

## **In Search of an Asian Cosmopolitanism**

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Asia as cartographic reality or an imagined place is a many layered concept that has embodied a range of social and political attributes in its long historical existence. In this paper I would like to explore the many contending Asianisms in the region built around imperial agendas, religious communities, national destinies and emancipatory ideologies to think about the meaning of Asia in its layered and polysemic environment and its future in an increasingly interdependent world. To that end I will mainly focus on South Asia and East Asia to consider the dynamics of the interplay between nationalism and regionalism, globalisation and cosmopolitanism, poles that provide one way to map the contours of this elusive and yet all-encompassing concept.

India and Japan provide examples of the different trajectories that the idea of Asia has taken. In Japan the attraction of Pan-Asianism lay in evoking a sense of community based on ancient philosophies and traditions that justified the challenge to European hegemony. The Pan-Asian agenda offered a way to galvanise the people and lay the basis for both a trans-national movement that could unite the colonised while simultaneously embodying the dreams of imperial expansion. This ambiguity lies at the core of Japanese Pan-Asianism.

In India the idea of Asia is much more inchoate and rarely articulated in any rigorous or sustained manner. Colonisation served in many ways to sever and alter regional links and created the idea of a self-contained civilisation. In nationalist writings the idea of Asia is linked to the centrality of India as the source and creator of Asian civilisation. This becomes one basis for the central role India is expected to play once it achieves independence.

Central to the definition of any Asian ideology was the issue of modernity and culture and how to overcome Western dominance. The anxiety and concern with culture finds expression in a range of texts. This historical background and the recovery of these different agendas allows us to think about the function of the idea of Asia and its relationship with nationalism in today's increasingly inter-dependent world. It also serves as an entry point to consider the shaping of notions of culture and modernity and the conflicted relationship between the West and the rest. Is there, I would ask, the possibility of an Asian cosmopolitanism?