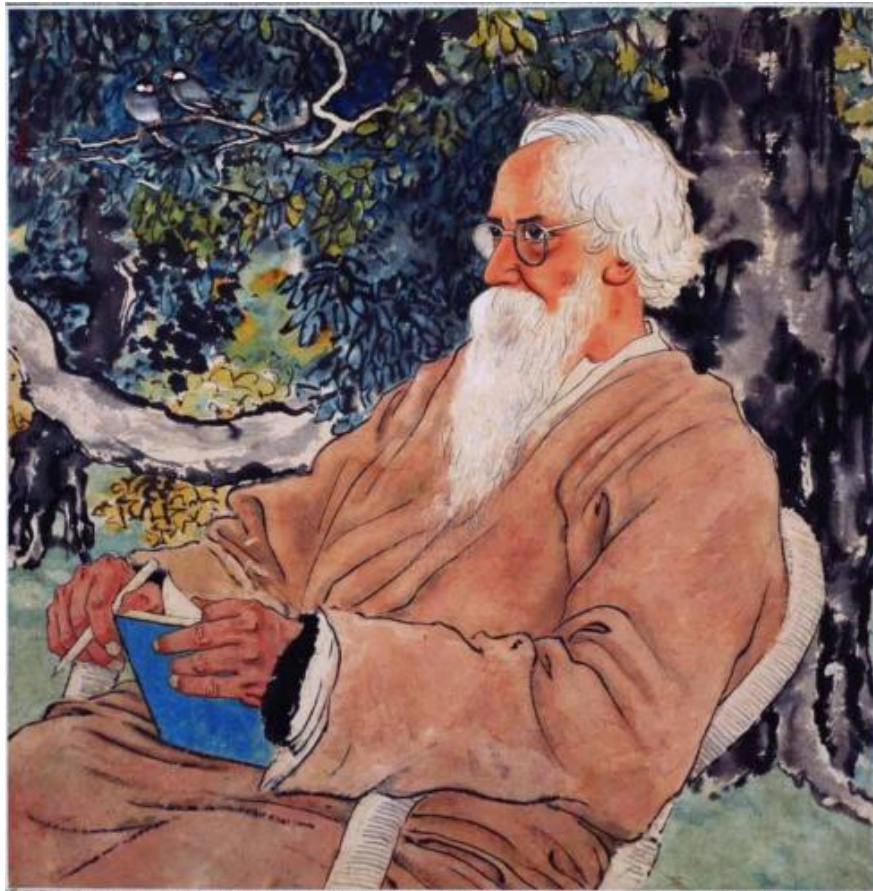


Geo Civilizations: India and China in Tagore's Century

Nirupama Rao

Meera & Vikram Gandhi Fellow in International Studies, The Watson Institute, Brown University



'Rabindranath Tagore', watercolour by Xu Beihong, 1940

“Take the Master’s tattered robes, let the winds of Gobi whistle through your sleeve and cut you to the bone; mount his rusty red nag and set your face to the West...” Then after this bitter journey at last “the great ice Mountains loom in front of you and you crawl like an ant and cling like a fly to the roof of the world,” until “on the topmost summit still far away from the promised land, you realize two things – the littleness of human life, and the greatness of one indomitable soul.” 7th century Chinese pilgrim to India. Xuan Zang as imagined in “Epochs in Buddhist History”, The Haskell Lectures, 1921, by Kenneth Saunders.

“What more wonderful journey there can be than to follow the old caravan routes right across Asia or from India to China via Turkistan and Sinkiang? I am filled with regret when I think that perhaps I shall never have the time or the opportunity to undertake this long, arduous and yet leisurely journey. For many years I have gazed at the map of Asia and traced these routes traversed by famous travellers. I have read many books about these travels and sought to satisfy thereby my own wanderlust. Asia fascinates me, the long past of Asia, the achievements of Asia through millennia of history, the troubled present of Asia, and the future that is taking shape almost before our eyes. Perhaps if I actually visit many of the places in Asia, about which I have read so much, I would be disappointed for the old glory has departed and often where a proud culture flourished only a backward desert now remains, It is more satisfying to see ruins which the imagination can fill as it chooses.”

(Jawaharlal Nehru: Foreword to KPS Menon’s book: Delhi-Chungking, in Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Second series, Vol. 2, p. 406.)

It is the depth of meaning that both these quotes carry that propels my lecture today on Rabindranath Tagore and his vision of the geo-civilizational linkages between India and China. The inspirational voice of Rabindranath Tagore reverberates with originality and relevance even today. Tagore’s ability to transcend the narrow confines of political nationalism made him an early globalist. His impact on the cultural consciousness of Asia, particularly, was profound. He stressed that interdependence, and not independence alone, offered the best future for the disadvantaged and oppressed. His legacy has substantive meaning for a 21st century Asia, that 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.

Tagore’s words resonate. He said: “tomorrow’s history will begin with a chapter on internationalism and we shall be unfit for tomorrow if we retain any manners, customs or habits or thought that are contrary to universalism. There is, I know, such a thing as national pride, but I earnestly wish that it never makes me forget that the best efforts of Indian sages were directed

against the abolition of disunity.” To Tagore, rationalism and universality, as Humayun Kabir once said, were “the principles of human survival, welfare and progress.” [*Humayun Kabir: “Rabindranath Tagore”, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1962*]

Tagore saw India’s strength as stemming from its capacity for civilizational dialogue, of creating the empires of the mind. He spoke of “the India of no nations”, “devoid of all politics”, “whose one ambition has been to know this world as of soul”. He advocated an “Advaita of humanity”. It was a theme that found resonance in China, a country that had been close to his mind and heart from his early youth. The late Ji Xianlin, doyen of modern Chinese Indologists, sounded a refrain similar to Tagore when he cited “*tian ren heyi*” a Song dynasty principle, meaning the unification of the universe, nature and mankind. [Ji Xianlin, 2005: Foreword for Tan Chung and Geng Yinzeng, *India and China: Twenty Centuries of civilizational Interaction and Vibrations, Centre for Studies in Civilization, Delhi, 2005*]. It is this confluence of the human spirit that Tan Chung, the son of Tagore’s associate, Tan Yun-shan, who is today a veritable cultural envoy for Sino-Indian friendship refers to when he says that Tagore’s ideal of the ‘universal human spirit’, is, in essence, identical to the Chinese ideal of ‘*shijie datong*’ (the world in grand harmony).

This is a geo-civilizational construct, removed from geo-politics or geo-strategy and imaging a certain consonance of the civilizational ideals that express the Indian and Chinese identities. It recalls the Chinese Buddhist saying” “*ni zhongyou wo, wo zhongyou ni*” : there is me in you, and you in me. This could conceivably also apply to Tagore’s idea of Asia, an Asia Uninterrupted. His vision was of an Asia engaging in the traffic of ideas, the peaceful absorption of different religions without proselytization, trade and commerce across a non-polarized region, a balanced middle earth, literally, enhanced by the concept of spiritual and inter-ethnic unity between East and West. Being a universalist, Tagore was ready to embrace the values of a West that did not speak the voice of conquest. As early as 1909, he was speaking of “Viswabodh” or awareness of the whole world. [*Girija Mookerjee: Tagore’s View of Asia, East and West, June-September 1961*] That is the idea of Asia he had in mind, not isolated and separate from the rest of the world but enriched by its own civilizations and also those of the West, just as he saw India’s identity as both Hindu and Muslim, because of its history. It was an ideal that he sought to apply to Visvabharati, his university at Santiniketan, and was reflected in his conceptualization of the knowledge that education should impart.

Tagore felt that the intellectual richness and the moral wisdom that constituted the past of Asia should provide a rough guide to its future. This map of Asia in his mind was defined by an almost sacred geography – like a mandalam or mandala, built on a geometry that was organic and free of blockages, a network of different trajectories, all mutually adjusting and synchronized. This flowing river of Asian consciousness Tagore saw as encompassing the geo-civilizations of India and China, expressed through the spiritual wisdom of their ancient pilgrims as also the cross-fertilization of their cultures in maritime Asia and the Indian Ocean world.

He therefore sought to reopen the channel of communication that had been closed for centuries between these two civilizational expanses of Asia: India and China. Intellectual contact and communication between India and China had virtually ceased in the centuries before Tagore's visit to China in 1924. The ballads of the Silk Road and civilizational dialogue between the two countries remained long unsung. After the voyages of Zheng He, both countries had lapsed into their own internal preoccupations. As colonialism spread its tentacles in India and beyond, Parsees and Sikhs had become a presence in the European settlements in China and Hong Kong as also Chinese settlers and tradesmen in Calcutta and some accounts speak of Chinese artists and painters in the courts of Tipu Sultan, as also the palaces of Tanjore; the association of Indians with the opium trade and as policemen and watchmen in the Chinese cities created a less than favourable image in Chinese minds. India was seen as a "lost" and "defeated" country, having fallen victim to the depredations of colonial empire.

But by the early twentieth century, Indians in China were also becoming politicized with nationalist fervor and opposition to British rule. The Ghadar Party that was established in San Francisco in 1913 had close connections with Indians, particularly Sikhs and Punjabis, in China. As the Ghadar Party made plans for an armed uprising against the British, China assumed greater relevance. Some of the Indian revolutionaries were also in touch with the father of modern China, Sun Yat-sen.

In 1925, as Professor Madhavi Thampi [*Madhavi Thampi, "Indians in China", Manohar, 2005*] recounts, when Indian police were used to shoot at striking Chinese workers in Shanghai, there was a great sense of revulsion felt by the Indians. The *United States of India* newspaper of the Ghadar Party reported an instance of seventy Indian members of the Hong Kong police resigning in sympathy for the Chinese and in protest against British actions against them. These men presented themselves before the Chinese governor of Guangdong, offering their services to him. When the governor hesitated to respond to their offer, the men reportedly told him: "We have burnt our boats. There is no going back. You can utilize us for China's cause or kill us – as you please". The governor, it was said, gave them employment.

In 1924, Tagore decided to respond to the invitation he had received to visit China. The award of the Nobel Prize to him in 1913 made him very well known in China and Japan; four poems from the *Gitanjali* had already been translated into Chinese by Chen Duxiu, founder of the Chinese Communist Party. "Kabuliwala", one of his most popular short stories was greatly appreciated in China with publishers having to publish and republish the story at least six times. [*Sourabh Chatterjee, IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science, March 2014*]

On arrival in southern China, the first message, according to Kshitimohan Sen, [*Indian Horizons, India and China, ICCR, 1994*] the maternal grandfather of Amartya Sen, who accompanied Tagore, was from Sun Yat Sen, "the soul of China" as Kshitimohan called him. Dr. Sun advised Tagore to proceed straight to Peking, instead of going to Canton, to meet him (since he was very

ill), saying the life-centre of China is in Peking. It is a loss to both India and China that Tagore was not destined to meet Sun Yat Sen. Their dialogue would have blazed a truly historic trail and may even have obviated some of the misunderstandings surrounding Tagore's visit and the reactions it elicited in a country hungry for revolution.

Be that as it may, his journey by boat and train to Peking, fascinated Tagore and he asked once on the journey, "Where is the difference between China and India?". In Peking, where "an almost inconceivable crowd" turned up to greet him at the station, he was felicitated by a gathering of scholars led by Liang Qichao who spoke of Indians and Chinese as brothers, anticipating the slogan of the fifties, but with much more intellectual depth and feeling. In Liang's words, "We are brothers, India is our elder brother and we are the younger. This is not only an expression of courtesy. We have got ample proof of that statement in history... Indians did not covet anything from China. They gave us the *sadhana* of freedom and *maitri*. ..Rabindranath has come to us from the country of our elder brother." Tagore responded to these words by saying that India felt a "very great kinship with China", *sraddha* as he called it.

It was Liang Qichao who gave a Chinese name to Tagore in Beijing on the occasion of his birthday in 1924 when the poet turned 63. The name was Zhu Zhendan or thunder of the oriental dawn. The profoundly symbolic Zhendan is the transliteration for the ancient Sanskrit word for China: Cinasthana. It also signifies the sudden outburst of thunder at the time of sunrise or dawn and was thus close to the meaning of Rabindranath. The surname, 'Zhu' was an abbreviation of 'Tianzhu', literally 'Heavenly India'. [*Tan Chung: India and China, Indian Horizons, ICCR, 1994*]

This expression of love and admiration for Tagore was personified by poets like the Western-educated Hu Zhimo (whom Tagore affectionately named "Susima") and beautiful young women like Lin Huiyin (his interpreter, who later became a close friend of John and Wilma Fairbanks in the 'thirties and was the first female architect of the People's Republic of China) who were his constant companions on that visit. They admired Tagore and held him in adulation. Yet there were others who were skeptical and indeed opposed to Tagore's influence on Chinese minds, particularly those of the youth and criticized Tagore's language for being "a dialect of another world" and his artistry as being "mediocre". China's national poet, Guo Moruo was among those who were critical of Tagore. Guo had begun his artistic and creative life in Japan as a fervent admirer of Tagore. His attitude changed once he embraced Marxism which, using a Buddhist idiom, he likened to the "only sacred raft", the dharma that ferries people out of the sea of suffering. The critics of Tagore in China in 1924, many of them children of the May 4 Movement, did not want to welcome Tagore or his "paradise of the spirit of poetry" because they felt what China needed was "the machine gun to drive out the machine gun-wielding imperialist aggressors.. Oriental culture was no solution to this". Secondly, it was felt that Chinese youth who were already inclined to shirk the responsibilities of life did not need another "dose of spiritualism". All this was quite the opposite of Tagore's view that the clearing of a passage for machines or machine guns cannot be the most memorable fact of history. In 1937, long after he

had returned from that first trip to China, he said, at the opening of the Chinese Hall, or Cheena Bhavana in Santiniketan in 1937, "It is to this privilege of preserving, not the mere body of our customs and conventions, but the moral force which has given quality to our civilization and made it worthy of being honoured, that I invite the cooperation of the people of China.. civilization, which is an ideal, gives us power to fulfil our obligations".

Communist China's first Premier, Zhou Enlai, speaking at Visvabharati in 1956 was, to recall Tagore's 1924 China visit, saying that his warm affection for the Chinese people would not be forgotten as also his support for their struggle for national independence. This was justified considering that Tagore had always spoken out against the exploitation of the Chinese people by western imperialism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, against the opium trade, and had later strongly opposed Japanese atrocities against the Chinese people. He had also made a profound impact on Chinese literature, and its new poetry in the early twentieth century. Even Guo Moruo, his vociferous critic in 1924, was no exception to this. Guo's poetry bore the distinct stamp of Tagore's influence and inspiration. Here are Guo's words:

"Thou are my invisible teacher!

I emulate thee with vigour.

I weave my heart, my tears

Into a chain of transient pearls.

I deck thy feet with it, my devotion to offer." [Tan Chung, *op.cit*]

Literate China's acquaintance with Tagore only grew in the years until the conflict of 1962. Thereafter, in the eighties as relations began to improve, the interest in Tagore revived. Writing in 1983, the Indologist, Ji Xianlin said that Tagore was an anti-imperialist, a patriot, as also religious and a mystic. The mistake that some of Tagore's admirers in China did, according to Ji, was to portray him simply as a mystic with no concern for human suffering, driven by dream and emotion.

As he did for India, Tagore was actually thinking ahead of China's place in the modern world and about the potential for mutual understanding between India and China. In fact, it is to Tagore's credit that he stood his ground in China. Ramachandra Guha recounts how the poet told an audience in Beijing that they could reject him, but he retained the 'right as a revolutionary to carry the flag of freedom of spirit into the shrine of your ideals – material power and accumulation.' Presciently, Tagore himself, in an interview with a Chinese delegation in Tokyo, seemed to read their minds well when he said to them, "...you are suffering from a conflict of ambitions harassing the whole country, and it seems to be following an interminably vicious circle." And, as if reading the tea leaves on China's future, he told them, "With all their strength and determination and power of self-sacrifice, let your people effectively decide to have a long

period of settled government even if it is not the best government possible. Let it only give you sufficient time completely to irrigate the mind of your people, to develop its potential wealth and thus enable your nation to realize the majesty of its humanity.” *[Visva-Bharati Quarterly, April-July 1929]*

The stream of consciousness between the two countries revived by Tagore was sustained through the institution of the Cheena Bhavana in Santiniketan and the pioneering efforts of Tan Yun-shan. In the years before independence, Tan became an important intermediary between the leaders of the Indian independence movement and leaders like Chiang Kai-shek and his wife, Soong Meiling. This period of the establishment of Cheena Bhavana also saw the nurturing of a pool of Indian sinologists. They included Prabodh Chandra Bagchi, and scholars like Professors Pradhana, P.V. Bapat and Amitendranath Tagore (from the family of the poet, himself).

On his first official visit to India in 2013, the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang spoke about how he admired the ‘sage poet’ Rabindranath Tagore as a student. Many young Chinese today, are spellbound by Tagore’s literary works, particularly his poetry. Weibo users post verses from poems like ‘Lover’s Gift’ online as Valentine Day messages. This branding of himself as a guru of love is not what Tagore had in mind when he visited China, but certainly he made friends in China and he left a lasting impact.

Jawaharlal Nehru’s vision of friendship between India and China drew its direct lineage from Tagore. He identified very closely with Tagore’s vision of a universalist Asia, although Nehru, as scholars point out, was both political nationalist and cosmopolitan internationalist in his vision. He aimed at harnessing Asia’s innate strengths and promoting its rejuvenation at the end of the colonial era. He wanted a free India and a free China to work for the good and weal of the world. It is another story that the smaller countries in Asia were apprehensive and questioning of a dispensation that implied their being dominated by two Asian giants like China and India.

References to “greater India”, meaning the cultural sphere of India’s influence in maritime southeast Asia were consciously given up by Nehru after independence. In fact, it was Ambassador K.M. Panikkar who coined the term Southeast Asia to replace ‘greater India’ and terms like ‘Suvarnabhumi’. Nehru made Panikkar’s book “Asia and Western Dominance” compulsory reading for Indian diplomats in the fifties. The young Biju Patnaik, who Nehru affectionately referred to as a buccaneer, became a legendary figure particularly in Indonesia for the rescue flights he piloted to evacuate Indonesian freedom fighters away from Dutch colonial police and security agencies.

The civilizational influence of India is strong in Southeast Asia and wise and far-seeing leaders like Singapore’s Lee Kwan Yew do not hesitate 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". Lee's description of meeting Nehru after the 1962 war with China and seeing how broken he was, is one of the most poignant accounts of the impact of those events on a man who led India for the first seventeen years of its independent existence and the last seventeen years of his life. Contemporary China, which admires Singapore a great deal perhaps needs to take a cue from that city state in developing a more holistic understanding of modern India.

After Bandung, 1955, pan-Asianism was never pursued actively by India. Relations between India and China were also beginning to unravel. Southeast Asian regional unity began to slowly consolidate itself in the sixties, leading to the establishment of the ASEAN. However, the political and cultural autonomy of the nation-state was stressed within the ambit of regional cooperation and the ethos of Cold War politics prevailed .

Let me briefly dwell on Nehru's vision of India and China in pre-independence decades and the early years after India's independence, a subject I have also referred to in my S. Gopal lecture on the 13th May, here at King's. Writing to Ambassador K.M. Panikkar in 1950 said, "I attach great importance to India and China being friends. I think the future of Asia and to some extent of the world depends on this." Nehru's vision was based on the assumption of ancient spiritual unity between India and China as providing a cultural dimension for a pan-Asian construct, and also his interactions with China and the Chinese beginning in 1927 at the Congress of Oppressed Nationalities in Brussels at which the Indian and Chinese delegations were prominent in their contributions to the proceedings.

During China's struggle against the Japanese, in 1938, the Congress Party despatched a medical mission to China to help the Chinese people. This unit developed close ties with the Chinese Communist leadership and one of its members, Doctor Dwarkanath Kotnis (who married a Chinese woman and whose son from this marriage was aptly called Yinhua or literally, India-China) is celebrated and revered as a hero in China till this day although he is largely forgotten in his home country. A China Relief Fund was set up, a number of China Days were observed to drum up support for China in its struggle, as also a boycott of Japanese goods. Mahatma Gandhi longed for "the real friendship between China and India based not on economics and politics but on irresistible attraction." "Then", he added, "will follow the real brotherhood of man". He assured China that that his appeal to British power to withdraw from India "is not meant in any shape or form to weaken India's defence against the Japanese or embarrass you in your struggle". India's freedom would not be gained at the expense of China's freedom, in Gandhi's view. In 1947, on the eve of independence, the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi aimed at a rediscovery of the unity of the Asian peoples. At the Conference, however, the first signs of Sino-Indian differences over Tibet were manifested when the Chinese Nationalist delegation objected to Tibetan participation, as a separate entity, in the meeting.

Post-independence, however, the vision of Asian unity was also disturbed by the Korean conflict. In June 1950, Nehru even went on record to acknowledge that Asia was not a political entity and that all-Asian conferences did not serve the purpose. However, faith in harmony with China did not erode. India became the second non-communist country, after Burma, to recognize the People's Republic of China in December 1949. The slogan of the 'fifties, 'Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai' (Indians and Chinese are brothers) were part of a song that the first Indian cultural delegation to China sang at all their stops in China in 1952. The song, written by Harindranath Chattopadhyay went: '*Gooj uthi hain charo or, Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai*'.

Professor Indira Chowdhury, based on her research at the TIFR, writes of how in 1948, Homi Bhabha and D.D. Kosambi the mathematician, wrote to S.S. Chern the Chinese mathematician expressing concern about the latter's welfare during the civil war and offering him the hospitality of the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research as a Visiting Professor and even suggesting he was free to bring some of his academic colleagues with him. By the time the letter from Bhabha and Kosambi reached Chern he had already accepted an offer from Robert Oppenheimer of a position at the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton. He wrote back about his deep gratitude 'for the concern of my foreign friends, which has never failed me.'*[Indira Chowdhury: Travelling across cultures: reflections on a visit to Beijing; Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, Vol. 7, No. 3, 2006]*

This would illustrate that not just Nehru, but a whole generation of Indians in the fifties, exhibited positive feelings towards China and were inclined to extend the hand of friendship. But this was not an era during which Tagore's ideal of a world and particularly, Asian, order free of the "selfishness" as he defined it, of nationalism could be pursued. Asia of the mid-century and after, was primed to pursue the ideal of a strong nation state serving the welfare of its people – 'No-nations' as Tagore called them, were becoming 'Nations'. When in 1954, Prime Minister Nehru and Premier Zhou Enlai jointly defined the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, they were expressing allegiance to the concept of state sovereignty above all, albeit infusing it with the aura of the ancient doctrines of Panchashila. In 1957, during a meeting between the then Indian Vice-President Radhakrishnan and Chairman Mao Zedong (in which Dr. Radhakrishnan patted Mao on his left cheek much to the latter's surprise, only to tell Mao not be alarmed, since, he, Radhakrishnan, had done the same thing to Stalin and the Pope), in response to the Vice-President's observation that if India and China stood together, the world would take note, Mao said that if India and China stood together for 20 years, "no one would be able to make us go on different paths". To mark Dr. Radhakrishnan's visit, the Chinese translation and rendition of Kalidasa's "Shakuntala" was staged in Beijing. That was five years before 1962, and before paths diverged. The rest is history.

As it turned out, the civilizational narratives that each of the countries, India and China, possessed led each to assume that leadership of a de-colonizing world could be theirs. Consonant with this, for India, were Nehru's various initiatives to try and bring China into the

U.N., on the Korean War, and Bandung. That strategy was ultimately sacrificed on the altar of conflict, and has not borne repetition for India. As cooperation was replaced by conflict, and then strategic competition, the vision of Tagore and Liang Qichao was overtaken by the diktat of realpolitik, the highlighting of difference, the consolidation of national territory and contestation over frontiers. What the scholar Patricia Uberoi calls the post-Westphalian compact where the institution of the nation-state is defined by territorial boundedness had become the regional currency. Tagore, as she says, would have thought of frontier zones as “revolving doors – as creative spaces where civilizations meet, and not as the trouble spots of contemporary geopolitics”. That ideal of global sustainability, especially in an age of globalization and the discontents it creates, would stress regional cooperation across territorial boundaries to strengthen connectivities and diminish the salience of protracted conflict and contest. Tagore’s notion of an intercultural give-and-take between India and China contradicts the theory of any clash of civilizations.

The trans-boundary cooperation initiative launched by the UN Environmental Program and ICIMOD, Kathmandu called the Mount Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation Initiative and involving China, India and Nepal is an example of the cooperation that if taken forward could break the mould of traditional patterns of boundary policy. Similarly, the stress on trade, developmental and cultural connectivities in India’s Look East Policy, especially involving Northeast India is also helping to reimagine our vision of Asia. Burma, or Myanmar, can once again become a vital link between India and Southeast Asia, and southwestern China, provided the unsettled conditions in its northern areas improve. Nehru was an enthusiastic votary of such communication links as far back as February 1940. Talking of the India-Burma-China road he said:

“The magnificent road that has been built from Kunming to the Burma border is now one of the main routes into and out of China. This road brings China very near Burma and India and along this road, and the railway that is being built alongside, will no doubt flow merchandise and all manner of goods. The economic interactions between India and China will then grow and the bonds that unite China and India will increase to their mutual advantage”. [Across the Himalayan Gap, Indian Savants Observations of China, Jawaharlal Nehru; Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 1998]

Nehru’s vision here anticipates the zeitgeist of regional cooperation initiatives like the India-Myanmar-Thailand highway project, Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar cooperation or BCIM, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, the Mekong-Ganga Initiative, and of course, India’s Look East policy. His stress on a humanistic and people-centred development of Northeast India, where Southeast Asia begins, was a part of this vision that he outlined in the early years of independent India. Today, the expansion of the ambit of the Asia-Pacific to include India and the growing currency of the term “Indo-Pacific” signals the onset of a much more inclusive definition of Asian identity.

The model of “cultural circulation”, as some scholars have termed it, is, in my view, also sought to be recreated in the Nalanda University project, arising out of the decisions of the East Asia Summit, which includes India. As I have said before, the road to Nalanda, giver of education and knowledge, echoes with the muffled footsteps of that period of shared history between India and China when the traditions of Buddhist pilgrimage and quest of scholarship defined their relationship. The Nalanda Mentor Group, headed by Professor Amartya Sen has been working to realize this vision of a truly global university, as Tagore would have wanted.

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 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 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. This will involve the creation of an “emancipatory and civilizational” idea of Asia [Amitav Acharya: *The Idea of Asia; Asia Policy, January 2010*], 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.

For the consolidation of Asian unity. India and China need to take a millennial view of their relations, drawing from the patterns of their early relationship, as also their current geo-political and economic attributes, so that they enable the peaceful transformation of their own societies and those of the region to a stage of more complete social and economic development and

political maturity. Unfortunately, geographies have been fragmented, and as has been said, these have to be sutured. In the emphasis on centres, peripheries must not be forgotten. Territorial nationalism has often neglected people in borderlands, for instance. One has only to witness the jigsawed geography of the Himalayan borderlands and the marginalization of border peoples in state-to-state contestation over territory. We need to celebrate the margins and the diversities, much more, as Tagore would have wanted. Tagore lived the examined life, constantly seeking reassurance that Asia is one, infused with intellectual richness and moral wisdom. He would have opposed the hegemony of the geopolitically or economically strong dominating the small and the dependent, he would have wanted solutions to the problems of Asia, whether maritime, environmental, water security-related, or those concerning human security, to be addressed in a manner that would have emphasized consultation, dialogue and traditional values founded on trust and civilizational principles.

Let me end by returning once again to the pilgrims who charted the first pathways in India-China friendship almost two millennia ago. Enduring the winds of the Gobi that whistled through their tattered robes and overwhelmed by the vistas of the snowy Himalaya, they were spurred on only by their indomitable spirit and their search for truth and meaning. Those muffled footsteps from history, as Tagore said once, should continue to beat in our blood, so that we are constantly reminded of the smallness of the present when we contrast it with the enormous potential of a future of cooperation yet to be realized.

Thank you.