

# MODERN CHINA AND INDIA

## Asian History or Third World History?

By Kaushik Bagchi

Experts on China and India tend to stay away from each others' fields. This is in stark contrast to the popular perception, shared by many undergraduate students, of Asia as a single historical and cultural entity that can be studied in a coherent manner. Of late, this notion has been buttressed by media attention on the "Asian" economic miracle, which as we know has now turned into the "Asian" economic crisis. While Asian Studies is now popular on campuses, with a growing number of conferences and professional bodies (the ASIANetwork consortium, for example<sup>1</sup>) to support the trend, scholars within the field still remain confined by the traditional demarcations: East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia. Perhaps the only time all these regions are really studied together is in the traditional Asian Civilization survey, generally taught to freshmen as a humanities requirement. Once faculty are done teaching this course, a task they do not always enjoy, they go back to their own areas of specialization.

I suggest in this article that some of the content of the field of Asian Studies be reorganized around new themes, such as Third World history. While we might be concerned about the negative connotations the term "Third World" might carry for North American students, other labels such as "developing country" or "less industrialized nation" are, in my opinion, even more problematic and unsatisfactory. I am using the term "Third World" here in a neutral, descriptive sense, and also, deliberately, as a symbol of affiliation and identity in the new, post-Cold War world order.<sup>2</sup> I focus here specifically on modern India and China, two countries which, I argue, lend themselves more readily to comparison if we see them as Third World, rather than Asian countries. Such an approach will bring the field of Asian Studies more in line with recent global, or world-historical trends, and at the same time infuse new meaning into the definition of the field itself.

The Third World has been for so long a feature of the modern global landscape, having outlived the Cold War and the East-West divide, that it is worth reminding ourselves that it is, in fact, a new and unique phenomenon in world history. While there have been rich and poor societies in earlier periods of history, the emergence of a group of countries, from different continents and cultural regions, that have enough characteristics in common to justify the use of this overarching category is unprecedented in human history. What is especially unprecedented is the sharp and

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(Top to bottom) 1949 posters of Chairman Mao from the Web site [www.blythe.org/mim/index.html](http://www.blythe.org/mim/index.html); photo of Shanghai, © Coral Corp.; poster image of Nehru from the Web site [www.cnce.com/india/nehru.htm](http://www.cnce.com/india/nehru.htm); photo of an Indian farmer [c. 1990], courtesy of Kaushik Bagchi; and a photo of the "Gate of India," Bombay, © Coral Corp.



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massive socioeconomic divide, brought on by scientific and industrial developments in the last two hundred years, between these countries and developed nations.

But it is not just their economic condition, or poverty relative to the developed countries, that the Third World nations have in common. From Latin America to Africa to Asia, these countries seem to be grappling increasingly with a similar set of issues. These include fighting poverty and economic inequality, improving the status of women, reversing environmental degradation, coping with the cultural and economic legacy of the colonial era, promoting democratic structures, and preserving cultural identity in the face of globalization and homogenization. Mexico City, Cairo, Bombay, Jakarta, and Shanghai are all beginning to look alike, and it is often hard to tell the Peruvian landscape of a Mario Vargas Llosa novel from the Egyptian setting of Naguib Mahfouz. Studying India and China as Third World nations therefore raises a range of common issues and themes that can be used for course work and discussion, which viewing them simply as Asian countries does not.

### **CHINA AND INDIA SINCE REVOLUTION AND INDEPENDENCE**

Last year, I attempted to tackle these issues in an upper-level course on “Twentieth-Century Asia” by using a comparative perspective and contemporary global themes. My course was called “China and India since Revolution and Independence.” The readings and lectures covered a wide range of topics such as politics, social issues, cultural trends, economic development, and environmental problems. In addition to short papers focused on each country, students had to write a final paper comparing the two countries in one or more areas, depending on their interests.

When I had taught the course in the past, I had done literally what the title demanded: a survey of as much of twentieth-century Asia as possible, without losing focus altogether. While we covered a lot of ground, and my students amassed a large amount of information on different regions, I found the result very unsatisfactory. This time, I decided to narrow the focus—if studying India and China together can be called narrow—and also put the comparative perspective at the heart of the course.

While China was never a formal colony of a foreign power, both India and China entered the post-World War II era from a background of struggle against Western or Westernized powers. India’s fortunes had been dictated by the British for a hundred and fifty years, and China too had been forced to cede concessions and acknowledge spheres of influence ever since the West displayed its power in the Opium Wars of the nineteenth century. This history had a profound influence in shaping both Chinese and Indian attitudes and policies after 1950, particularly in politics and economics.

A convenient and meaningful starting point for their history as fully sovereign nations is 1950–51; India completed the transition from British rule and became a republic, and newly communist China emerged with enhanced status and recognition from the test of the Korean War.<sup>3</sup> After the end of colonialism, both nations kept their distance from the West. China, after its initial

friendship with the Soviet Union, virtually became a bloc by itself,

while India became a prominent player in the nonaligned movement. Only recently, in the last fifteen to twenty years, have both countries begun to drop their inward-looking policies and engage in a political give-and-take with Western nations. Other countries in Asia and Africa have gone through almost identical colonial and postcolonial experiences. A comparison of the course of India’s and China’s relations with Western countries sheds considerable light on twentieth-century world history and can be an interesting topic for a course paper.

In their internal politics, China and India went entirely different ways, at least at first glance. China proclaimed itself a communist state, while India decided to mold itself into a Western-style democracy. These were at least their intentions on paper. To what extent these ideas percolated down into the vast rural populace of both countries, and how they interacted with local traditions to shape a new political culture, is another story. What the founding leaders of newly independent or sovereign nations all over Africa and Asia wanted above all in the 1950s and 1960s was modernization, not just in terms of economic development, but politically and socially as well. Both Nehru and Mao, for example, wanted to create modern-thinking and progressive societies, which they equated among other things with an industrial mindset and a distancing from, or repudiation of, religion. Whether the Chinese people at large truly absorbed communist ideas, to what extent Indian society really is democratic, or whether life below the surface followed other customs and structures that had developed over centuries, are questions that still need to be answered.

Another area of possible comparative study is economic development and policies in China and India in the last four decades. A handy organizing structure is provided by the five-year plans of the two countries, inspired by Soviet socialism. Building a heavy industrial base was a top priority in both countries. Rural development was, and remains, another common and urgent issue. While both China and India have invested a lot over the years in rural improvement, China perhaps more than India because of the inherent structure and background of the Communist Party, the cities are still the places where economic activity and modern comforts are most concentrated and visible, and where people want to move in search of a better life.

Bombay and Shanghai today are like magnets sucking in resources and people, a pattern which is typical of countless developing countries all over the world. Rural versus urban development is not an Asian, but a global, Third World issue. So is the question of economic liberalization and the ending of closed-door policies, which both China and India have embraced in fits and starts over the last decade or two, with benefits and consequences that are making the two countries converge toward a “global” model. It is in areas like this that the histories of modern India and China genuinely intersect, and not in the increasingly artificial realm of Asian history.

An urgent social issue in virtually all Third World nations is gender relations and the status of women. Both India and China declared soon after attaining sovereignty their total commitment to women’s rights and equality with men. Comparing how far the

two countries have come toward reaching this goal is a useful exercise, one which leads to related topics such as population planning, food production and consumption, and education. When students think of India and China, and indeed of Third World countries in general, they think of population. Paper assignments present no major problem, even for students with limited knowledge of Asia, since there is no dearth of primary and secondary material on this topic. One student in my course wrote a paper comparing female infanticide and the treatment of female children in India and China.

Indian and Chinese culture are also often associated with religious traditions, particularly Hinduism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Again, a corrective is required when discussing the recent history of these countries. In China, communism suppressed religion for so long that broad sections of society apparently turned away from all religious sentiment and tradition. Recently, though, religion, along with the free market, appears to be making a comeback. On my recent visit, I noticed that the temples are flourishing and worshippers were coming in a steady stream to pay respects. In India, on the other hand, religion was never suppressed, even if the secular elite, typified by Nehru, often viewed it as an opiate of the people and an obstacle to progress. But the study of religion in post-1950 China and India has to be approached very differently from that of the freshman Asian survey where Buddhism, Hinduism, Daoism, and Confucianism are treated by both students and faculty as manifestations of the “wisdom of the East.” Religion in modern Asia is a more challenging topic than economic development or population, mainly because it is not as quantifiable and tangible, and is probably handled better by students who are already somewhat familiar with Asian culture, if one wants to avoid slipping into Orientalist clichés.

### THE RELEVANCE OF ASIAN STUDIES IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

Asia, as K. N. Chaudhuri has reminded us, is a European invention,<sup>4</sup> and “Asian Civilization” smacks more of nineteenth-century Orientalist imaginings than of the realities of the modern world. So is it still possible to do Asian Studies in a meaningful fashion without breaking the established professional boundaries? The question is more relevant, I believe, to modern Asian studies, than to the study of premodern Asia. In premodern times, Buddhism served as a link between Indian and Chinese, and subsequently Korean and Japanese civilizations, Islam and Buddhism spread along the silk routes across Central Asia, and Southeast Asia and India exchanged goods and ideas. But that was all a long time ago. The closer we get to the present, the more tenuous the linkages become, and “Asia” seems to become less and less meaningful.<sup>5</sup>

So where does that leave Asian Studies and those of us who teach it? After we get to “the arrival of the West” (or Western ideas), seemingly the last great event shared by all Asian societies, does Asian Studies dissolve as each country and region goes its own way? I believe not. On the contrary, the study of Asia can make even more sense in the twentieth-century setting, provided we are willing to try new approaches such as the one I have outlined.

I am not suggesting here that we abandon the idea of Asian Studies since the twentieth-century world has overtaken or rendered obsolete the idea of Asian societies or an Asian civilization. On the contrary, what I have outlined above, and other similar approaches, could help Asian studies maintain and gain new relevance in the contemporary world. It would also give meaning to the term “Asianist,” if by that we mean someone who studies pan-Asian culture and society, because most Asianists today are, in reality, East Asianists, South Asianists, Southeast Asianists, and so on.

While countries in Asia have in recent times gone their own different ways, centuries of cross-cultural contacts and transnational trade have also formed an Asian culture, or perhaps an Asian web of contacts and exchanges, one that is quite distinct from, say, the Latin American or the African web, despite their shared fate today as Third World countries. Asian Studies does not, therefore, have to be discarded entirely as an area of study. It should, instead, be combined with new approaches and categories to reflect the sweeping changes which the twentieth century has brought about in the global landscape. The Third World, or developing country approach is one way of doing this. It would also be possible to use, for example, gender relations, environmental issues, or religious movements as one’s principal analytical category. All of these have transnational dimensions, but have also to take into account the specific culture and histories of individual societies.

World history, which takes transnational and cross-cultural processes in history as its primary object of study, does not have to deny the distinctiveness of each country or society. It can allow room for the specialized and focused analysis of experts in traditional fields, as well as the synthesis which world historians themselves have set as their goal.<sup>6</sup> ■

### NOTES

1. This consortium of mainly liberal arts colleges was established recently to promote Asian Studies on their campuses through study abroad programs, faculty development, and collaborative student-teacher projects, among other things (URL: <http://www.asianetwork.org>).
2. In an interdisciplinary freshman course I am currently teaching on “Third World Music and History,” students often say that they consider the term Third World “cool.” It then becomes my task to provide correctives, that is, present a bleaker and less attractive picture.
3. See, for example, Craig Dietrich, *People’s China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 65–68.
4. K. N. Chaudhuri, *Asia Before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 22–24.
5. For example, K. N. Chaudhuri’s comparative studies of Asian history, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) and *Asia Before Europe*, both end around 1750.
6. For a discussion of the tension between professional specialization, and synthesis in world history, see Gilbert Allardyce, “Toward World History: American Historians and the Coming of the World History Course,” *Journal of World History* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1990), 23–26.

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