



Finding India in China: Travels to the Lesser Known

Speaker: Dr. Anurag Viswanath, Adjunct Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies

Chair: Prof. Alka Acharya, Director, Institute of Chinese Studies

16 December 2015

Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi

Dr. Anurag Viswanath held a book reading session and a presentation on her latest publication 'Finding India in China.' Dr. Viswanath began her presentation with a short video in which she talked about her inspiration for writing the book. The author describes the book as a deeply personal account of her travels and experiences in China. Having extensive experience of traveling through interiors of China, the author has put her understanding and perceptions of the country into this book. As one moves further from the glittery eastern coastal cities towards western hinterlands, a different China emerges. It is this China and its lesser-known diversity which is the highlight of the book, and not the oft-discussed Chinese economic miracle or the 'golden cities'. The book spans seven different cities/villages located in China's hinterlands or the periphery. These cities/villages were chosen since the author believes there is a degree of similarity with different cities or regions in India. It is intended for the layperson curious to understand China through an Indian lens.

After the brief video, the author proceeded with reading an excerpt from the book. She chose a chapter about the Gansu province, commonly known as China's Bihar in the Indian China circle. She described present-day Gansu as hotbed of backwardness and poverty, much as Bihar is in India. The bond of likeness between the two provinces extends beyond misery and deprivation. Historically, Gansu was a strategic point on the ancient Silk Road and also bore a significant footprint of Indic Buddhism, similar to Nalanda and Bodhgaya in Bihar. The Chinese word *luan* (乱) best describes Gansu – disordered, chaotic, far from the glamour of modernity, and largely unknown. Despite its comparisons with Bihar, Gansu fairs better than many Indian provinces in terms of development and infrastructure. The Chinese central government's Western Development strategy is aimed at transforming the 'ugly duckling' into a 'beautiful swan'.

The author also narrated instances where she was identified as an Indian solely by her appearance. The lay Chinese person associated India with old Bollywood movies, and associated Indian women with a red dot on the forehead.

Historically, Xinjiang province has maintained a distinct identity from the rest of Han China. However, present day Urumqi, with its tall skyscrapers, open boulevards, People's Road, and a People's Square; could be mistaken for any other modern Chinese city. Cities of Xinjiang are undergoing rapid 'Shanghai-fication' and the native Uyghurs have become a minority in the autonomous region dedicated to the ethnic community. The author made a comparison with India's Jammu and Kashmir province which also faces challenges of separatism and terrorism. Like J&K which is home to Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists; Xinjiang is a melting pot of Turkic Uyghurs and Han Chinese which manifests in the region's unique cuisine and architecture.

The author compared Xi'an with the Lucknow and Aligarh region. Xi'an's claim to global fame is Terracotta Warriors, the mausoleum of the first Chinese emperor Qin Shihuang. A vibrant Hui Muslim community is the lesser known side of Xi'an. In this sense, there is a parallel between Moplas of Malabar and Huis of Xi'an, the latter born out of intermarriage between Arabs/Persians and the local Chinese. Inner Mongolia is likened to Rajasthan as both share long history of warfare, conquests, feudalism, and hierarchy. Xiamen is compared with Mumbai and Surat as they were all first ports of emigration. Even today, these cities attract hordes of migrants from all over their respective countries, yet also nurse a certain anxiety towards them. Kaifeng is likened to Kochi as both the cities serve as model examples of assimilation and integration of foreigners with the mainstream. While the Kochi Jews have maintained a distinct identity and Judaism is a living tradition in the city, the Chinese Jews have completely assimilated with the mainstream. Daqing in Heilongjiang has similarity with Jharkhand, Dhanbad, Bokaro region, the common factor being their geographical location in the country's industrial belt.

The author concluded the session by narrating an anecdote where a young Chinese man professes his admiration for a fashion model over revolutionary heroes. The particular fashion model was born in a dusty county in rural Henan and later became China's first supermodel to walk the ramp in Paris. The story of rags to riches, from bicycle to limousine, is indeed the new China dream.

Discussion

A lively discussion session followed the presentation. Questions ranged from details about the book and publisher to queries into personal interests of the author. A question was asked about the choice of poverty and backwardness as choice of subject. The author explained that her original area of research was role of state in poverty alleviation programmes. However, the choice of Dingxi county for her fieldwork was made by her Chinese supervisor. Dingxi is a model county, and model counties have a reputation for being prepped up by the state for

showcase purposes. The author also expressed desire to write a book on poverty alleviation in future.

When asked about the profile of the book publisher, the author explained that she self-published the book in order to retain the history component of the narrative. The book has received overwhelming reception in Singapore and its second edition will shortly go to press. Questions were asked about plans to translate the book in Chinese and regional Indian languages. The author informed that the book is available in select book stores in Shanghai, and plans to translate the book into Chinese and regional Indian languages might be considered in future.

On being asked if she intends to be a full-time travel writer, the author said that while it has been long since an Indian travel book on China was published, her book is unique as it has layers of history intertwined with travel experiences. She was also questioned about her unpleasant experiences in China, to which she replied that China is a welcoming place and she did not face any hostility except some racial slurs.

A question was asked on Tibet being conspicuous by absence in author's narratives. The author explained that she was declined entry permit into the Tibet Autonomous Region as Indians must travel in a group. Another participant followed up with a question if the author faced any difficulty in traveling through Lanzhou, one of the centres of China's national nuclear power industry, to which the author replied in negative.

The concluding question was asked by the author's doctoral research supervisor, Prof. Manoranjan Mohanty. He asked the author's final impressions and what kind of India she eventually succeeded in finding in China. The author saw India in multiple ways – fleeting flashes, parallels, commonality of history and geography, and sometimes issues. She did not witness a definite India, and her final impression is that while both the countries are vastly different, they are also alike in many ways.

Report prepared by Prateeksha Tiwari, Research Assistant, Institute of Chinese Studies.

About the Speaker

Anurag Viswanath is an avid China watcher who has regularly been writing about China for more than a decade, with numerous articles in Bangkok Post, The Nation and Prachatai in Thailand, Far East Economic Review in Hong Kong, as well as Financial Express and Business Standard in India, among others. A Mandarin speaker, she has travelled extensively throughout China. She lived in Shanghai as a researcher at Fudan University for her doctoral dissertation on China's reforms from Delhi University. An Adjunct Fellow of the Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi, she presently lives in Singapore.

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