

Inaugural Address

by

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at

Tezpur University

on

‘South Asia and Beyond: Past, Present and Future’

at

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Prof. Mihir Kanti Chaudhury, Vice Chancellor of Tezpur University; Prof. Partha S. Ghosh, President of Indian Association for Asian and Pacific Studies (IAAPS); Prof. Chandan Kumar Sharma, Coordinator, Maulana Azad Centre for Research on Northeast India, Tezpur University; Esteemed Scholars from India and Abroad; Invited Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my privilege and pleasure to deliver the Inaugural Address at the Seventh Biennial International Conference of the Indian Association for Asian and Pacific Studies on the theme of 'South Asia and Beyond: Past, Present and Future.' I express my deep gratitude and appreciation to the host institution, Tezpur University, especially Dr. Chandan Kumar Sharma, Local Secretary, for the superb arrangements made and the generous hospitality extended to us. I am particularly grateful to the IAAPS Executive Committee and its president, Professor Partha S. Ghosh, for their cordial invitation to me to participate in this important conference.

Wide Scope

This conference is ambitious, innovative and wide-ranging in its conception and scope. Being multi-disciplinary in nature, it will hear presentations on subjects beyond merely international studies. Its time-frame covers the past, present and future as a continuum. Above all, it plans to focus not only on South Asia but also cover other regions as well – West Asia, Central Asia, and East Asia or Asia-Pacific.

In essence, therefore, we can look forward to partaking in a rich and rewarding intellectual feast. It will help us all to savour and comprehend better the diversities and complexities as well as opportunities and challenges facing Asia today. The venue of our extraordinary feast – the North Eastern Region (NER) – will no doubt add its own unique flavours, ensuring that issues important to the region figure prominently in our deliberations. NER's relevance to South Asia and East Asia is too potent to be ignored by anyone.

I bring to you all warm greetings from the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), India's oldest and premier foreign policy think tank. Back in March-April 1947, it hosted the first Asian Relations Conference (ARC) when Jawaharlal Nehru, soon to be the country's first prime minister, articulated and advocated the idea of Asian unity. Addressing participants, who had

come from the vast region stretching from Egypt to Australia, he startled them by asking them why they had come! He stressed that ‘it was not merely that call from us but some deeper urge that brought you here.’ He spoke of Asia entering a new era: ‘A change is coming over the scene now and Asia is again finding herself.’ Subsequent history shows that Asia lost its way, struggling through the Cold War and its aftermath. However, seventy years down the line, Nehru’s words reverberate again: ‘We live in a tremendous age of transition and already the next stage takes shape when Asia takes her rightful place with the other continents.’

Asian century

In order to reinvigorate the spirit of the first Asian Relations Conference, ICWA launched a new series of ARCs in 2009. The 6th ARC is due to be held in New Delhi in March 2015. These conferences have demonstrated that Asian identity has staged a comeback in our intellectual pursuits and nations’ consciousness. It is also not far from the minds of policy makers. For example, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has often voiced his confidence that the 21st century would be ‘Asia’s century.’ It is, of course, fully understood that this will not happen on its own. We – Asian citizens and not just governments – will have to work harder to ensure peace and prosperity of Asia to the degree that our continent creates a dominant impact on global affairs, just as Britain and the US impacted the 19th and 20th centuries respectively.

The conference’s concept paper aptly portrays Asia as ‘a salad bowl of diversities.’ We will benefit by its recommendation that both macro and micro approaches may be adopted, as appropriate, in order to decipher our past experiences, present predicaments and future directions.

South Asia

For those of us living in South Asia, it is the heart of Asia. Extending from Afghanistan to Myanmar and from the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean, the region has gone through a rich and complex historical experience. Pre-colonial history of empires and kingdoms, epics and scriptures, great men and women has moulded our collective consciousness. Colonial experience altered our land beyond recognition, pulling us apart but also pushing us into the modern era. For the past over six decades, we have been struggling to overcome the colonial legacy as also to

assert ownership on our present and to shape our future. Given the intricacies of the region's internal politics and external linkages, South Asia has emerged as 'one of the hotspots of global politics.'

In the aftermath of the 18th SAARC Summit held in Kathmandu in November 2014, much analysis has appeared on the future of our regional grouping. The SAARC process continues to move forward – but at 'a snail's pace.' Optimists who dreamt of the proposed South Asian Economic Union may feel a little more sober now. Pessimists, who saw only a bleak future, may now feel compelled to envisage other alternatives. 'Cynicism and scepticism', the two sentiments that SAARC often evokes, cannot guide our policy. Governments have to look at alternative strategies to forge regional integration with all countries or with a few countries. It is for us – the academic and strategic community – to define, weigh and recommend new options to our authorities.

While reflecting on this subject, perhaps we cannot avoid identifying four specific factors. The first is the Pakistan factor. Pakistan is a country which is not at peace with itself. It is torn by all kinds of negativity. The question is: can it contribute to stability and progress in South Asia in the foreseeable future? The second is the India factor. Are we in a position to develop a sustainable consensus among us that a stable and prosperous South Asia is essential to our interests and that, for this goal to be achieved, we need to make sacrifices in the short term? Our new leadership is clear: the destinies of India and South Asia are intertwined. We must, therefore, act accordingly.

The third factor pertains to other SAARC member-states. Would they consider that cooperation with India, including showing sufficient sensitivity to its security and economic interests, will promote their own welfare? The fourth is the China factor. Can China, the fountain of several new initiatives such as the BCIM Economic Corridor, New Maritime Silk Road, Southern Silk Road, North-South Corridor etc, strike a balance between its declared desire of friendly relations with India on the one hand and its manifest policy to deepen linkages with all our neighbours on the other?

As we look ahead to the next decade, India seems set to deploy the power of three Cs – Commerce, Connectivity and Culture – to deepen cooperation with all our neighbours, excepting perhaps Pakistan. The real challenge is likely to be to determine the nature and degree of China’s engagement with South Asia. Some Indian scholars view China’s growing interest in South Asia as ‘a benign extension of influence’, while others point to ‘a larger strategic purpose behind such ingress.’ This question is linked to the wider issue of the respective roles of China and India in Asia as a whole.

East Asia

In no region the debate about China’s rise being peaceful or something else has been more intense and widespread than in Asia-Pacific. Especially since 2009, this has been a constant theme for scholarly debates. Chinese spokesmen swear by their country’s peaceful intentions, but China’s actions on the ground and seas are perceived differently. Every country from Myanmar to Japan and Australia has enjoyed the benefits of economic cooperation with China. Yet, many of its partners experience a varying degree of anxiety about the strategic dimensions of ‘the new Great Game’ unfolding in East Asia.

ASEAN faces a paradox. As it reaches the historic milestone of community-building in 2015, questions have been raised about its solidarity, credibility and centrality in the region’s affairs. Responding to the evidence of China’s new assertiveness, the US adopted the pivot/rebalancing policy, albeit with questionable consistency and impact. Other players are busy following a hedging strategy suitable for their interests. Even as economic integration advances through divergent tracks such as RCEP, TPP and FTA for APEC, experts and officials are striving to reform the regional security architecture. In this regard, the role of East Asia Summit (EAS) seems to assume a special importance, but consensus eludes governments on whether and how to strengthen EAS.

In this context, India, under Prime Minister Modi, has begun shifting gears, switching from the Look East Policy to Act East Policy. Is it a mere play of words or does this represent a significant policy reorientation? I would argue that the latter explanation is more plausible. The new government’s emphasis on ensuring effective implementation of previous commitments and

agreements is welcome. In addition, the stress now is on economic as well as strategic facets of building multi-dimensional relations with the key players in the region – US, Japan, Vietnam, Australia and South Korea. Even with China, New Delhi remains keen to impart fresh momentum to mutually beneficial economic cooperation, but our essential requirement here is that China should show its good intentions by maintaining peace and tranquillity on the border and contributing to sustained progress in resolving the border question. Our conviction is that, as both countries need to pay attention to economic development, they should cooperate in maintaining ‘a peaceful periphery’ which is so crucial for stability, security and peace. Clearly, India's interest and footprint in East Asia have been increasing steadily, as evident especially from Prime Minister Modi’s visits to Japan, Myanmar, Australia and Fiji.

NER

Closer home, and as we are assembled here in Assam, it is essential to reckon that the NER constitutes the true gateway between South Asia and South East Asia. What it means in practice is that NER’s economic links and infrastructure connectivity with eastern neighbours – Myanmar and Bangladesh – should be expanded further. This is possible only as part of stepped-up economic development of NER itself. Linkages with neighbours would have to be developed in a manner that they prove useful to all concerned. Lately, experts favour a shift from building merely roads and rail links to broad-based development of growth corridors.

An inescapable question, in this context, is: what kind of linkages do we need to develop with China? I expect that this question will be debated at this conference with necessity objectivity. Suffice it is for me to reiterate the view which I expressed at the international conference hosted by North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong last month. In sum, we favour moving ahead on the BCIM Economic Corridor project, subject to certain agreed basic principles i.e. “mutual trust and respect, mutual interests, equitable sharing of mutual benefits, pragmatism, effectiveness, consensus-building and securing win-win outcomes.” I would suggest that this conference should attempt to craft a consensus view on this sensitive and significant subject, which then can be shared with policy makers.

Other Regions

West Asia, Central Asia and the Indian Ocean are also important components of Asia, the subject matter of our conference.

In the past four years, West Asia has travelled from the optimistic Arab Spring to a nightmarish mix of violence, authoritarianism, fundamentalism, extremism and loss of hope. Disturbed conditions and conflicts in Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq and elsewhere testify to this tragic turn. But discerning experts claim that the people's yearning for freedom, peace democratic reform, inclusive development, and equality for women remains strong and may assert itself in due course of time. In the context of momentous developments and fast-changing dynamics, India's policy towards West Asia has come under the scanner again. The region is vital for our national interests. South Block favours stability, peace and progress, and is desirous of cooperative relations with all regional players. However, given multifarious fault lines and complexities, is it possible for India to be more proactive in contributing to this goal? Perhaps scholars assembled here will reflect on this matter and come up with considered suggestions and alternative approaches.

Central Asia has been a relatively recent area of focus through India's 'Connect Central Asia' policy. A region of considerable strategic importance and blessed with a huge reservoir of hydrocarbons and other natural resources, it has enjoyed close historical, cultural and civilizational links with South Asia. India and Central Asian countries maintain cordial relations at the political level, but there is a need to enhance the economic content of the relationship and to promote greater connectivity, both physical and at the people-to-people level. Lack of direct connectivity remains a major constraint. Further, India has to contend with ongoing competition for influence, a game in which China, Russia and, to some extent, US have been the main players. Perhaps it is by reviving and strengthening the Asian identity of Central Asian states that we may be able to leverage India's national assets, namely appropriate technology, skill development, soft power and strategic weight.

The Indian Ocean may not be – and is not – 'India's Ocean', but essentially it is Asia's ocean. All its littoral countries have huge stakes in Asian affairs. Their well-being is linked to the

destiny of Asia. The challenge in the Indian Ocean is to manage the growing strategic completion and to develop an effective way to deal with a whole range of non-traditional security threats. A key instrument for this purpose could be the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). In concert with other member-states, India has been trying to reinvigorate it, apart from crafting closer strategic partnerships with the principal players such as Indonesia and Australia and adopting other policy measures.

Conclusion

The purpose of this tour d'horizon, presented from the perspective of a practitioner with academic inclinations, is to sensitize you about how the situation in South Asia and beyond looks to many of us in India's strategic community. I have also intended to raise questions and pinpoint issues for triggering a healthy debate and constructive deliberations that will no doubt cover a variety of fields of knowledge. I am particularly appreciative that the conference's concept paper has already raised many interesting questions which are germane to the chosen theme.

In the end, let me once again thank the organizers and the host institution for their commendable initiative. Like you all, I look forward to our discussions spread over the next two days, based on the Papers authored by many of you.

Finally, I am thankful to you all for your attention.
