



# INSTITUTE OF CHINESE STUDIES

## VP Dutt Memorial Lecture: The Art of Convergent Comparison: India and China in Modern Times

**Speaker:** Prof. Prasenjit Duara

**Chair:** Patricia Uberoi

**Venue:** IIC Annexe, Room II

**Date:** 24 April, 2019

The VP Dutt Memorial lecture was chaired by Patricia Uberoi, the Chairperson of the Governing Board of Institute of Chinese Studies. In her opening remarks, she conferred a heart-warming eulogy to the illustrious career of Prof. VP Dutta, calling him one of the few spotlight professors whose expert comments were always sought after in such academic gatherings. After this, she introduced the gathering to the familiar face of the distinguished sinologist and historian Prasenjit Duara- the speaker for the evening.

Prof. Duara began his talk with an introduction to the notion of ‘circulatory histories’ by drawing parallels to an ‘ocean flow’ model wherein history is not tunnelled and linear (like that in the case of national histories) but rather, of an open-ended nature. To illustrate the idea, he touched upon the historical interconnectedness of the Afro-Eurasian region since the Bronze Age. He asserted that ‘histories cannot be confined by national borders, but they disperse’. In his words, “histories between the two countries have not been isolated, but they have merged and emerged from each other.” This idea was presented to the audience through various examples drawn from the first millennium circulations of Buddhism in South Asia and its impact on social, culture monastic economy, salvation practices; and art. These included- the linkage between the Achaemenid Empire inscriptions and the Ashoka Pillar, Asokan Pillar at the gates of a Buddhist temple in Thailand and the incorporation of the Daoist Avolokitesvara, Jiuku tianzun into Buddhism.

Further familiarizing the audience with the theoretical framework of circulatory histories, Prof. Duara discussed how historians present different conceptions of time and how societies experience

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time differently. He explained that circulatory history concerns itself with the flow of time. In doing so, it is important to identify the vehicles, bodies, agencies and processes that embody the flow of time. He asserted that the natural process most suited to explain his model of history is the circulatory flow of the oceans. Just like the ocean flow is not tunnelled or bounded, circulation of history can also be fundamentally understood in the same way. He recounted the various characteristics of this flow as irreversibility, repetition and morphology.

In the next part of this speech, he traced the circulatory histories between India and China. From the sixteenth century onwards, two countries became the sink of the silk trade. This accelerated the connections between the two global societies. At the political front, both the countries found common enemies in the European forces which resulted into the Taiping Rebellion from 1850 to 1864 and the India's First War of Independence in 1857 respectively. Both the countries also experienced a transition from politics of the moderates and constitutionalists in the early twentieth century to their downfall and rise of extremist politics. Finally, in spite of ideological diversions, the parties of Mao and Gandhi respectively had striking similarities in their goals, visuals, rhetoric, representational techniques and results. Prof. Duara uses these similarities to understand the convergence between the histories of the two countries that has been brought about by the circulatory forces. In his words, 'the zone of convergence is the space of impact space of circulatory forces'. This concept gives a better understanding of the continuities, discontinuities and the novelties that arise in the course of history.

In the next part, Prof. Duara discussed the responses of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of India to the various forces of nationalism, competitiveness, rights and markets. According to him, the two countries pursued fundamentally different ideological and political principles; where one nation-building focused on command economy with capitalist foundations, the other pursued autarkic development with strong socialist characteristics. However, these circulatory forces not only apply at national-level, but also at micro-level processes. Prof. Duara argues that these forces such as goods, ideas and styles, etc. ingress more easily and incrementally into societies through routine, everyday activities.

He contends that both the nations and the basic constitution of people across the world, imbibe within them a fundamentally global nature. However, it the drive for sovereignty that leads to a deliberate creation of distinctiveness. Most of the times, it is the myths that play an instrumental role in creating conflicts between national identities. Prof. Duara, in his research, thus seeks to find a reconciliation between the globality and nation-ness. This reconciliation will emerge when the discourses are based on cultural sensorium that is, visual, aural, auditory, tactile experiences. Popular examples of the same are the appeal towards Nehru Jacket, Sun Yat Sen's Suit and the East-Asian fruit Durian, K-Pop, national anthems and flags, etc.

According to Prof. Duara, cultural sensorium combines vernacularization and novelty to facilitate the ingression of cultures, creating a comprehensive infra-cultural framework. One example he cites is of the play by Gigi Sicaria- 'Any Parallel', where Gandhi-Nehru and Mao-Deng have been compared. He also talks about the Anyuang painting of 1967 made by Liu Chunhua. The painting features Chairman Mao with the *yunhai* in one hand and a clenched fist, representing a unique combination of traditional imagery with a modern style. It depicts the 1922 Anyuan coal-mine movement also inspired by enlightenment era artist- Raffaello Sanzio's styles, thus representing vernacularization of a revolutionary message.

The lecture headed towards its conclusion with an engrossing interaction session wherein several interesting questions were raised by eminent experts and students. The questions covered a broad spectrum including the intra-cultural infrastructure between India and Bangladesh, convergent comparisons between Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping, the impact of Tagore on China, blurring on circulatory forces amidst an internet age, etc.

*Report Prepared by Nishant Dilip Sharma and Aishwarya Sanas, Research Interns at Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.*

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