

‘The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and a Sustainable Future’ *Interactive Session with Prasenjit Duara*

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Institute of Chinese Studies

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Prasenjit Duara was at the Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi, to engage in an interactive discussion on his newly released book ‘The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and a Sustainable Future’, published by the Cambridge University Press. The respondents included Rajeev Bhargava, Director, Centre for the Study of Developing Studies, Hemant Adhlakha, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Ritu Agarwal, Jawaharlal Nehru University and Alka Acharya, Director, Institute of Chinese Studies.

The interaction began with a brief introduction to the book by the author himself who mentioned that the basic methodology of the book that criss-crosses various disciplines, hinges on three key areas – historical sociology, history of religion and secularism, and world economy and politics. The central theme of the book is that the crisis of global modernity has been the result of human overreach, and the efforts to transform the world has reached a point of crisis resulting in both diminishing and decreasing returns.

He mentioned that there is already a consensus among a majority of environmental scientists that we are living in the Anthropocene period where human activity has overtaken geological or natural forces in shaping nature.

He argued that if China and India, both growing non-western powers, continue to follow the same western model of development, then the day is not far when our world and all forms of life, including human life would be ravaged. He reiterated the importance of all disciplines to study and attend to these problems in the interest of a sustainable planet.

His book looks at alternative approaches in Asian traditions and religions in order to achieve the goal of sustainability. This would require a major transformation in our literary approach as well as in the way we do research; so much so that it requires changes in protocol, themes etc. of our approach to research. Duara argued that must strive towards a goal of transcendence – transcend the traditional nationalist understanding of history towards transnational historiography. He believes that Asian traditions offer different ways of understanding the relationship between the personal, ecological and universal.

Rajeev Bhargava mentioned that culture is the only remnant of transcendent authority with us now. He acknowledged the yearning for the metaphysical in humans which has effects on reality. On the question of transcendence, he mentioned that all religions – Buddhism, Abrahamic tradition, Catholicism, Sufism, and so on – have texts, scriptures that are discursive and hence, possess some sort of ideology or religiosity. However, capitalism is not transcendent, rather, it is hegemonic. In some ways, on the question of dialogic propagated by

Durara, Bhargava felt that the dialogic can also become status-quoist sometimes. A similar point was made by Acharya as well. Bhargava called for radical transcendence as an option in these occasions. Notwithstanding, he cautioned about the consequences of such radical transcendent approaches as being more difficult to counter, and therefore there is a tension here vis-à-vis the problem with counter-finalities. He also harked on another type of tension pertaining to technology as the supposed alternative to achieve sustainability. Language was considered as another important factor in bridging the gap between local/personal concerns and universal concerns.

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