

 Open access • Journal Article • DOI:10.1017/S0010417511000594

Imagining Asia in India: Nationalism and Internationalism (ca. 1905–1940)

— [Source link](#) 

Carolien Stolte, Harald Fischer-Tiné

Institutions: Leiden University, ETH Zurich

Published on: 01 Jan 2012 - Comparative Studies in Society and History (Cambridge University Press)

Topics: Nationalism

Related papers:

- [The politics of anti-Westernism in Asia : visions of world order in pan-Islamic and pan-Asian thought](#)
- [Asia Redux: Conceptualizing a Region for Our Times](#)
- [Indian Nationalism and the 'world forces': transnational and diasporic dimensions of the Indian freedom movement on the eve of the First World War](#)
- [A hundred horizons : the Indian Ocean in the age of global empire](#)
- [The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism](#)

Share this paper:    

View more about this paper here: <https://typeset.io/papers/imagining-asia-in-india-nationalism-and-internationalism-ca-cbhwu93cft>

Imagining Asia in India

Nationalism and Internationalism (ca. 1905-1940)

Journal Article**Author(s):**

Stolte, Carolien; Fischer-Tiné, Harald

Publication date:

2012-01

Permanent link:

<https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000046363>

Rights / license:

[In Copyright - Non-Commercial Use Permitted](#)

Originally published in:

Comparative studies in society and history 54(1), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417511000594>

Imagining Asia in India: Nationalism and Internationalism (ca. 1905–1940)

CAROLIEN STOLTE

Leiden University

HARALD FISCHER-TINÉ

Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Zurich

What is this new cult of Asianism, at whose shrine more and more incense is being offered by vast numbers of thinking Asiatics, far and near? And what has this gospel of Asianism, rightly understood and properly interpreted, to do with the merely political cry of ‘Asia for the Asiatics’? For true it is, clear to all who have eyes to see and ears to hear, that Asia is fast developing a new consciousness of her specific mission, her original contribution to Euro-America.

———Nripendra Chandra Banerji¹

INTRODUCTION

Asianisms, that is, discourses and ideologies claiming that Asia can be defined and understood as a homogenous space with shared and clearly defined characteristics, have become the subject of increased scholarly attention over the last two decades. The focal points of interest, however, are generally East Asian varieties of regionalism.² That “the cult of Asianism” has played an important

Acknowledgments: Parts of this article draw on a short essay published as: Harald Fischer-Tiné, “The Cult of Asianism”: Asiendiskurse in Indien zwischen Nationalismus und Internationalismus (ca. 1885–1955),” *Comparativ* 18, 6 (2008): 16–33.

¹ From *Asianism and other Essays* (Calcutta: Arya Publishing House, 1930), 1. Banerji was Professor of English at Bangabasi College, Calcutta, and a friend of Chittaranjan Das, who propagated pan-Asianism in the Indian National Congress in the 1920s.

² Among others: Sven Saaler and Victor J. Koschmann, eds., *Pan-Asianism in Modern Japanese History: Colonialism, Regionalism, and Borders* (London: Routledge, 2007); Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Eri Hotta, *Pan-Asianism and Japan's War 1931–1945* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Christopher W. A. Szpilman, “The Dream of One Asia: Ôkawa Shûmei and Japanese Pan-Asianism,” in Harald Füß, ed., *The Japanese Empire in East Asia and Its Post War Legacy* (München: Iudicium, 1997), 49–63; Victor J.

role on the Indian subcontinent, too—as is evident from the quote above—is less understood. Aside from two descriptive monographs dating back to the 1970s, there has been relatively little scholarly engagement with this phenomenon.³ In this article, we would like to offer an overview of several distinct concepts of Asia and pan-Asian designs, which featured prominently in both political and civil society debates in India during the struggle for Independence. Considering the abundance of initiatives for Asian unification, and, in a more abstract sense, discourses on Asian identity, what follows here is necessarily a selection of discourses, three of which will be subjected to critical analysis, with the following questions in mind:

- What were the concrete motives of regional—in this case Indian—actors to appropriate the concept of Asianism? Is the popularity of supranational frames of reference solely to be explained as an affirmation of a distinctive identity vis-à-vis the imagined powerful West, or are there other motives to be found?
- What were the results of these processes of appropriation, and how were these manifested politically and culturally?
- What tensions resulted from the simultaneous existence of various nationalisms in Asia on the one hand and macro-nationalistic pan-Asianism on the other?

An important theoretical tool in the engagement with Indian Asianisms is provided by Prasenjit Duara, who has analyzed the interrelations between the expansion of anti-colonial nationalism and the transformation of concepts of civilization after the First World War.⁴ He argues that over the course of the nineteenth century the only accepted criteria for being “civilized” and for recognition of national sovereignty as such, had come to consist of the values of Christianity and Enlightenment. “Civilization” (with a capital C) was understood to be both singular and universal. In the late 1900s, the rhetoric of an

Koschmann, “Asianism’s Ambivalent Legacy,” in P. J. Katzenstein und Takashi Shiraishi, eds., *Network Power: Japan and Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); and Peter Duus, “Imperialism without Colonies: The Vision of a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere,” *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 7, 1 (1996): 54–72.

³ Birendra Prasad, *Indian Nationalism and Asia (1900–1947)* (Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1979); and Stephen Hay, *Asian Ideas of East and West: Tagore and His Critics in Japan, China, and India* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970). See also: T. A. Keenleyside, “Nationalist Indian Attitudes towards Asia: A Troublesome Legacy for Post-Independence Indian Foreign Policy,” *Pacific Affairs* 55, 2 (1982): 210–30; and Miroslav Krása, “The Idea of Pan-Asianism and the Nationalist Movement in India,” *Archiv Orientální* 40 (1972): 38–60. For the resurgence of Asianist discourses in India since the 1990s, see Christophe Jaffrelot, “India’s Look East Policy: An Asianist Strategy in Perspective,” *Indian Review* 2, 2 (2003): 35–68. An excellent recent contribution, which unfortunately reached the authors too late for a thorough response, is Mark Frost, “‘That Great Ocean of Idealism’: Calcutta, the Tagore Circle and the Idea of Asia, 1900–1920,” in S. Moorthy and A. Jamal, eds., *Indian Ocean Studies: Cultural, Social and Political Perspectives* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 251–79.

⁴ Prasenjit Duara, “The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism,” *Journal of World History* 12 (2001): 99–130; and *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern* (Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003). See also G. W. Gong, *The Standard of Civilization in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

imperial “civilizing mission” of the West became the single most important legitimation for colonial exploitation.⁵ However, this changed after the seminal catastrophe of the First World War, and an alternative understanding of civilization in a Spenglerian sense arose⁶: “An alternative discourse of civilization as multiple, spiritual, and moral ... that had survived in the penumbra of the singular Civilization, received an important fillip towards the end of the war... Western Civilization had forfeited the right to represent the highest goals of humanity, and the new national movements sought to turn towards their own civilizational traditions—often reconstructed in the image of Civilization—to found the ideals of the new nations and the right to sovereignty.”⁷ Through these complex interrelations between the postulates of nationalism and the transnational concept of civilization, says Duara, tensions and conflicts of loyalty are inherent in these new civilizational concepts.

In addition, Sugata Bose has examined the role of extraterritorial identity and universalist aspiration among the people of the Indian Ocean in the age of global empire.⁸ He demonstrates that the dreams and goals of the colonized were never fully constrained by the borders of colonial states. Nationalism and universalism, far from being in an adversarial relationship, were bound in a strong symbiotic embrace.⁹ Anti-colonialism as an ideology was both tethered to the idea of homeland and, paradoxically, strengthened by extraterritorial affiliations. This, he maintains, is a powerful political theme, the importance of which has not been grasped by political theorists and historians obsessed with territorial nationalism.¹⁰ Using examples such as those of “expatriate patriots,” pilgrimage networks, and Islamic universalism, he demonstrates that there were, in fact, many transterritorial aspects to the “nation in formation.” This view is supported by several other theorists of both internationalism and transnationalism, who maintain that these phenomena do transgress but do not

⁵ See also Jürgen Osterhammel, “The Great Work of Uplifting Mankind: Zivilisierungsmission und Moderne,” in B. Barth and J. Osterhammel, eds., *Zivilisierungsmissionen: Imperiale Weltverbesserung seit dem 18. Jahrhundert* (Konstanz: UVK, 2005), 335–425; Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860–1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 202–6; Michael Mann, “Torchbearers upon the Path of Progress—Britain’s Ideology of ‘Material and Moral Progress’ in India: An Introductory Essay,” in H. Fischer-Tiné und M. Mann, eds., *Colonialism as Civilizing Mission: Cultural Ideology in British India* (London: Anthem Press, 2004), 1–26; Andrew Sartori, “The Resonance of ‘Culture’: Framing a Problem in Global Concept-History,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 47, 4 (2005): 676–99.

⁶ Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes: Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte*, 2 Bde. (München: C. H. Beck, 1923). See also John Farrenkopf, “Spengler’s Historical Pessimism and the Tragedy of Our Age,” *Theory and Society* 22, 3 (1993): 391–412.

⁷ Prasenjit Duara, “The Imperialism of ‘Free Nations’: Japan, Manchukuo, and the History of the Present,” in A. L. Stoler, C. McGranahan, and P. C. Perdue, eds., *Imperial Formations* (Santa Fe, N. Mex.: School for Advanced Research Press, 2007), 214.

⁸ S. Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

subvert the nation-state.¹¹ It is with considerable frequency, for instance, that one encounters anti-imperialists whose plans for India and the world included transnational ingredients that were at least as important as nationalism and, indeed, frequently overshadowed it. The applicability of these observations to our Indian case study is best illustrated by a chronological overview of India's engagement with Asia. We will then examine three Asianist discourses in greater detail.

IMAGINING ASIA IN INDIA: A CHRONOLOGICAL SKETCH

From the mid-nineteenth century onward, references to other Asian states and regions surface in the emerging Indian public sphere.¹² From the opening decade of the twentieth century, these transform into more tangible transnational networks and initiatives to promote Asian unity in various shapes and forms. Importantly, these initiatives, ranging from fairly unself-conscious invocations of Asian identity to highly articulate pan-Asian projects, cut across the full spectrum of religious and political currents on the subcontinent.

Early Asianism: The Unity of Asian Civilization

One of the first Indian thinkers to formulate a marked concept of Asia in the sense of Prasenjit Duara's "civilization" was the Bengali Hindu reformer Keshab Chandra Sen (1838–1884).¹³ In his 1883 speech with the programmatic title "Asia's Message to Europe" he states: "We have indeed learnt a great deal from the West ... but Europe too must learn of Asia. Who can deny the deep idealism and the lofty spirituality of the East? The marvellous and almost incredible ease with which Asiatic seers have always communed with the Eternal Spirit, gives the lie to the dictum that God is unknowable. Wilt thou, Europe, take away from us our soul substance? Thou shalt not do it. In this sceptical age, Asia must preach with thundering eloquence the Gospel of the Living and Knowable God.... It is un-Asiatic not to know God."¹⁴ The

¹¹ See, for example: T. Brennan, "Cosmopolitanism and Internationalism," in D. Archibugi, ed., *Debating Cosmopolitanism* (London: Verso, 2003), 40–50; Prasenjit Duara, "Transnationalism and the Predicament of Sovereignty: China, 1900–1945," *American Historical Review* 102, 4 (Oct. 1997): 1030–51; P. Cheah, "Given Culture: Rethinking Cosmopolitical Freedom in Transnationalism," *Boundary 2* 24, 2 (Summer 1997): 157–97.

¹² See, for instance, the poetry of the renowned Bengali writer Hem Chandra Bannerjee from the 1870s. Prasad, *Indian Nationalism*, 26–27.

¹³ Frans Damen, *Crisis and Religious Renewal in the Brahma Samaj: A Study of the New Dispensation under Keshab Chandra Sen* (Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 1983); and David Kopf, *The Brahma Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979). For a short discussion of Keshab's concept of Asia: Birendra Prasad, "Keshab Chandra Sen: Prophet of Pan Asianism," *Quarterly Review of Historical Studies* 15, 2 (1975–1976): 122–25.

¹⁴ T. E. Slater, *Keshab Chandra Sen and the Brahma Samaj: Being a Brief Review of Indian Theism from 1830 to 1884; Together with Selections from Mr. Sen's Works* (Madras: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1884), 135.

discursive strategy, which is often called “self-orientalization,”¹⁵ is clearly visible in Sen’s phrasing. In line with prevalent Orientalist stereotypes, a peace-making and placid Asia is contrasted with a materialistic and menacing Europe. This leitmotiv would later permeate most (but not all) Indian concepts of Asia.

An important platform for the global promulgation of East-West stereotypes was the *World Parliament of Religions*, held in Chicago in 1893 in the context of the World Exhibition.¹⁶ The Parliament offered a unique forum for the representatives of Asian religions to reach a Western audience. At the same time it was a space for encounters and communication between Asian actors themselves, to be consolidated by future transnational cooperation. P. C. Majumdar, representative of the Hindu reformist Brahmo Samaj,¹⁷ Gyanendranath Chakravarti from the Indian Theosophical Society, and the self-appointed representative of “orthodox” Hinduism, Swami Vivekananda,¹⁸ all enthusiastically subscribed to the binary East-West cliché. Vivekananda undoubtedly had the greatest impact. He identified Asia, and especially India, by its inherent spirituality, as the antithesis to the highly mechanized but soulless West. He was one of the first Indian intellectuals to build bridges between Asian neighbors: on the way to Chicago, Vivekananda visited Japan and speculated openly about a common future for Asian peoples.¹⁹ His model of division-of-labor, whereby the West would take care of the material development of the world and the East of its spiritual edification, had substantial influence on the Bengali Nobel Prize laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), who will be treated below.

Development of Asianism into a Pan-Movement

The Japanese victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 gave Asianist thought a completely new direction. The triumph of the Japanese army over a

¹⁵ Arif Dirlik, “Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism,” *History and Theory*, 35, 2 (1996): 96–118.

¹⁶ Dorothea Lüddeckens, *Das Weltparlament der Religionen von 1893. Strukturen interreligiöser Begegnung im 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin-New York: De Gruyter, 2002); and Richard Hughes Seager, *The World’s Parliament of Religions: The East/West Encounter, Chicago 1893* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

¹⁷ See Pratapchandra Majumdar, *The World’s Religious Debt to Asia. Being the Substance of an Address Delivered at the Parliament of Religions, Chicago* (Lahore: Punjab Brahmo Samaj, 1894).

¹⁸ The speeches of Vivekananda at this forum are printed in *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Almora, 1955), vol. I, 1–22; and Rev. John Henry Barrows, ed., *The World’s Parliament of Religions. An Interesting and Popular Story of the World’s First Parliament of Religions Held in Chicago in Connection with the Columbian Exhibition of 1893* (Chicago: Parliament Publishing Co., 1893), vol. I., 102, and vol. II., 968–78. A good analysis is found in Brian A. Hatcher, *Eclecticism and Modern Hindu Discourse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 47–70; and Indira Chowdhury-Sengupta, “Reconstructing Hinduism on a World Platform: The World’s First Parliament of Religions, Chicago 1893,” in William Radice, ed., *Swami Vivekananda and the Modernisation of Hinduism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 17–35.

¹⁹ Vivekananda, “The Abroad and the Problems at Home,” in *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashram, 1979), vol. V, 209–10.

European opponent crushed not only the widely held belief of the “natural” superiority of the white “race”; it also demonstrated to Asia the formidable achievements in modernization by Meiji Japan. For many Indian nationalists, Japan became the forerunner of an alternative Asian modernity.²⁰ Thus, between 1906 and 1914, a growing number of patriotic young Indians decided to spend their education abroad in Tokyo instead of at a prestigious European or American university.²¹ At the same time, a series of radical Indian nationalists found their way to this city, where they tried, mostly by appealing to pan-Asian solidarity, to win Japanese support for the Indian freedom struggle.²² However, Indian students were frequently discriminated against by the Japanese public²³ and, not least because of Japan’s ties with Great Britain,²⁴ official response to such appeals for support was lukewarm. Nevertheless, the Indian press already speculated about the formation of an Asian association of states under Japanese leadership.²⁵ Prominent leaders of the Indian National Congress (INC) took up an Asianist agenda, including the wish to turn the perceived “fundamental unity of India, China, and Japan” into the basis of a successful struggle against the cultural hegemony of the West.²⁶ A group of radical Indian revolutionaries-in-exile in Paris had still further-reaching visions. In 1909, they published a call to establish a pan-Asian parliament in the French capital to promote political and military

²⁰ T. R. Sareen, “India and the War,” in Rotem Kowner, ed., *The Impact of the Russo-Japanese War* (London: Routledge, 2007), 239–50; Gita Dharampal-Frick, “Der Russisch-Japanische Krieg und die indische Nationalbewegung,” in M. H. Sprotte, W. Seifert, and H. D. Löwe, eds., *Der Russisch-Japanische Krieg 1904/05: Anbruch einer neuen Zeit?* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007), 259–76; and R. P. Dua, *The Impact of the Russo-Japanese (1905) War on Indian Politics* (Delhi: S. Chand, 1966).

²¹ Their numbers rose from fifty-four in 1906 to well over a hundred in 1910. Harald Fischer-Tiné, “Indian Nationalism and the ‘World Forces’: Transnational and Diasporic Dimensions of the Indian Freedom Movement on the Eve of the First World War,” *Journal of Global History* 2, 3 (2007): 325–44, here 336.

²² Fischer-Tiné, “Indian Nationalism,” 341–43; Yukiko Sumi Barnett, “India in Asia: Okawa Shūmei’s Pan-Asian Thought and His Idea of India in Early Twentieth-Century Japan,” *Journal of the Oxford University History Society* 1 (2004): 1–23, here 6–9; and Aydin, *Politics of Anti-Westernism*, 113–21. See also Arun Coomer Bose, *Indian Revolutionaries Abroad, 1905–1922: In the Background of International Developments* (Patna: Bharati Bhawan, 1971), 67–81; and T. R. Sareen, *Indian Revolutionaries, Japan and British Imperialism* (New Delhi: Anmol, 1993).

²³ British Library, Asia, Africa and Pacific Collection, India Office Records (henceforth APAC, IOR), Pos 8959, Government of India, Home Department, Political Proceedings (B) 24 (July 1907–Sept. 1908), Prog. 145, “Weekly Report of the Director of Criminal Intelligence for the Week Ending July 27th 1907.” The Report quotes the letter sent by an Indian student in Japan. The writer complains that the thirty-five Indian students in Tokyo “have to face great difficulties,” not least because, “Japanese do not hesitate to treat them with contempt.”

²⁴ See also Antony Best, “India, Pan-Asianism and the Anglo-Japanese Alliance,” in P. O’Brien, ed., *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance, 1902–1922* (London: Routledge, 2004), 236–48.

²⁵ Prasad, *Indian Nationalism*, 47.

²⁶ Irving S. Friedman, “Indian Nationalism and the Far East,” *Pacific Affairs* 13, 1 (1940): 17–29, here 18. See also Lala Lajpat Rai, *Young India: An Interpretation and a History of the Nationalist Movement from Within* (London: Home Rule for India League, 1917).

Asian unity against the domination of the European imperial powers: “There are educated Indians, Osmanlis, Egyptians, Japanese, Chinese, Arabs, Armenians, Parsis, Persians, Siamese, and others to be found at Paris. A pan-Asian Parliament could be easily organized, which would co-ordinate the ambition and polity of an Emancipated East. [...] a few keen brains on the Seine could marshal in array the swords of Eight Hundred Millions. Asia has sat too long in darkness and in the shadow of death. Let Asia arise in Unity and Unity will bring Might.”²⁷ Japan’s ascent to intra-Asian colonial power soon dampened pan-Asianist aspirations in India. The annexation of Korea and the imposition of the “21 demands” on China in 1915, particularly, led to disillusionment with Japan and resulted in a partial transfer of attention to India’s direct neighbor: China.²⁸ After the Japanese aggression in Manchuria and its attack on China, this transfer reached its zenith in the 1930s.²⁹

However, there was no clear break in India’s engagement with Japan, nor a complete reorientation towards China. While Japanese imperialism was generally condemned, and solidarity with the Chinese professed,³⁰ there were some notable exceptions. Japan remained Asia’s strongest power and still served as an influential model of modernity. Japanese good-will missions continued to seek and find audiences in India,³¹ and their views on Asia did find their way to the Indian press,³² often through the mediation of the Indian-born, but naturalized Japanese revolutionary Rashbehari Bose, who published his own monthly journal, *New Asia*.³³ The Indian community in Japan formed an important bridge in this respect, and its most prominent members attended the inauguration of the Great Asia Association in Kobe in 1938.³⁴

²⁷ “A Suggestion for a Pan-Asian Union in Paris,” *Indian Sociologist* 5, 4 (1909): 16.

²⁸ Prasad, *Indian Nationalism*, 94; and S. R. Mehrotra, “The Development of the Indian Outlook on World Affairs before 1947,” *Journal of Development Studies* 1, 3 (1965): 269–94, here 280.

²⁹ Madhavi Thampi, *Indians in China 1800–1949* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2005), 200. See also Prasad, *Indian Nationalism*, 151–74.

³⁰ Among other things, this solidarity found expression in the sending of a medical mission to China, received by one Hengchi Tao with the following words: “These Angels of Mercy have in their hands not only the cure for the wounded but also love to bind together the hearts of these two great nations.” *Harijan*, 22 Oct. 1938: 296.

³¹ For instance T. Kurose, who enlisted the support of many Bengali youths in Calcutta. APAC, IOR, L/PJ/12/158, Weekly Intelligence Report, 3 Dec. 1938.

³² The Indo-Japanese Society in Calcutta co-funded a monthly review to highlight the “Asiatic” and “anti-European side” of Japan’s policy. Other examples include: “A Japanese Visitor,” *Harijan*, 24 Dec. 1938: 404; Japanese Professor T. Kurose, in the *Singh Observer*, Dec. 1938: n.p.; and the Tagore-Noguchi correspondence published in both *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and *Visva Bharati Quarterly* in September 1938.

³³ At the subscription rate of 1 yen, a price probably aimed at both a wide circulation and a student readership. APAC, IOR, L/PJ/12/163, on Rash Behari Bose, British Embassy Tokyo, 31 May 1933.

³⁴ IOR, L/PJ/12/158, British Consulate General at Kobe, 30 Sept. 1938.

Imagining India in Central and Western Asia

In spite of the increasingly ambiguous relationship with Japan, the conception of Asia in accordance with the principle of self-determination, as formulated by both Lenin and Wilson, found further impetus on the Indian subcontinent after the First World War.³⁵ As early as 1918, Aga Khan III, the politically influential religious leader of the Ismaili Muslims, proposed the creation of a south- and west-Asian union.³⁶ The case of the Aga Khan demonstrates the versatility of the concept of Asianism. He vehemently rejected any suggestion of tension between his multiple identities as a Muslim, an Indian, and an Asian. Both as India's chief delegate to the League of Nations and president of the Muslim League in the 1930s, he was able to express his views on a wide array of Asian concerns. As a delegate, he propagated mediation between China and Japan in the early 1930s, repeatedly confirming India's ancient ties with both countries, invoking both Buddhism and Islam as unifying factors: "China is our good neighbour ... and with her province of Turkestan we have had, since time immemorial, friendly cultural and economic relations.... Just as the Indian Buddha has influenced Chinese and Japanese thought, so the great Confucius has left his living and eternal mark on India."³⁷ His appropriation of the *topos* of "ancient bonds," so often used for countries to the east of India, enabled him to form a more inclusive concept of Asia: "The whole world knows the long and intimate spiritual, cultural and economic relations between India and the lands that to-day form the Kingdom of Iraq."³⁸ When Afghanistan was admitted into the League, he proclaimed "no representative of India, no Muslim, no Asiatic could play his part in this historic occasion unmoved."³⁹ In this way, he synthesized India's

³⁵ For a general account, see Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment. Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Erez Manela, "Imagining Woodrow Wilson in Asia: Dreams of East-West Harmony and the Revolt against Empire in 1919," *American Historical Review* 111, 6 (2006): 1327–52.

³⁶ Keenleyside, "Nationalist Indian Attitudes," 217. As Cemil Aydin has recently demonstrated, this was emphatically not the only attempt to combine pan-Islamism and pan-Asianism. Aydin, *Politics of Anti-Westernism*, passim. See also Selçuk Esenbel, "Japan's Global Claim to Asia and the World of Islam: Transnational Nationalism and World Power, 1900–1945," *American Historical Review* 109, 4 (2004): 1140–70.

³⁷ "Speech at the Special Session of the League of Nations, Geneva, 8 March 1932," in K. K. Aziz, ed., *Aga Khan III: Selected Speeches and Writings of Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah, Vol. II: 1928–1955* (London: Routledge, 1997), 900–1.

³⁸ "Speech in the General Assembly of the League of Nations, Geneva, 3 October 1932," in *idem*, 911. This sentiment is echoed in both Kalidas Nag's writings on Aryan civilization in Central Asia and Tagore's sojourn in Persia and Iraq (1932), where he, too, emphasized the ancient linkages of both these countries to India. See Rabindranath Tagore, *Journey to Persia and Iraq* (Santiniketan: Visva Bharati, 1994).

³⁹ "Speech, General Assembly of the League of Nations, Geneva, 27 September 1934," in K. K. Aziz, ed., *Aga Khan III: Selected Speeches and Writings of Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah, Vol. II: 1928–1955* (London: Routledge, 1997), 1039.

religious and cultural variety and redirected it into one single occasion for joy: “For India, however much she may seek from the West her political institutions, remains a true daughter of the East, proud of her Eastern blood, her Eastern languages, her Eastern cultures. These she shares with Afghanistan, and seventy million of her peoples share, as I share, with Afghanistan in the glorious brotherhood of Islam.”⁴⁰

While a detailed description of this specific variety of Asianism would exceed the scope of this article, it must be noted that several South Asian discourses are generally overlooked in this context. The Khilafat movement⁴¹ should be mentioned in this respect. It brought forth a variety of bulletins in Urdu and English with sizeable circulations.⁴² The English-language *Khilafat Bulletin*, for instance, used the presses of the *Bombay Chronicle* to call for Asian unity under the banner of Islam.⁴³ Nor was the Khilafat movement restricted to South Asian Muslims. It was Gandhi who first voiced Congress support to the movement, partly in an effort to incorporate the Indian Muslims into All-India nationalism.⁴⁴ Carved-up Turkey became a symbol for the imperialist dismemberment of Asia, and M. A. Ansari firmly put the Khilafat movement into the realm of pan-Asianism when he said: “It is, therefore, not only a question of India’s honour and freedom, but of a great struggle for the emancipation of all the enslaved Asiatic peoples from the thralldom of the West.”⁴⁵

Building Institutions

In the INC, explicit Asianist tendencies can be found early on. In 1921, the possible foundation of an Asian Federation was discussed at the annual meeting of the Indian National Congress.⁴⁶ INC President Chittaranjan Das was convinced that “such a bond of friendship and love, of sympathy and cooperation, between India and the rest of Asia ... is destined to bring about

⁴⁰ Ibid., 1040.

⁴¹ For accounts of the Khilafat movement in India and its ties to (Pan-)Islamism in a wider sense, see Gail Minault, *The Khilafat Movement: Religious Symbolism and Political Mobilization in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982); Mushirul Hasan and Margrit Pernau, eds., *Regionalizing Pan-Islamism: Documents on the Khilafat Movement* (Delhi: Manohar, 2005); M. Naem Qureshi, *Pan-Islam in British-Indian Politics: A Study of the Khilafat Movement 1918–1924* (Leiden: Brill, 1999); M. Hasan, *Pan-Islam versus Indian Nationalism: A Reappraisal* (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, 1995); A. Özcan, *Pan-Islamism, Indian Muslims, the Ottomans and Britain 1877–1924* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

⁴² Examples of these bulletins are the Urdu-language *Khilafat-I ‘Usmaniyya* (a weekly, later continued as a daily under the name *Khilafat*), or the English weekly *Khilafat Bulletin*.

⁴³ Editorial, *Khilafat Bulletin* (published by the Central Khilafat Committee of India, Bombay), 11 Aug. 1922: 2.

⁴⁴ For an excellent account of the Khilafat movement and Congress, see M. Naem Qureshi, *Pan-Islam in British-Indian Politics*.

⁴⁵ M. Hasan, *Pan-Islamism*, XXVI, Sept. 1985, 10.

⁴⁶ Krása, “The Idea of Pan-Asianism,” 246.

world peace.”⁴⁷ Both the delegates and the general press welcomed his idea, but concrete steps towards its execution failed to materialize. This is not entirely surprising given that even Jawarlalal Nehru, as the Congress’ most enthusiastic proponent of Asian relations, had his doubts. When the proposal was tabled again, he wrote to his friend and revolutionary-in-exile Virendranath Chattopadyaya⁴⁸: “The Congress passed a resolution about summoning a Pan-Asiatic conference in India in 1930. Nobody quite understands what this means.... I doubt if it is at all possible to hold any such gathering in India.”⁴⁹

Although Nehru proved to be right, at least for the moment, tangible impulses for regional cooperation did manifest themselves at the World Congress of Oppressed Peoples held in 1927 in Brussels, which founded the League Against Imperialism, and in which Nehru participated as representative of the INC.⁵⁰ Like the World Parliament of Religions thirty-five years before, the Congress offered a platform for the creation of international contacts. This time, however, the participants were not religious dignitaries but political leaders who mingled and forged alliances. A separate meeting of several Asian delegates was held, at which the founding of a pan-Asian organization was discussed once more,⁵¹ and the meeting resolved to “undertake all necessary action, to free Asia from Imperialism and Colonial Oppression.”⁵²

In this particular case, international communism provided a particularly salient framework for linking anti-imperial forces in Asia, and several of the League’s organizers were in touch with the Communist International (Comintern). Other avenues for Asian cooperation were the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat founded by Profintern, the Asian wing of the Comintern, and its Bureau of Transport Workers of the Pacific. The Communist section of the All-India Trade Union Congress was in touch with the former and had a seat on the latter.⁵³ At the other end of the political spectrum, the 1930s opened

⁴⁷ Ibid. See also Banerji, *Asianism and other Essays*.

⁴⁸ Virendranath Chattopadyaya was a revolutionary in exile, who succeeded M. N. Roy to the Indian leadership of the Comintern. At the time, Chattopadyaya was the League Against Imperialism’s secretary in Germany. For biographical details, see Nirode K. Barooah, *The Life and Times of an Indian Anti-Imperialist in Europe* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁴⁹ Nehru to Chattopadyaya, 16 Jan. 1929, P. C. Joshi Archives, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, LAI file 7.

⁵⁰ Bakar Ali Mirza, “The Congress against Imperialism,” *Modern Review* 11, 5 (May 1927): 555–66.

⁵¹ Michael Brecher, *Nehru: A Political Biography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 109–10.

⁵² Joint Resolution by the Asian Delegations, International Institute for Social History, League Against Imperialism Archives, file 28.

⁵³ Membership of the former was blocked by moderate sections in the All-India Trade Union Congress, but India received a seat on the latter. X. J. Eudin and R. C. North, *Soviet Russia and the East, 1920–1927: A Documentary Survey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 268. See also J. Fowler, “From East to West and West to East: Ties of Solidarity in the Pan-Pacific Revolutionary Trade Union Movement, 1923–1934,” *International Labour and Working Class History* 66 (2004): 99–117.

avenues for Asian collaboration within the context of fascism. This development reached its zenith in December 1933, when the Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East organized an Asiatic Congress in Rome.⁵⁴ A sizeable Indian delegation attended this conference, of which Pramatha Nath Roy, formerly a lecturer in Italian at Calcutta University, and Subhas Chandra Bose, of later Indian National Army (INA) fame, took an especially active part.⁵⁵ Out of this conference emerged an Oriental Students Confederation, but this organization was short-lived. However, Subhas Chandra Bose's European connections proved useful when he made his way to Germany and Italy in 1941 before continuing on to Japanese-occupied Southeast Asia, recruiting Indian war prisoners and laborers into the INA with the intent to fight alongside the Japanese and liberate India from the British.⁵⁶

Eventually, this spirit of Asianism, having swept the continent during the interwar period, found expression after the Second World War in a series of Asian Conferences that were replete with the rhetoric of pan-Asianism, and confirmed the existence of an Asian identity and the need to jointly fight imperialism anywhere in Asia. India aspired to take a leading part in this, as evidenced by dailies' headlines such as, "India's Emergence as Leader of Asia,"⁵⁷ and "Nehru Leads Asia against Foreign Aggression."⁵⁸ The first conference in New Delhi in March and April 1947, according to G. H. Jansen, "marked the apex of Asianism, for never again was there such a gushing outflow of the Asian spirit."⁵⁹ Asian conferences followed in rapid succession, culminating in the Bandung Conference of 1955.

COMPETING DISCOURSES OF ASIA

Having presented this short outline of the development of pan-Asianist enthusiasm in India, we now turn to three examples of pan-Asianist rhetoric to explore the discursive strategies in more detail. We selected these discourses on the basis of shared features that allow for a more in-depth treatment: all

⁵⁴ For details, see Mario Prayer, "Italian Fascist Regime and Nationalist India, 1921–45," *International Studies* 28, 3 (1991): 249–71; Valdo Ferretti: "Politica e cultura: origini e attività dell'Is-Meo durante il regime fascista," *Storia contemporanea* 17, 5 (1986): 779–819.

⁵⁵ Memorandum on the Asiatic Congress in Rome, 22–27 Dec. 1933, APAC, IOR, P&J/12/475.

⁵⁶ Several prominent Indian pan-Asianists living in Japan were also part of the INA, such as A. M. Sahay and R. B. Bose, and as a movement it had its pedigree in pan-Asian thought. However, extensive treatment of the INA falls outside of our chronological and thematic scope here. For details, see S. K. Bose, *A Beacon across Asia: A Biography of Subhas Chandra Bose* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1973); S. S. Gupta, *Our Struggle and Rash Behari Bose* (Calcutta: Books of the World, 1951); J. G. Oshawa, *Two Great Indians in Japan: Shri Rash Behari Bose and Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose* (Calcutta: Kusa Publications, 1954); P. S. Ramu, *Rash Behari Bose: A Revolutionary "Unwept, Unhonoured and Unsung"* (New Delhi: The Freedom Movement Memorial Committee, 1998).

⁵⁷ *Bombay Chronicle*, 12 Mar. 1947.

⁵⁸ *Bombay Chronicle*, 21 Jan. 1949.

⁵⁹ G. H. Jansen, *Afro-Asia and Non-Alignment* (London: Faber, 1966), 51.

were developed on the subcontinent in the tumultuous years between 1905 and 1930, and all had their origins in Bengal.⁶⁰ Despite these regional foundations, all three soon developed into pan-Indian, partly even global movements for Asia.

Asia as the Spiritual Antithesis of Europe: The Message of Rabindranath Tagore

Conjuring up Asian spirituality not only has a long history; it is also a *topos* that had its origins in the West. European travelers, missionaries, Orientalists, philosophers, and poets had constructed Asia since the late seventeenth century as the spiritual counterpart of Europe.⁶¹ While we cannot provide here an in-depth treatment of European images of Asia, it should be noted that even before the century's turn the Theosophical Society popularized this *topos* through its international network of branches and its various publications not only within India but also globally. The Society's veneration of the allegedly "spiritual East" as opposed to the "materialist West" was informed by the textualized approach to Asia of "romantic Orientalists" such as William Jones and the earlier German romantic tradition.⁶² While Eur-American members of the Society used the East-West cliché for an inner-civilizational critique, Asian affiliates such as the theosophical delegate to the World Parliament of Religions, Gyanendranath Chakravarti, later employed it for their own specific agendas, as did Gandhi.⁶³ The cases of Chakravarti and Gandhi exemplify how successfully the Theosophical Society as a globally recognized platform mediated this cliché between Eur-America and Asia.

Hindu-reformers like Keshab Chandra Sen and Vivekananda also fell back on this well-established myth. In the case of Tagore too, Western mediation was involved; he corresponded intensively with the Irish devotee to Hinduism

⁶⁰ All three discourses have wielded considerable influence, but it is not argued here that they were the only or main architects of Indian pan-Asianism; other strong influences, besides the developments traced above, include the substantial interaction between South India and Southeast Asia, North India and Central Asia, Buddhist revivalism, networks of lascars, revolutionaries, and many others.

⁶¹ See Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Entzauberung Asiens: Europa und die asiatischen Reiche im 18. Jahrhundert* (München: C. H. Beck Verlag, 1998); Kate Teltscher, *India Inscribed: European and British Writing on India 1600–1800* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁶² Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and "the Mystic East"* (London: Routledge, 1999), 141–42; and Mark Bevir, "The West Turns Eastward: Madame Blavatsky and the Transformation of the Occult Tradition," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62, 3 (1994): 747–67. On the political engagement of the Theosophical Society in India, by the same author, see "Theosophy as a Political Movement," in Antony Copley, ed., *Gurus and Their Followers: New Religious Reform Movements in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁶³ For Gandhi's involvement with theosophical ideas, see Michael Bergunder, "Gandhi, Esoterik und das Christentum," in Michael Bergunder and Daniel Cyranka, eds., *Esoterik und das Christentum: Religionsgeschichtliche und theologische Perspektiven* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2005), 129–48.

Margaret Noble, who was also in touch with Japan's prophet of pan-Asianism, Okakura Tenshin (1863–1916).⁶⁴ Okakura visited India in 1901 and 1902, on which voyage he met both Vivekananda and the celebrated man of letters Rabindranath Tagore.⁶⁵ One year later he published a book entitled *Ideals of the East*, the first sentence of which drove his point home so poignantly that it would later become a sort of mantra for Asianists of various persuasions: *Asia is one*.⁶⁶

Like many other English-educated intellectuals, Tagore was highly receptive to such a message, which heralded the spiritual greatness and unity of Asia. All the more so when the harbinger of this imagined Asian interconnectedness came from soaring and uncolonized Japan. The Bengali poet stayed in touch with Okakura until the latter's death in 1913, and made Japan the focal point of his attempts to establish a collective Asian identity. He visited the country thrice between 1916 and 1929. After he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, Tagore's fame allowed him to act as the mouthpiece of the intellectual and political elites of his country. In "The Message of India to Japan," a speech delivered during his first visit to the Imperial University of Tokyo,⁶⁷ he succinctly explained his vision of Asia. He argued that, at a time when the West was still barbaric, a blossoming civilization had existed, which united the whole of Asia from India to Japan, and "which was not political but social, not predatory and mechanically efficient but spiritual."⁶⁸ Secondly, he portrayed the soulless, materialistic West as an existential threat to Asian peoples: the appropriation of European modernity should occur only highly selectively and under permanent consideration of one's own cultural heritage. Finally, he supported the view that the secularized West could not reform itself from the inside. This world-historical role was reserved for Asia, and especially for its emerging leading power, Japan: to re-spiritualize the shallow and self-destructive Western civilization and, in so doing, to finally save the world itself from destruction. The continuity with Vivekananda's concept of a division-of-labor between East and West is clearly visible here.⁶⁹ He appealed to the Japanese elites to distinguish themselves clearly from the West, and to refuse those acquisitions of "European modernity" that

⁶⁴ Rustom Bharucha, *Another Asia: Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁶⁵ The best biography still is Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson's *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad Minded Man* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995).

⁶⁶ Okakura Kakuzo, *The Ideals of the East: With Special Reference to the Art of Japan* (London: John Murray, 1904).

⁶⁷ A reworked version was soon published in English: Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (London: Macmillan, 1917).

⁶⁸ Cited in Hay, *Asian Ideas*, 64.

⁶⁹ Harald Fischer-Tiné, "'Deep Occidentalism'?"—Europa und der Westen in der Wahrnehmung hinduistischer Intellektueller und Reformer (ca. 1890–1930)," *Journal of Modern European History* 4, 2 (2006): 189–94.

might have a dubious impact⁷⁰: “Of all countries in Asia, here in Japan you have the freedom to use the materials you have gathered from the West according to your genius and to your need. Therefore your responsibility is all the greater, for in your voice Asia shall answer the questions that Europe has submitted to the conference of Man. In your land the experiments will be carried on by which the East will change the aspects of modern civilization, infusing life in it where it is a machine, substituting the human heart for cold expediency, not caring so much for power and success but for harmonious living.”⁷¹

This skepticism vis-à-vis the modern, which was a central part of Tagore’s Asianism, was received as reluctantly in self-conscious Taishō-Japan as were his universalist fantasies of an Asia whose *raison d’être* it was to save the world. Especially criticized in the Japanese public sphere was Tagore’s simultaneous critique of Japanese nationalism and imperialism—he viewed both as “satanic excesses of the West” with no roots in Asia.⁷² His “unrealistic anti-modernism” and “naïve pacifism” showed, according to his critics, that he represented a subjected, humiliated nation.⁷³ On his later visits to Japan, too, the response was mixed. During his second in 1924, he trashed the Japanese aspirations to become a great power in scarcely concealed words: “I have come to warn you in Japan, the country where I wrote my first lectures against Nationalism at a time when people laughed my ideas to scorn.... Let Japan find her own true mind, which will not merely accept lessons from others, but will create a world of her own, which will be generous in its gift to all humanity. Make all other people of Asia proud in their acknowledgement of your greatness, which is not based on the enslavement of victims [and] upon the accumulation of material wealth.”⁷⁴

The reactions of his Japanese hosts were as cool this time as they had been eight years earlier. He fared even worse during his short tour of China that same year, especially with the younger generation, and was booed off the stage by

⁷⁰ It must be noted that for all his essentializing of Asia and the “Asian mentality,” Tagore remained a cosmopolitan to the end, cautioning repeatedly against full denial of the West, which he also recognized to have spiritual traditions. See Louise B. Williams, “Overcoming the Contagion of Mimicry: The Cosmopolitan Nationalism and Modernist History of Rabindranath Tagore and W. B. Yeats,” *American Historical Review* 112, 1 (2007): 69–100; and Bharucha, *Another Asia*, 94–98.

⁷¹ Tagore, *Nationalism*, 59.

⁷² The Bengali Nobel Prize laureate was convinced that Japan, after it had overcome the “sickness” of westernization, would come into its own true Asian Self and rediscover spirituality and non-violence. Only after the Japanese invasion of China did Tagore find himself forced to rethink his optimism. See Rabindranath Tagore, “A Letter to an Indian Friend in Japan,” *Modern Review* 63, 6 (1938), 622–26, here 623–24.

⁷³ Hay, *Asian Ideas*, 116–18.

⁷⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, “International Relations (A Lecture Delivered in Japan),” *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly* 2, 4 (1925): 307–16, 316.

Chinese students.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, Tagore did redirect some of the hopes he had held for Japan to China, and he felt that China would soon wake up to her great responsibilities to other countries.⁷⁶ In Penang he said that his visit to China had made him feel “like one of the great makers of history in Asia who loom large in the domain of Indo-Chinese culture, of a synthesis of cultures of India and China.”⁷⁷

Although there certainly was overlap here with concerns held by individual Japanese and Chinese intellectuals,⁷⁸ the vision of an “Asian civilization” as a spiritual “Anti-Europe” and world-redeemer, so widely spread in Hindu reformist circles, had very limited export potential. This, at least, can be gathered from Tagore’s reception in East Asia. But in the India of the 1920s and 1930s, too, marked by a growing impact of the nationalist movement and especially by Gandhi’s campaigns for mass mobilization, few shared Tagore’s rigorous condemnation of nationalism. It is here that the tensions between nationalism and internationalism manifest themselves most obviously. It was not so much Tagore’s message of Asianism as his rather elitist cosmopolitanism and intellectual anti-nationalism that were being rejected.

Nevertheless, there would always be an audience for Tagore’s vision for Asia, even if relatively small. *Visva Bharati* at Santiniketan continued to be a venue for Asian activities through the Centre for Chinese Studies, founded as the “China House” (Cheen Bhavan) in 1937. Their activities were further made public through the *Visva Bharati Quarterly*, which devoted much space to Tagore’s intentions for the new Centre. Cheen Bhavan, it was explained, had been built “to maintain and nourish the distinctive merit of our respective cultures and not to be misled into believing that what is ancient is necessarily outworn.... And can anything be more worthy of being cherished than the beautiful spirit of the Chinese culture that has made the people love material things without the stain of greed?”⁷⁹

But neither did Tagore ever abandon his hopes for Japan. He continued to correspond publicly with Yone Noguchi on Asian issues as late 1938 and speculated that the country would abstain from aggression and find its “true

⁷⁵ Described in greater detail in Dominic Sachsenmaier, “Searching for Alternatives to Western Modernity: Cross-Cultural Approaches in the Aftermath of the Great War,” *Journal of Modern European History* 4, 2 (2006): 241–59, here 250–52; Dutta and Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore*, 251–52.

⁷⁶ “Speech to the Children of the Confucian School, Kuala Lumpur, on 6th August, 1927,” in S. Das Gupta, *Tagore’s Asian Outlook* (Calcutta: Nava Bharati, 1961), 66.

⁷⁷ Tagore’s address to the Chinese community at Penang, 24 July 1927, quoted in *idem*, 66.

⁷⁸ See, for example, the writings of contemporary East Asian intellectuals close to Tagore’s own position: Liang Chi Chao, “China’s Debt to India,” *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* 2, 3. (1924): 251–61; Matosada Zumoto, “Japan and the Pan-Asiatic Movement,” *News Bulletin of the Institute of Pacific Relations* (Feb. 1927): 8–15; and Masaharu Anahaki, “Western Pressure and Eastern Resistance,” *Modern Review* 61, 6 (1937): 617–18.

⁷⁹ “India and China,” *Visva Bharati Quarterly* (May 1937): 29–34, here 32.

Asian self” again, writing: “Japanese and Chinese people, let us hope, will join hands together in no distant future, in wiping off memories of a bitter past. True Asian humanity will be reborn....”⁸⁰

Even though imagining Asia as the spiritual antithesis of Europe, with the accompanying rejection of violence and/or aggressive nationalism, would at first glance seem to be largely an academic exercise, it held potential for wider application. The most prominent person to reformulate this Asianist essentialism in support of a (nationalist) cause was Gandhi. Within his specific agenda, the “spiritual unity” of Asia could become an argument against capitalism, industry, materialism, and imperialism, or one in favor of nonviolence. But unlike Tagore, Gandhi seemed to regard any involvement with the Asian scene as an unfortunate necessity. In the war between Japan and China he supported neither side. He explained his neutral position thusly: “China’s is not active non-violence. Her putting up a valiant defence against Japan is proof enough that China was never intentionally non-violent.... I wish the Chinese success. According to the accepted standards her behaviour is strictly correct. But when the position is examined in terms of nonviolence, I must say it is unbecoming for a nation of 400 millions, a nation as cultured as Japan, to repel Japanese aggression by resorting to Japan’s own methods.”⁸¹

Nevertheless, where Gandhi does speak out on the issue, it is to construct an Asia that is Europe’s antithesis in every respect, where the focal point lies strictly on the teachings of the Buddha and the cultural affinity with spirituality and non-violence that he believed all Asians to share. He sought to legitimize this image of Asia by participating in the cultural-historical discourse that was pervading the Indian public sphere of the late 1930s, applying several of its most common *topoi*, such as that of the ancient bonds between India and China, to his own agenda. For instance, he redirected the image of the monk-missionary, then a popular image of ancient Asian interconnectedness,⁸² to demonstrate the antiquity of nonviolence as a concept: “It is not yet well enough known in India that Lao Tze who was very nearly the contemporary of Gautama, the Buddha, made universally recognised in China his own teaching of Tao. [...] Such a spirit of harmony with one’s surroundings as Tao’s is the very opposite of violence....”⁸³

In an article for his newspaper *Young India*, he brought up the perceived new supranational (self)consciousness as a tool in the fight against the imperialist world order, saying, “Common lot no less than territorial homogeneity and

⁸⁰ Tagore to Noguchi, letter dated 1 Sept. 1938, in S. Das Gupta, *Tagore’s Asian Outlook* (Calcutta: Nava Bharati, 1961): 138–51.

⁸¹ *Harijan*, 24 Dec. 1938: 394.

⁸² As demonstrated by Joseph Alter, particularly in his treatment of P. C. Bagchi’s work. “Yoga in Asia—Mimetic History: Problems in the Location of Secret Knowledge,” in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 29, 2 (2009): 213–29.

⁸³ C.F.A., *Harijan*, 4 Feb. 1939: 456.

cultural affinity is bringing Asiatic races wonderfully together, and they now seem determined to take their share in world politics.”⁸⁴ Still, it would be misleading to portray Gandhi as a champion of pan-Asianism. To his mind, the tension between nationalism and internationalism was particularly strong. Gandhi’s goal was autarchy, and on more than one occasion he called a united Asian stand against imperialism (rather than an all-India one) a waste of resources. India should first be capable of standing on her own: “If we are in effect truly unable to help others and only ask for something at their hands it would not conduce to mutual esteem; nor can a healthy alliance grow.... The link of mere friendship of slavery is not likely to be a real or useful bond. Why do we turn to Russia, China or Turkey? It is not simply the greatness of the past history of these nations that attracts us.... It is because we believe that there are great movements now going on in those countries which furnish matter for useful study or admiring observation.”⁸⁵

At a much later stage, Gandhi did make one appearance in the theatre of pan-Asianism. On the threshold of Independence, the historic Purana Qila (Old Fort) in New Delhi was the scene for the first Asian Relations Conference in March 1947, and Gandhi’s rather ambiguous role in the proceedings is worth mapping out. Nehru had invited him to attend, and he consented provided it did not interfere with his many other obligations. But as the conference drew near, it became clear that his presence would be vital. Gandhi was not a pan-Asianist, but Asia certainly wanted to speak to him: the delegates to the Conference all expressed the desire to meet the Mahatma and hear him on “Asia’s contribution to world peace.”⁸⁶ A question and answer session was indeed organized, at which his reluctance was pronounced. He addressed the two hundred-odd delegates with the following words: “Let me confess my ignorance. I have really to apologize to you. Pandit Nehru has asked me long before ... whether it would at all be possible for me to attend. It has proved a much more important conference than it was expected to be....”⁸⁷

Nevertheless, Gandhi used the two sessions he attended to map out his Asia to the audience: an Asia that would contribute to building One World, the Great Edifice of Truth, and bring to the West her message of harmony. Stating that wisdom had come to the West from the East, he said: “The first of these wise men was Zoroaster. He belonged to the East. He was followed by Buddha who belonged to the East—India. Who followed Buddha? Jesus, who came from the East. Before Jesus was Moses, who belonged to Palestine

⁸⁴ Cited in Prasad, *Indian Nationalism*, 107.

⁸⁵ Editorial, *Young India*, 1 Mar. 1928: 67.

⁸⁶ “Mahatma to Address Inter-Asian Meet?” *Bombay Chronicle*, 24 Mar. 1947: 1.

⁸⁷ “Questions and Answers between Gandhi and Delegates,” *Harijan*, 20 Apr. 1947: 113.

though he was born in Egypt. After Jesus came Mohammed. I omit my reference to Krishna and Rama and other lights. I do not call them lesser lights but they are less known to the literary world. All the same I do not know a single person in the world to match these men of Asia. And then what happened? Christianity became disfigured when it went to the West. I am sorry to have to say that.”⁸⁸

His message to the delegates had, according to him, already been taught to them in their own lands, thus emphasizing his view of an inherent and shared Asian spirituality. His words echo Tagore and Vivekananda: that it was up to Asia to re-spiritualize the hollow West and to bring Asia’s message of harmony to Eur-America. That this message still had enough resonance to be employed in a large gathering of delegates from all over Asia shortly after the turbulent years of the war is testimony to the resilience of this particular discourse of Asia, and demonstrates that it did not die in the disillusion over the Sino-Japanese war. The following part of his speech therefore deserves to be quoted in full:

What I want you to understand is the message of Asia. It is not to be learned through the Western spectacles or by imitating the atom bomb. If you want to give a message to the West, it must be the message of love and the message of truth.... I am certain that if all of you put your hearts together—not merely heads—to understand the secret of the message these wise men of the East have left to us, and if we really become worthy of that great message, the conquest of the West will be completed. This conquest will be loved by the West.... It is up to you to tell the world of its wickedness and sin—that is the heritage your teachers and my teachers have taught Asia.⁸⁹

The Asianist message encountered eager audiences at every turn, depending on the way the message was formulated, and to what political ends. As the next example will show, even imperialism and civilizing missions were accepted in certain intellectual and political circles, albeit only if they spread the “right kind” of civilization.

Asia as “India Magna”: Kalidas Nag and the Greater India Society

In view of the emerging anti-imperialist consensus in the Indian and international public spheres, irony does not spare the fact that in the 1920s a further influential Asia-discourse came into being, which celebrated India’s past as a colonizer and “bringer of civilization” to Southeast Asia. The members of the *Greater India Society*, established in Calcutta in 1926, were without doubt inspired by Tagore’s concept of Asia,⁹⁰ but developed it in

⁸⁸ Ibid.: 116.

⁸⁹ Ibid.: 117.

⁹⁰ Kalidas Nag was not only an admirer of the Bengali poet but also a close collaborator, accompanying Tagore on his tour of France in 1920, and his tour of Asia four years later.

another direction. Two of its founders shared an exceptional academic background, which was crucial for their views on Asia.⁹¹

Kalidas Nag (1888–1980) and P. C. Bagchi (1898–1956) obtained their doctorates in Paris with the French Indologists Sylvain Lévi (1863–1935) and Jean Przyluski (1885–1944), and had thus become Orientalists by training—in the pre-Saidian sense of the word. They derived their concept of Asia from European academic discourses, although they did not draw from the German and English Orientalism prevalent in British India, but rather from the autonomous French variety. What made the theories of Lévi and his students so attractive to Indian intellectuals?⁹² In opposition to the widely held paradigms of evolution, which depicted the history of humanity as a sequence of the rise and fall of civilizations (whereby the “Oriental” ones were usually represented as extinct or degenerate), the French academics were interested in translocal *longue durée* processes of cultural transfer. *Diffusion*, and not *évolution*, explained, in their opinion, the different stages of development, or “civilizational phases” of nations.⁹³ In his early writings on the foundation of the fields of epigraphy, literature, and architecture in Indochina, Lévi had pointed to India as the great civilizational force of Asia.⁹⁴ Hindu and Buddhist India had, according to him, spread their cultural, spiritual, and material accomplishments throughout a space that reached “from Persia to the Chinese Sea and from the icy coast of Siberia to Java and Borneo.”⁹⁵

Such messages were easily compatible with a nationalist agenda. Indeed, Lévi himself seems to have been not only an admirer of the “genius of India”⁹⁶ but also very sympathetic to the cause of Indian independence.⁹⁷ Lévi’s Indian

⁹¹ See Susan Bayly, “Imagining ‘Greater India’: French and Indian Visions of Colonialism in the Indic Mode,” *Modern Asian Studies* 38, 3 (2004): 703–44; and “India’s ‘Empire of Culture’: Sylvain Lévi and the Greater India Society,” in L. Bansat-Boudon and R. Lardinois, eds., *Sylvain Lévi (1863–1935): Études Indiennes, histoire sociale: Actes du Colloque tenu à Paris les 8–10 Octobre 2003* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2007), 193–212.

⁹² The popularity of Lévi spread far wider than the small circle of his students. Tagore invited him to Santiniketan in Bengal, where he was the first foreign visiting professor in 1921/22 at *Vishva-Bharati*, the university founded by the poet. See Roland Lardinois, *L’invention de l’Inde. Entre ésotérisme et science* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2007), 211; and Kalidas Nag, *Discovery of Asia* (Calcutta: Institute of Asian African Relations, 1957), 10–11.

⁹³ Susan Bayly, “French Anthropology and the Durkheimians in Colonial Indochina,” *Modern Asian Studies* 34, 3 (2000): 581–622.

⁹⁴ Sylvain Lévi, *L’Inde civilisatrice: aperçu historique* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1938). A collection of his writings on the topic, which Lévi wrote with two of his students, was translated into English by P. C. Bagchi and published in India: Sylvain Lévi, Jean Przyluski, and Marc Bloch, *Pre-Aryan and Pre-Dravidian in India* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1929).

⁹⁵ Cited in Kalidas Nag, “Sylvain Lévi and the Science of Indology,” *Journal of the Greater India Society* 3, 1 (1936): 3–13, here 12.

⁹⁶ This was already evident from his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France. Sylvain Lévi, *Génie de l’Inde*, Roland Lardinois, ed. (Paris: Éditions Allia, 2008).

⁹⁷ Lévi and P. C. Bagchi belonged to a Paris society called “Les Amis des Orient” that was shadowed by the British C.I.D., suspected of involvement in “seditious activities.” “Afghans and Indians in Paris,” report by Col. Humphrys, 21 Dec. 1925, APAC, IOR, L/PJ/12/219.

followers stressed the active role of ancient India in the cultural fertilization and “development” of Southeast Asia. These *topoi* were taken up again and again in both academic and popular publications,⁹⁸ some of which were translated into Indian regional languages.

The thesis that India had been not only a highly developed civilization long before its contact with Europe, but also a hegemon and civilizational force in Asia, supplied valuable ammunition to the anti-colonial struggle for freedom. The famous Indian historian R. C. Majumdar (1888–1980),⁹⁹ one of the co-founders of the *Greater India Society*,¹⁰⁰ dedicated a two-volume monograph to the idea of *Ancient Indian Colonies in the Far East*.¹⁰¹ The message was clear: India’s past as a colonial power raised it to the level of a “civilized nation.” Moreover, Indian imperialism was superior to its European counterparts because it had aimed solely at “uplifting” the colonized areas.¹⁰² Through this emphasis on India’s role as colonizer and harbinger of culture in Asia—criticized by current historiography¹⁰³—the image of India in the West as self-centered and static was supposed to be disproved. *Vis-à-vis* the British, India could position itself as the superior “colonial power” because its colonizing had been pacifist and benign.

The idea of “Greater India” soon became part and parcel of the cultural baggage of the educated classes, cutting through the whole political spectrum of India. It

⁹⁸ Paresh Chandra Dasgupta, “Cultural Affinity between India and Siam,” *Journal of the Greater India Society* 17, 1 & 2 (1958): 269–308; and O. C. Gangoly, “On Some Hindu Relics in Borneo,” *Journal of the Greater India Society* 3, 1 (1936): 97–103; Kalidas Nag, *Greater India (A Study in Indian Internationalism)* (Calcutta: Greater India Society, 1926); Prabodh Chandra Bagchi, *India and China* (Calcutta: Greater India Society, 1927); Bijan Raj Chatterjee, *Indian Culture in Java and Sumatra* (Calcutta: Greater India Society, 1927); Niranjan Prasad Chakravarti, *India and Central Asia* (Calcutta: Greater India Society, 1927); and Upendranath Ghoshal, *Ancient Indian Culture in Afghanistan* (Calcutta: Greater India Society, 1928); see also Sadananda, *Pilgrimage to Greater India* (Calcutta: Swami Sadananda, 1936).

⁹⁹ R. C. Majumdar is seen as one of the most influential historians of his generation. Later in life he was known mostly for his monumental publication: R. C. Majumdar et al., eds., *The History and Culture of the Indian People*, 11 vols. (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1951–1977). His work is criticized in part for its conservative Hindu-nationalist overtones. See also Dietmar Rothermund, “Die Geschichtsschreibung im unabhängigen Indien: Bürgerlich-nationale, marxistische und subalterne Perspektiven,” *Comparativ* 11, 4 (2001): 31–39, esp. 31–32.

¹⁰⁰ See E. S. Craighill Handy, “The Renaissance of Indian Culture: Its Significance for the Pacific and the World,” *Pacific Affairs* 3, 4 (1930): 362–69, 364.

¹⁰¹ R. C. Majumdar, *Ancient Indian Colonies in the Far East*, vols. 1 & 2 (Lahore: The Punjab Sanskrit Book Depot, 1927). Interestingly, Majumdar’s writings on “Greater India” were republished in the 1990s: *History of the Hindu Colonization and the Hindu Culture in South-East Asia* (New Delhi: Classical Publishers, 1996).

¹⁰² Cited in Michael Gottlob, ed., *Historical Thinking in South Asia: A Handbook of Sources from Colonial Times to the Present* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 161–62.

¹⁰³ Kirti N. Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 58–59. For the background and content of this understanding of Hindu-“xenology,” see also Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Philosophical Understanding* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991), 172–96.

was especially popular with the supporters of Hindu nationalist parties and organizations. The Hindu Mahasabha party, for instance, took up the rhetoric of an Indian civilizing mission and decided at its 1932 meeting to send Indian cultural delegations to neighboring countries, to “relive the feeling of the fundamental unity of Asia.”¹⁰⁴

The focal point of Asianism for the Hindu Mahasabha was the attempt to appropriate Asia as a Hindu-Buddhist continent. This, by definition, entailed a geographical conception of Asia that was different from, for instance, an Asia as envisaged by Muslim leaders like the Aga Khan.¹⁰⁵ As a result, most of the international activities of the Hindu Mahasabha were directed eastwards. Nevertheless, there was the odd attempt to appropriate the western part of the continent, such as “Hindus of Arabia: Their Marvellous Survival,” by T. S. Vinayaka Rao, a lawyer from Madras. He wrote to the *Hindu Outlook*, a mouthpiece of the Hindu Mahasabha: “A small community of people who profess Hinduism and who are idol worshippers have been existing for several centuries in Arabia surrounded as it were by fanatical Muslim tribes.”¹⁰⁶ But such wild initiatives, however useful for the Mahasabha’s domestic agenda, proved elusive.

In order to lay claim to Asian civilization through an “Out of India” theory, in the context of the Hindu Mahasabha, the first task was to establish that Hinduism and Buddhism were one. This was an undertaking enthusiastically appropriated by the Hindu Mahasabha Working Committee, which passed a resolution advocating cultural contact between Hindus and Buddhists in Burma. “Buddhism, to which the majority of the Burmese belong, was of Indian origin. In fact, in the beginning it was only a reformation movement among the Hindus. Hence Buddhists are as much Hindus as Protestants are Christians.”¹⁰⁷ This was fully in line with the Hindutva definition as per V. D. Savarkar, the Mahasabha leader.¹⁰⁸ It would become a common theme in Mahasabha circles, through which relations with Buddhist organizations elsewhere in Asia were pursued.

However, this discourse was not limited to a set of Hindu Mahasabha initiatives to further its domestic agenda. Rather, the organization was drawn into existing networks of Indian revolutionaries resident elsewhere in Asia. Petitions submitted to the Hindu Mahasabha, because the sender perceived

¹⁰⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, “Asian Cultural Rapprochement,” *Modern Review* 54 (Dec. 1933): 661–65, here 661. Contemporary Hindu-nationalist groups have employed a surprisingly similar rhetoric. See also Susan Bayly, “India’s ‘Empire of Culture,’” 210–11.

¹⁰⁵ It was also different from the perception of Greater India Society’s Kalidas Nag, who was eager to search for “Aryan” remnants further west. K. Nag, *Greater India; and India and the Middle East* (Calcutta: M. C. Sarkar & Sons, 1954).

¹⁰⁶ *Hindu Outlook*, 27 July 1940: 13.

¹⁰⁷ *Hindu Outlook*, 25 May 1940: 3.

¹⁰⁸ Vinayak D. Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* (New Delhi: Bharati Sahitya Sadan, 2005), 17.

them to fit the organization's agenda, actually outnumber the initiatives originating in the Mahasabha itself. V. D. Savarkar's private correspondence offers fascinating insights into both the transnational networks that were fostered through this perceived Hindu-Buddhist unity and the existing revolutionary networks that were eager to use the rhetoric for obtaining funds, contacts, and goodwill in India, especially in the 1930s. Savarkar maintained a lively correspondence with Rash Behari Bose in Tokyo, who wrote in 1938: "The Buddhists are also Hindus, and every attempt should be made to create a Hindu block extending from the Indian Ocean up to the Pacific Ocean. For this purpose, the Hindu Sabha should take immediate steps for establishing branches of Mahasabha in Japan, China, Siam and other countries of the Pacific and sending their representatives for creating solidarity among the Eastern races."¹⁰⁹ Although Savarkar was not very receptive to the idea of devoting Mahasabha resources to international activities, he had no objection to revolutionaries creating their own momentum. Orders went out through the general secretary in Bombay: "Our President will be glad and feel obliged if you yourself take the lead and start a branch of the Hindu Mahasabha in Japan even though it may not show a large number of members. But it cannot fail to be an authorised International mouth piece of the Hindu Maha Sabha and Hindudom as such in Eastern foreign countries."¹¹⁰ It must also be mentioned that Savarkar did reach out internationally. He kept up a lively exchange with the prime ministers of Burma and Nepal and organizations in those countries throughout the 1930s, ensuring through resident Indian intermediaries that fraternal greetings from the Hindu Mahasabha to their "co-religionists" were regularly published in local papers.

It is important to mention at this junction that this appropriation of Buddhism was not confined to Hindutva. Buddhist revivalism was sweeping across Asia and its leaders found ample hearing in India. A good example is the Indian network forged by the Ceylonese Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933), another delegate to the Chicago World Parliaments of Religions, who was able to use the organizational impetus provided by the Theosophical movement to initiate a variety of initiatives in India.¹¹¹ Gatherings such as the first Pan-Pacific Buddhist Conference (1930) or the Conference of Pan-Pacific Young Buddhist Associations (1934) received wide publicity. The increased presence of itinerant Asian monks in India in the wake of this revival movement was cause of concern for the British, who suspected a "disturbing connection" between this new Buddhist enthusiasm and "the pan-Asiatic idea."¹¹² Weekly

¹⁰⁹ Rashbehari Bose to Savarkar, 11 July 1938, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Savarkar Private Papers, R6450/23.

¹¹⁰ *Idem*, letter dated 18 Aug. 1938.

¹¹¹ B. G. Gokhale, "Theravada Buddhism and Modernization: Anagarika Dhammapala and B. R. Ambedkar," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 34, 1 (1999): 33–45, here 33.

¹¹² APAC, IOR, P&J/12/480, Home Department, 9 Apr. 1934.

intelligence reports regularly mention monks, ostensibly engaged in pilgrimage, who “express an interest in politics” or were suspected of being “secret emissaries.”¹¹³

Finally, the “India Magna” thesis was adopted into a political register as well. Jawaharlal Nehru, known as a rigorous proponent of secularism, was among its politically more moderate supporters. He cites Sylvain Lévi’s *l’Inde Civilisatrice* several times in his widely read books *Discovery of India* and *Glimpses of World History*.¹¹⁴ One might speculate that the attempts at Asian integration during Nehru’s term in office were inspired partly by the idea of Greater India.¹¹⁵ Indeed, the theme resurfaced in the proceedings of the Asian Relations Conference in 1947. The welcome address by Chairman of the Reception Committee Sir Shri Ram read: “In future we shall all . . . visit each other’s countries often, . . . even if not on the scale on which contacts existed at one time between southeast Asia and the kingdoms of the Pandyas and the Cholas.”¹¹⁶

However, one need not take an Asianist perspective to locate problems inherent in conceptions of “India Magna.” The idea of India as a benign colonial power is pervaded by a paternalistic attitude toward “Island India” or Southeast Asia, perceived as culturally similar. Such rhetoric was politically volatile, not least because of the existence of large Indian diasporas in Southeast Asian countries.¹¹⁷ This was one reason why anti-Indian attitudes prevailed in Ceylon and Malaya. In Burma, the 1930s saw multiple pogroms against Indian minorities.¹¹⁸

Into the 1930s and 1940s, it became clear that the rhetoric of Greater India had far outlived its academic base. As Independence and the possible partition of the country drew near, the Hindu right had firmly appropriated the concept of Asia as a Hindu-Buddhist continent. The idea that “civilization” was “Hindu-Buddhist” came to carry the connotation that it was “non-Muslim,” and the rhetoric was domesticated as a Hindu-nationalist tool. The Greater India Society continued its activities, but its output was far outstripped by the clamoring of the Hindu-right press.¹¹⁹ The year 1959, in which the *Journal of the*

¹¹³ APAC, IOR, P&J/12/45, Far Eastern Department, 29 Aug. 1921.

¹¹⁴ Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Repr. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992 [1946]), 200–10; and *Glimpses of World History* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1964 [1934]), 101–5, 136–40.

¹¹⁵ See also Jaffrelot, “India’s Look East Policy,” 38–40.

¹¹⁶ *Report on the Proceedings and Documentation of the First Asian Relations Conference, New Delhi, March–April 1947* (New Delhi: Asian Relations Organization, 1948).

¹¹⁷ See Sunil Amrith, “Tamil Diasporas across the Bay of Bengal,” *American Historical Review* 114, 3 (2009): 547–72; Michael Mann, *Geschichte Indiens vom 18. bis zum 21. Jahrhundert* (Paderborn: UTB, 2005), 207–75.

¹¹⁸ For Southeast Asian skepticism, see also Keenleyside, “Nationalist Indian Attitudes,” 221.

¹¹⁹ In particular, “Long Live Greater Bharat,” *Organiser*, 16 Nov. 1949; “Bharat Must Save Tibet,” *Organiser*, 23 Nov. 1949; “Why India Should Recognize Israel,” *Hindu Outlook*, 4 Apr. 1950; “The International Aspects of Hindu Nationalism,” *Hindu Outlook*, 8 Nov. 1953; “Pan-Islam, A Living Force,” *Organiser*, 22 Feb. 1957.

Greater India Society drew to a close, also marked the start of the conflict with China, which finally eclipsed any ideas of Hindu-Buddhist brotherhood.

“Young Asia”: *Asia as the Site of a Superior Modernity*

While Greater India Asianism, through its consistent emphasis on the importance of Hindu and Buddhist “colonizers,” still partly drew on the larger East-West cliché, the third kind of Asianism to be explored here radically resisted the axiom of the inherent “spirituality” of Asia. The Calcuttan *homo universalis* Benoy Kumar Sarkar (1883–1949)¹²⁰ and the diasporic revolutionary Taraknath Das (1884–1958)¹²¹ were “Young Asia’s” most important prophets in India. Sarkar’s contribution, especially, deserves further examination. This economist and sociologist from Calcutta, all but forgotten today, wielded considerable influence during his lifetime and had a significant impact on intellectual life in his Bengali homeland as much as he formed the image of India in Europe and the United States.

Benoy Kumar Sarkar’s political roots lay in the *Swadeshi* movement.¹²² This experience would mark him for the rest of his life. He became a radical anti-imperialist and aimed at a career in the British-Indian diplomatic service to support independent “national” institutes.¹²³ Between 1914 and 1925 he traveled extensively in Asia before teaching at various universities in Europe and North America. After his return to India he became the chair of Economics at the University of Calcutta in 1926.

His central theme, expressed in countless publications, was India’s connections to other Asian countries. During the First World War, he proposed the first tenets of his concept of Asia on a lecturing tour of the United States.¹²⁴ In *The Futurism of Young Asia*, published in Berlin in 1922, he elaborated on these basics of his pan-Asian project. He saw a collective battle of Asians against the political and intellectual dominance of the West, or as he called it, “Euro-America.” The leitmotif of Asian cooperation was

¹²⁰ For Sarkar’s biography, see Robert E. Frykenberg, “Benoy Kumar Sarkar, 1887–1949, Political *Rishi* of Twentieth-Century Bengal,” in G. Berkemer et al., eds., *Explorations in the History of South Asia: Essays in Honour of Dietmar Rothermund* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001), 197–217; and Haridas Mukherjee, *Benoy Kumar Sarkar: A Study* (Calcutta: Das Gupta and Co., 1953), 3–25.

¹²¹ For a biography, see: Tapan K. Mukherjee, *Taraknath Das: Life and Letters of a Revolutionary in Exile* (Calcutta: National Council of Education, 1998).

¹²² On the *Swadeshi* movement, see, inter alia, Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 244–76; Rajat Kanta Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal, 1875–1927* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), 160–206; and Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903–1908* (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1973).

¹²³ Swapan Kumar Bhattacharya, *Indian Sociology: The Role of Benoy Kumar Sarkar* (Burdwan: University of Burdwan, 1990), 40–54.

¹²⁴ Lecture at Clark University, Worcester, Mass., Nov. 1917, published as: Benoy Kumar Sarkar, “The Futurism of Young Asia,” *International Journal of Ethics* 28, 4 (1918): 521–41.

to him a “war against colonialism in politics and against *orientalisme* in science.”¹²⁵

Japan, Sarkar argued, had delivered proof of Asia’s equality in the military and economic arena. Given such a state of affairs, political decolonization would be only a matter of time. For this reason, the focal point of joint efforts by the peoples of Asia should lie on their mental decolonization. A “critique of Western reason”¹²⁶—to be formulated by Asians—was needed to bring about the end of the intellectual hegemony of Eur-America. His considerations in this sense revolved around two central arguments: First, the specter of the inherent difference of Asia and the superiority of the West were historical constructs. Second, Orientalism perpetuated the myth of civilizational difference insofar as it deduced insights into the character of entire civilizations from older writings usually divorced from their historical context. Sarkar applied himself to the production of “post-Orientalist” knowledge of the Orient, starting with historical research on materialist traditions in India.¹²⁷ But he looked at other Asian nations as well, and published, among other things, a series of writings on politics and religion in China, Japan, and Persia.¹²⁸ The self-appointed representative of *Young Asia* profited especially from his impressive linguistic capabilities. On one hand, he sought academic Western and Indian readerships via publications in English, German, French, and Italian.¹²⁹ On the other, he translated his insights into Bengali and Hindi for Indian non-elite or secondary elite readers.¹³⁰

Institutionally, he tried to draw attention to his pan-Asian agenda in the early 1930s through the foundation of the *Bengali Asia Parishad*. This was a

¹²⁵ Benoy Kumar Sarkar, *The Futurism of Young Asia and other Essays on the Relations between the East and the West* (Berlin: Springer, 1922), iv.

¹²⁶ Sarkar, “Futurism of Young Asia,” 521. See also, Dhruv Raina and Irfan S. Habib, “The Moral Legitimation of Modern Science: Bhadrakok Reflections on Theories of Evolution,” *Social Studies of Science* 26, 1 (1996): 9–42, here 27–29.

¹²⁷ Benoy Kumar Sarkar, *Hindu Achievements in Exact Sciences* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1918); “Public Finance in Ancient India,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 97 (Sept. 1921): 151–69; *The Positive Background of Hindu Sociology: Introduction to Hindu Positivism* (Sacred Books of the Hindus, vol. 23) (Allahabad: The Panini Office, 1937 [1914]).

¹²⁸ Benoy Kumar Sarkar, “Sino-Japanese Buddhism and Neo-Hinduism,” *Modern Review* 20 (July 1916): 39–47; “The Democratic Background of Chinese Culture,” *Scientific Monthly* 8, 1 (1919): 58–65; “Reshaping of the Middle East,” *Journal of Race Development* 9, 4 (1919): 332–43; “The Beginnings of the Republic in China,” *Modern Review* (Aug. 1920): 119–24; and “Persia and the Persian Gulf (1906–1919),” in *Futurism of Young Asia*, 38–47.

¹²⁹ Benoy Kumar Sarkar, “La Théorie de la Constitution dans la Philosophie Indienne,” *Revue de Synthèse Historique* 31 (Aug.–Dec. 1920): 47–52; *Die Lebensanschauung des Inders* (Leipzig: Markert and Petters, 1923); and “Società ed economia nell’India antica e moderna,” *Annali di Economia* 6, 2 (1930): 303–47.

¹³⁰ In this context, the volumes of Benoy Kumar Sarkar—*Bartamān Jagat* (The world of today) (5 Vols., Calcutta: Grihastha Publishing House, 1915–1923)—must be noted, in which he brought to a Bengali readership the culture, society, and politics of the countries that he visited during his first long world tour. See also: Mukherjee, *Benoy Kumar Sarkar*, 19.

platform for scientists, literati, and intellectuals to discuss issues concerning Asia. Among the themes of discussions were “The Asian Movement in India” and “Asia in Bengali Thought,” but also the “Economic Expansion of the Japanese People.”¹³¹ This clearly shows that Sarkar’s understanding of Asia shared little with Tagore’s more romantic vision; Sarkar saw no alternative to fast and full modernization. In *The Futurism of Young Asia*, he explains: “The people of Asia have no choice before them but to accept all the new vidyas and kalas, sciences, arts, mechanisms and institutions of Eur-America from the steam engine to radioactivity and from *The Wealth of Nations* to Bolshevism.... The only problem before the East is to try by all means to catch up to the West at the Japanese rate of advance and establish once more the foundations of equality and reciprocal respect that governed the relations between Asia and Europe in ancient and mediaeval times.”¹³² Aside from this appeal for non-selective modernization, his view on the widely promulgated concept of an “Asian mind” is also remarkable. Fully consistent with his critique of Orientalism, Sarkar professed the strategic-essentialist notion that the Asian nations did not belong to one “Asian civilization,” but were building a community nonetheless because they shared the challenge posed by the West.

This unsentimental estimation is found almost literally in Taraknath Das’ writings. He too was a dedicated supporter of the concept of *Young Asia*. Taraknath Das had been educated partly in the West and, like Sarkar, was familiar with American academic traditions.¹³³ But his fight against the imperialism of the West went further than the Calcuttan professor of economics’ intellectual engagement. After being forced to flee India in 1906 as a suspected “terrorist,” he traveled to Japan before moving to the United States. On arrival he joined the *Ghadar* party, which had been founded by Indian exiles in San Francisco.¹³⁴ This revolutionary group advocated armed struggle against the British Empire and was supported by the German secret service during the First World War. In 1916, Taraknath Das returned to Japan, closely trailed by British Intelligence, which suspected that he had embarked on a propaganda tour of the Far East.¹³⁵ He maintained that he was engaged in a

¹³¹ Sarkar, “Indo-Asian Contacts,” 133–34.

¹³² Sarkar, *Futurism of Young Asia*, 333.

¹³³ Das earned a masters degree in Political Science from the University of Washington in 1911, and his doctorate in 1925 from Georgetown University. For further biographical details, see T. K. Mukherjee, *Taraknath Das*; Ranendranath Das, *Taraknath Das—Ein Lebensbild des indischen Revolutionärs, Freiheitskämpfers und Gelehrten* (Berlin: Taraknath Das-Stiftung, 1996).

¹³⁴ On the activities and ideology of the Ghadar, see inter alia: Maia Ramnath, “Two Revolutions: The Ghadar Movement and India’s Radical Diaspora, 1913–1918,” *Radical History Review* 92 (2005): 7–30; Karl Hoover, “The Hindu Conspiracy in California, 1913–1918,” *German Studies Review* 8, 2 (1985): 245–61; Harish K. Puri, *Ghadar Movement: Ideology, Organization, and Strategy* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University Press, 1983); and Sohan Singh Josh, *Hindustan Gadar Party: A Short History*, 2 vols. (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1978).

¹³⁵ Apparently he managed to travel the Far East disguised as a patent medicine salesman. APAC, IOR, P&J/12/166: File on Taraknath Das (1923).

research project regarding the rise of Japan. Both were true: in 1917, from Shanghai, he published *Is Japan a Menace to Asia?* He answered his question in the negative, arguing instead that Japan was only a menace to European domination in Asia. The book received a considerable amount of press due in part to a foreword by former Prime Minister of China Tong Shao-Yi, and an appendix by Ichiro Tokutomi of the Japanese House of Peers. The otherwise pro-British *Far Eastern Review* even dubbed it “the magnum opus” of the pan-Asiatic movement.¹³⁶

After Taraknath Das had distanced himself from violence and terrorist methods in the 1920s, he published a series of academic papers and articles in Indian journals in which he often promoted the role of “Young Asia” in a future world order. In one 1929 article he articulated his pragmatic understanding of Asian solidarity poignantly: “Today all the Asian peoples feel their own weakness and realize the necessity of some form of concerted action to attain the goal of securing their freedom. This is the true underlying cause of the movement of Pan-Asianism. The movement of Pan-Asianism is bound to be a vital factor towards the accomplishment of Asian Independence; and without Asian Independence any programme for World Peace is a mere mockery.”¹³⁷

CONCLUSION

Forty years ago, the American historian John Steadman wrote that the concept of Asia was so popular with artists, poets, and politicians because there was no clear definition—just a series of emotionally charged connotations that made it versatile in its uses.¹³⁸ Our analysis of Asianism in political and intellectual debate in India supports that thesis. Taken together, one must conclude that “Asia” in this period was a free-floating signifier, a container to be filled with meaning when a particular agenda so required. The three discourses we have discussed, despite their considerable overlaps and mutual borrowings, ultimately put forward very distinct definitions of Asia. Tagore’s spiritual understanding of Asia, embedded in the postulate of a universal synthesis of East and West, did partly inspire the seemingly nativistic panegyrics on the accomplishments of “Greater India,” but it ultimately had little in common with them. And both are hard to reconcile with the sober and pragmatic definition of Asia by Benoy Kumar Sarkar and Taraknath Das, for whom Asian solidarity represented solely a temporary and goal-oriented bond in the battle against the hegemony of Eur-America and for overcoming the colonial trauma.

¹³⁶ Quoted in Mukherjee, *Taraknath Das*, 101.

¹³⁷ Taraknath Das, “Pan Asianism, Asian Independence and World Peace,” *Modern Review* (Jan. 1929): 44–52. See also Taraknath Das, “Awakened Asia and Germany in World Politics,” *Calcutta Review* (Oct. 1927): 107–13.

¹³⁸ John Steadman, *The Myth of Asia* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969), 35.

With that, we have arrived at the question as to the motives for using Asia in a continuum of prospective collective identities that ranged from sub-nationalism to cosmopolitan universalism. This raises the issue of the commonalities shared by the three designs. The reaction to the hegemony of the West and the critique of the imperial world order lies at the base of all three Asianisms in question. Europe, Eur-America, or the Occident are omnipresent in all of them. It is implicit in the Greater India model, with its construction of a “benevolent imperialism,” which takes up the contemporary European rhetoric of “development” or “*mise en valeur*” and seeks to trump it. It is explicit in the Asianisms of Tagore and Sarkar.

The third question we posed at the outset, regarding the interplay between supranational Asia-discourses and the various nationalisms in the region, requires a differentiated answer. The clearest conflict with nationalist agendas was provoked by Tagore’s recapturing of the transnational category of civilization. Not only were Japanese hardliners dissatisfied with his rejection of all nationalisms; it also alienated him from the mainstream of the Indian nationalist movement. His elitist, cosmopolitan Asianism no longer fit the spirit of the times during the mass campaigns of Gandhi, and Tagore’s role in the political debate diminished. On the other hand, the connection between “civilizationism,” nationalism, and imperialism as per Duara is clearly discernible in the concept of Greater India. The Greater India thesis promoted the construction of a national identity to the degree that the strengthened nationalism took on an imperialist guise. Even if it was subtler than the doctrine of a “Greater Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere” as developed contemporaneously in Japan, it provoked new conflicts rather than promoting integration.

The intended emancipation from the intellectual paradigms of the West met with equally limited success. At most, concepts, categories, and binary oppositions were appropriated from the “West.” Only a handful of “thinking Asiatics,”¹³⁹ such as Benoy Kumar Sarkar and Taraknath Das, rejected concepts like “civilization” or “cultural community” as irrelevant to Young Asia. Although their strategic Asianism was marked by considerations of “Realpolitik” and advocated a modernization after the Western example, it made them paradoxically the only ones who could move beyond the hegemonic Western paradigms of civilization. But in this case too, Asianism remained more of a discursive mode than a specific political project.

¹³⁹ Banerji, *Asianism and other Essays*, 1.