only to study the efforts of Jawaharlal Nehru to create a global *modus vivendi* with a New China post-1949, or the attempts to create a new equilibrium and balance in global affairs with the advent of peaceful coexistence and its five principles or non-involvement graduating to non-alignment, or the charting of a national course on the basis of values derived from Confucianism grafted on modern education and technology as in Singapore, to understand that Asia is not what the West imagined it to be.

Our unique Asian inheritance today is derived from liberation struggle, national consolidation, the choice of political systems, economic strategies, foreign policy and external relations, and the tradition versus modernity debate. However, we still search for that vision of an Asia Uninterrupted – is it the romantic idealism laced with pragmatism of a democratic Nehru, ever conscious of the historic perspective, the Taoist concealment of a Zhou Enlai, once described as one of the most successful actors of the twentieth century, the Panca Sila of a shooting star-like Sukarno, or the didactic, angular Confucianism of a Lee Kwan Yew to define our idea of Asia? Or is it, that what this demonstrates is the diversity and non-singular nature of Asia, that one has to study the parts to understand the wholeness of the sum, that our continent is not a simple integer.

Asia of the 21st century is obviously not the same place it was sixty years ago when the colonial era was ending, but nationalistic fervour and the defence of sovereignties has not receded into the woodwork. The management of diversity, the clash of politics and interest groups, the choice of a path of economic development, questions of democratic choice and rising public expectations, corruption and governance, external interference and cross-border disputes and threats are all enduring themes.

Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi dominate not only the history of India but have influenced the course of histories of nations beyond India. This “unarmed knight of non-violence” as Jawaharlal Nehru once called him, spoke in 1947 of the need for Asia being not the domination of the West, but to convey the message of love and truth. The Chinese leader Sun Yat-sen also spoke similarly of Asian virtues versus militarism and colonialism.. For these leaders, and thinkers, the rise of Asia was about emancipation, democracy, the reconnecting with civilizational ideas, going beyond narrow nationalisms (especially for Tagore for whom India was an idea, not a geographical expression). In the talk about the rise of Asia and its economic dynamism, these illuminating concepts must continue to be guiding principles if rivalries and competing nationalisms are to be better managed and peacefully circumvented. Equilibrium and mutual accommodation on the basis of an open, pluralistic and non-hierarchical, non-unipolar, uniquely Asian architecture that stresses human values and freedoms should provide the way.

Today, the center for global opportunity has shifted towards Asia and the Indo-Pacific world of the 21st century. This phenomenon has been characterized by the growth in Asia’s share of the global GDP, the rise in its standards of living, and a growth rate for its economies that outpaces the rest of the world. Asia has by far the greatest share of rising middle classes and a young population, when compared to other regions. It can be expected to contribute significantly in the coming decades to global growth, trade, prosperity and innovation thus imprinting our times with a distinctly Asian identity and imprint. Asia is regaining its lost prominence – its premier global position of a few centuries ago - this is therefore, the return of history, not it’s end.

India is part of the Asia-Pacific and a part of the Indian Ocean world that traditionally lived in peace, pursued the traffic of ideas, the peaceful absorption of religions, and transacted trade and commerce in a non-polarized, peaceful, common economic space. This paradigm that characterized Asia’s past was a geo-civilizational one – a creative space with revolving doors where civilizations coalesced and did not clash. When one visits the caves of Ajanta in western India, or sees the murals of Dunhuang in China’s West, we see a vision of unity – take for instance, the vision of various nationalities depicted in these ancient works of art, or the many foreigners also among those mourning the dying Buddha in these paintings. Asia’s ancient lives, like those of Boddhidharma , the Indian Buddhist monk, and Xuan Zang from Tang dynasty China, were mortgaged to pilgrimage and voyages of intellectual discovery. That past must be a rough guide to our future.

These were interactions that faded during India's colonial era, but soon after independence, we strove to re-establish these linkages. The doctrine of Panchashila or the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence envisioned by India, China and Burma was essentially an attempt to recast that ancient paradigm, that civilizational compact encompassing many streams of thought, philosophies, ethnicities, cultures and lifestyles, trade winds and geographies, and give it a modern tenor and definition. The core beliefs of the ASEAN are also defined by such an approach.

As Indians, we balance many identities within ourselves. It is said of us that we speak in many tongues – our home tongue, that is, the first language we learnt to speak from our mothers, then, the street tongue that we learnt when we played ball or other children's games with our playmates, and finally, the "upstairs" or "parlor" tongue which is, English. So, it can be said justifiably that we draw East and West into our identities – East and West – those "two most famous twins in history", as Amaury de Riencourt once called them. And East and West as they exist for us, are not an either/or but a part of the many sidedness of life. Being born in India, brings the gift of seeing human life with many eyes and speaking about it with many tongues. India is like a kaleidoscope and every way you flip the kaleidoscope, the colors and their combinations change spectacularly.

India's diversity, much spoken of and marveled at, is not irreducible. It helps that the country has an assimilative outlook. Let me cite the example of Kerala, India's southern-most state where Hindus, Moslems and Christians have coexisted peacefully for centuries. This tenor of coexistence essentially meant, as the writer, Krishna Chaitanya says, "each leaving the other to come to terms with his God in his own fashion and realizing that difference here in no way militated against close cooperation in activities that ensured the livelihood of all". Kerala is also the state whose literature is rich with content from all the three main religious communities. Its greatest twentieth century poet, Vallathol, a Hindu, wrote a narrative poem on Mary Magdalene which is treasured by the Christian community both for its spiritual high notes as well as its sheer beauty. Here the reality of integration exists in the "undeniable verity that the myths of the majority and minority communities have become interchangeable and shared possessions". For instance, the story of the Genesis is integrated with the Hindu myth of the churning of the primeval ocean by the gods and demons. This is true symbiosis.

Kerala is a state that has prided itself on engagement with the outside world, particularly the Indian Ocean world, through the centuries. It is the land of the monsoon, and the monsoon winds brought visitors and trade from the west. It is also where the west was able to see, even in early times, India's pluralistic dimension. Pepita Seth, an English woman who has made India, and Kerala, her home writes eloquently about this aspect:

“In northern Malabar there is a Theyyam deity, Kshetrapalan, the guardian of temples, who once demolished a semi-ruined shrine and built a mosque to give a growing community of Muslims a place of worship. This, in essence is a sharing of cultures and spaces, even as the other is respected. This fineness shows India’s profoundly pluralistic dimension. It is beyond me to suggest what can be done, political will being what it is. The great hope is that our children can, at an early age, be shown what is common to us all, that with opened minds they come to recognise that this will give them a share of the wider whole.

As India is railed against for the dreadful things that now too often happen, it can help to recognise that the other side of the coin exists. And that I have been lucky to experience it.”

This narrative governed by mutual respect, of a sharing of cultures and spaces, this fineness that shows India’s “profoundly pluralistic dimension” is what we need to valorize, to preserve and to internalize as we chart our future course and as we seek an idea of Asia. India encompasses many parables of human experience that hold lessons for men and women everywhere. That is the power of her example. And that is also what Tagore meant when he said: “I love India, but my India is an idea and not a geographical expression”.

India, as Shashi Tharoor says, can only be spoken of in the plural, it’s map is a map of many migrations. India speaks to both East and West when it demonstrates the fact that labels like Hindu, Moslem, Christian, American or Chinese, are no more than the starting points that Edward Said once referred to. Our long traditions, our languages, the homelands we inhabit, the “cultural geographies” - all have blurred and indistinct boundaries, interrelated contexts of meaning. Separation and distinctiveness do not define them. Human life is not about such separation, it is about connection, and the realization that there are “other echoes” that inhabit even the most manicured gardens. Indeed, India’s vision for Asia and the world is that there is a universal code of meaning that binds human societies together and that therefore, we must respect the value of cultural diversity, local knowledge systems, and the preservation of fast disappearing traditions that are the markers of age-old civilizations.

Traditionally, East and West have come together in Asia, because of the traffic of ideas over the centuries, the peaceful absorption of different religions without proselytization - at least until the advent of the colonial era -and trade in a common economic space. This balanced equilibrium was enhanced by the concept of spiritual unity. It is also the concept of non-interference that is particularly Asian in connotation and application. Just as the concept of sovereignty is Westphalian and western, the non-interference principle is directly correlated to the spiritual and philosophical precepts, the civilizational values, of the Asian world. While the principles of sovereignty

and the structure of the nation-state predominate in international relations, perhaps we have foregone, as Delhi University's Patricia Uberoi says, the creative spaces of "no nations", that Advaita of humanity as Tagore once said, or, awareness of the whole world, where civilizations meet - because we are obsessed with essentially western notions of center and periphery, mainland and margins, and the use of force in their defense. This goes also with a preference for multi-polarity rather than the dominance of one or two great powers.

21st century Asia, is still trying to develop a singular, cohesive identity that replaces the pluralities and competing nationalisms that define it even today. These pluralities are not only built on parochialisms or identities created on the basis of ethnicity, language, or religion, but also the divide between the continent's wealthy, internationalized elite and its working classes, and the exclusivities created by gender discrimination, particularly against women and girls.

No rendition of what Asia can be would be complete without my referring to Rabindranath Tagore. His ideal image of Asia was one of a map defined by an almost sacred geography - like a mandala, built on a geometry that was organic and free of blockages, a network of different trajectories, all mutually adjusting and synchronized. This was a vision that emphasized universalism rather than sheer nationalism, and sought the harnessing of Asia's innate strengths.

India, by virtue of its size and geographical expanse, looks both to East and West Asia, to the deserts and caravan routes of Central Asia, as also to the monsoon world of the Indian Ocean. This epitomizes the image of the famous twins of history, east and west, being personified in one single entity, as is the case with India. Historically, India was the place of every arrival in Asia, for fighters and conquerors, for merchants and buccaneers, for refuge seekers and religious preachers; and, India was also the country that was the cradle of religions like Hinduism and Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism and she also became the life-source for the life streams of many cultures of South and Southeast Asia. This is not to say that India has used such influence to leverage power and enforce diktat. In fact, references to "greater India", meaning the cultural sphere of India's influence in maritime southeast Asia were consciously given up by Nehru after independence. One of our early diplomatists, Ambassador K.M. Panikkar coined the term Southeast Asia to replace 'greater India' and terms like 'Suvarnabhumi'. Yet, the civilizational influence of India remains strong in Southeast Asia and leaders like Singapore's Lee Kwan Yew never hesitated to emphasize their admiration for India's democracy, its civil service, its scientific talent and spiritual heritage. As the journalist Sunanda Dutta Ray notes, "the willing retention of the name Singapore was the best tribute Chinese Singapore could pay to India and her civilization". Perhaps the best way to describe the cultural influences that

pervade Asia would be to refer to these as “cultural circulation” where there is a give-and-take of ideas and knowledge between societies and peoples. In fact, India’s “Look East” – now christened “Act East” – policy is about reconnecting with the siblings of her past in Southeast Asia.

It is however true that today there is no one imagination of Asia. Today’s Asia is still a heterogenous entity and the various regions of East, South-east, South, Central and West Asia are yet to explore all their connectivities. The idea of Asia that for instance, Tagore espoused, included both East and West as his speeches made during his various travels would suggest. He saw the Indian Ocean world, particularly, as a natural integer, an interlinked cultural universe. In this, he was drawing his inspiration from the interdependence and inter linkage of an era when Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism and Islam were transmitting their influence through the Asian inter-regional sphere. These flows were not constrained by definitions of state or national identity or hard borders.

There is a plurality today, of definitions about Asia, and being Asian. That arc of advantage which emphasizes the free flow of ideas, creativity, people-to-people connections has been slow in creation. Transnational and diaspora elites may be emerging because of regional inter-migration, but the movement of labor for instance, is rigidly controlled and limited, by nation-states. Tagore sought the creation of a transnational consciousness in Asia, not to forego our sense of belonging to a nation, but because it would help harmonize the national interest with the universal interest. India, he felt, could be a path-creator, a *marga-darshi* in this respect. Tagore’s (and Nehru drawing from Tagore)’s ideal was a personality like the Bengali social reformer Rammohun Roy, a mind “thoroughly steeped in the best culture of his country’, and yet, “capable of finding himself at home in the larger world”. It was essentially an Asian cosmopolitanism that these visionary thinkers favored. What this involves for the future is the creation of an “emancipatory and civilizational” idea of Asia as scholars like Amitav Acharya point out, constructed from inside, and not a definition imposed from outside. The ideals of democracy, inclusive development, free commerce and trade, the abandoning of war and conflict because its consequences spell disaster, open dialogue and cooperation mechanisms must constitute this definition of Asia, not cultural exclusiveness or hegemonic discourse. It must stress inter-disciplinary education, on the lines of Tagore’s Visvabharati whose motto: *yatra visvam bhavatiekanidam* – where the world makes a home in a single nest, should apply to Asia, discovering inter-connectedness rather than fostering narrow nationalisms. Unfortunately, geographies have been fragmented, and, as has been said, these have to be sutured. Territorial nationalism has often neglected people in the borderlands, for instance. One has only to witness the jigsaw geography of the Himalayan borderlands and the marginalization of border peoples in state-to-state contestation over territory as an example.

The question is often asked: is there the notion of a Concert of Asia? The answer is negative. A strategy for Asia has to be rooted in principles, not designs. A concept of security for Asia has to be about ensuring peace. It has to be about balancing interests and not about geopolitical activism. An open and inclusive, transparent and balanced security and economic architecture for the region can help cement relationships, avoid conflict, and promote security with economic growth and development for Asia. Western concepts of balance of power may not strictly apply here. Universal, humanistic ideals are very much native to Asian tradition as is the cosmopolitanism that connected the peoples of the Asian continent and the Indian Ocean through millennia. Modernization can coexist with Eastern values and need not be tied to Westernization.

In discussions of the idea of Asia, there is usually little focus on Islam and its Asianness. Islam's arena of growth and evolution was Asia – the Asia of the Indian subcontinent, of Central Asia and the Straits of Malacca. The largest Muslim communities in the world live in Indonesia and India and these communities are known for their syncretic traditions, the manner in which they have assimilated local tradition and cultural influences. The words of India's nationalist leader, Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad are particularly revealing and meaningful:

“I am a Muslim and proud of this fact. Islam's splendid traditions of thirteen hundred years are my inheritance...In addition, I am proud of being an Indian, I am part of the indivisible unity that is Indian nationality....Islam has now as great a claim on the soil of India as Hinduism. .

It was India's historic destiny that many human races and races and cultures and religious faiths should flow to her, and that many a caravan should find rest here...One of the last of these caravans was that of the followers of Islam....

Eleven hundred years of common history have enriched India with our common achievement. Our languages, our poetry, our literature, our culture, our art, our dress, our manners and customs, the innumerable happenings of our daily life, everything bears the stamp of our joint endeavours. There is indeed no aspect of our life which has escaped this stamp..”

The Islam of the East therefore embraces the local traditions of its country of adoption. Islamic civilization has thrived in lands beyond Arabia, its actual place of birth. The “fluorescence” of Islam, as scholars have defined it, took place mainly in Asia. The Turko-Mongols converted to Islam and established empires in Iran, Turkey and in India. Their rule nurtured rich literary traditions and glorious architecture, including the Taj Mahal in Agra, India and the Registan of Samarkand. Islam is firmly established in Southeast Asia. It is truly an Asian religion today as the words of Maulana Azad quoted above so eloquently illustrate. Islam's heartland today is Asia. Indonesia is the

largest Muslim country and India with a Muslim minority has the second largest population of Muslims in the world. The largest concentration of Muslims in the world is in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. No study of Islamic diversity would be complete without the study of the Sunnis, the Shias, the Sufis, of the South Asian subcontinent. Sufi Islam in India, particularly, has incorporated into its devotionals , ancient Hindu and Buddhist festivals and sites of pilgrimage. The poetry of Guru Nanak and Saint Kabir reflects a considerable deal of Muslim influence. And, Islam is also vital for the understanding of Central Asia - an area often neglected for study of Islamic traditions because of its long association with the Soviet Union.

The Islam of Southeast Asia was brought there basically by Muslim traders from Gujarat in India and from the Tamil speaking Coromandel Coast of southern India. There was no conquest involved and only a superimposition of the Islamic faith over the Hindu and Buddhist traditions and cultural mores already existing there - traditions brought from India in earlier epochs. This accounts for the widespread syncretism inherent in daily life in Indonesia particularly.

In India, we call the Middle East West Asia and North Africa. Political Islam as we see resurgent in the Middle East or West Asia today is not a strange phenomenon for us from the South Asian subcontinent. Pakistan is a creation of political Islam where religion is seen as bound with the state and not separate. Islam in Pakistan has increasingly sought to infuse elements of religious practice and influence drawn from West Asia in its intent to create an Islamic identity that is more than South Asian and less connected to its Indian past. The idea of Pakistan is one often expressed as an antithesis to India - and this struggle to define itself has come at a tremendous cost to Pakistan in terms of stability and development. Asia's future is also bound to be impacted by the unfolding developments in Syria and the areas within Iraq. The rise of the Islamic state - the ISIS - and its murderous militancy, is watched by the Muslim youth worldwide. This rejection of the "western" and the emphasis on the Islam of the desert, of the fundamentalist and radical movements like Salafism and Wahhabism , as also the struggle for the soul of Islam between Saudi Arabia and Iran is bound to have reverberations in the hitherto more tolerant and less rigid and orthodox Asian Islamic communities in Central, South and Southeast Asia, excluding Pakistan.

My idea of Asia is intrinsically linked with the universe of the Indian Ocean. In 1955, when the Indonesians convened the Bandung Conference they chose as a poster design for the event the picture of a dove of peace hovering above the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean world encompasses many diasporas and communities and expresses the core meaning of what the idea of Asia is: a place of blurred boundaries, of transnational trends of trade and commerce, of cosmopolitanism in embracing different cultures, of maritime networks across which goods, knowledge and ideas were shared and disseminated. The

Indian Ocean also was a vector of nationalism, as witnessed by Gandhi in South Africa and then in India; south-south cooperation as seen between India and South Africa gives a twenty-first century imprint to these old contacts.

Building the best balance between the local and the universal, the local and the regional remains a challenge for all of us, especially as we are buffeted by the winds of globalization. Traditional societies moving from rural to urban settings are often overwhelmed by the forces of change. These transitions often carry within themselves unforeseen consequences that impact internal stability, inter-religious harmony, the treatment of women and their safety and security, All this could be the antithesis of the change we want. Asia exists on the cusp of all these changes. One hopes that the traditions of tolerance and inclusiveness that have been unique to Asia all these centuries will serve her well in the future ahead too. Those inner reserves of strength and resilience, the spirit of entrepreneurship, the emphasis on dialogue and mediation, are the best natural defences against radicalism and intolerance, against the rise of terrorism and non-state actors. A rising, resurgent Asia, that giant banyan tree as some call it, must show it can turn back this regressive tide. We cannot be indifferent. We are increasingly more integrated and hence less sheltered . The civilizational identity of Asia must be emphasized rather than the civilizational identity of one religion or faith or a transnational attempt to impose such a vision of imagined community from outside. The makers of twenty first century Asia have formidable tasks ahead of them.

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