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Mark R. Frost

Mark Ravinder Frost studied history at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge and has published articles on Asian history and heritage in journals such as *Modern Asian Studies*, the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* and the *Asian Literary Review*. In 2010, his first book, *Singapore: A Biography* (2009) won the Asia Pacific Publishers Association Gold Medal and was selected as a "Choice Outstanding Academic Title". He is currently Lecturer in Transnational and Regional History at the University of Essex. Email: markderavinder@gmail.com

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The Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre Institute of Southeast Asian Studies

30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Pasir Panjang, Singapore 119614

TELEPHONE : (+65) 6870 4549

FAX : (+65) 6775 6264

E-MAIL : nsc@iseas.edu.sg

WEB : www.iseas.edu.sg/nsc

"That Great Ocean of Idealism": Calcutta, the Tagore Circle and the Idea of Asia, 1900 – 1920¹

Mark R. Frost

If any one political drama dominates the intellectual history of Calcutta during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, then surely it must be the Swadeshi movement of 1905 to 1908. These three hectic years of boycotts, protest marches and revived domestic industry have been seen by several historians as epoch-defining. Swadeshi (literally meaning "of one's own country") appears as that crucial moment when a nineteenth century Bengal Renaissance discovers its radical voice and thrusts the "second city" of the British Empire to the forefront of the anti-colonial struggle.² Recently, Swadeshi has been presented almost as an apotheosis for the very concept of Bengali "culture" itself: the point at which "culturalism", having migrated to India from northern Europe, transforms into the organizing trope in a popular celebration of local and communal distinctiveness.³

However, from a Bengali-nationalist perspective, the years that followed the Swadeshi campaign must have appeared something of an anticlimax. In 1911, the capital of the Indian Empire moved back to Delhi; by which time the promise of a collective Swadeshi agitation that would unite Hindus and Muslims had dissipated in communal riots; by which time, also, Calcutta's intellectual scene had become saturated by the "culture of revolution" and the "philosophy of the bomb" found in the city's proliferating secret societies and seditious coffee clubs.⁴ At the conclusion

¹ This is a revised version of a paper originally presented at 'The Indian Ocean World Colloquium', 11-12 August 2007, Kuala Lumpur. The study was subsequently published (under the same title) in Shanti Moorthy and Ashraf Jamal (eds), *Indian Ocean Studies: Cultural, social and political perspectives* (London; New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 251-79.

² For an important discussion of the way Swadeshi has been represented as the culmination of a "Bengal Renaissance" (with "Calcutta lying at the heart of both") see Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), pp. 159-85. Earlier, Sarkar traced the ideological origins of Swadeshi back through Bengal's nineteenth century "renaissance", in *The Swadeshi movement in Bengal, 1903-1908* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1973), pp. 24, 34-35.

³ Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁴ To borrow the description of Haridas and Uma Mukherjee, quoted by Roger Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: Vol. 3 — His Life and Work* (New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977), p. 78.

of World War One, leadership of the Indian nationalist movement passed to a Gujarati by the name of Mohandas Gandhi, who appropriated *Swadeshi* to become the nation's most famous political icon. In the 1920s, in the same decade that Gandhi presented passive resistance to the Indian nation, Calcutta experienced a major outbreak of the Hindu-Muslim violence that would periodically blight the city through the remainder of the century. In terms of a unifying Indian nationalism, by 1920, Calcutta appeared to have lost its intellectual primacy.⁵

But as much new scholarship illustrates, a land-locked, nation-state perspective provides just one prism through which to appreciate India's past.⁶ Indeed, in terms of Indian intellectual history, the territorial strictures imposed by a narrowly domestic investigation might not always prove the most enlightening. For if we approach the city of Calcutta not from the *mofussil* but from the sea, then a rather different tale can be told of its metropolitan rise as a center for ideas.

In this story, Calcutta appears as a highly internationalized, globally-connected colonial port-city, part of a network of other port-cities across the Indian Ocean world that were linked to each other by improved maritime communications and, in particular, by a steadily faster and more reliable imperial post.⁷ Through the latter nineteenth century, and especially after 1900, Calcutta literati utilized the accelerated circulation of books, periodicals and correspondence that the imperial post facilitated to establish their cultural presence not just throughout India but across the wider Indian Ocean world. With the advent of more rapid and frequent steamship passages, they began to make voyages to other port-cities that reinforced their taste for supranational intellectual sociability. In turn, a regional traffic in news, views and ideologies flowed back into the "second city" of the Empire; in growing numbers, literati, holy men and political activists headed to Calcutta to preen

⁵ At least, that is to say, in the minds of subsequent generations of Bengali literati. See Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, pp. 184-85.

⁶ One of the most important additions to this literature is Sugata Bose's *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2006). Other works with a similar oceanic scope are discussed throughout this essay.

⁷ See Mark Ravinder Frost, "Asia's Maritime Networks and the Colonial Public Sphere, 1840-1920", *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 6, no. 2 (December 2004): 63-94.

themselves in its metropolitan limelight and draw global attention to their diverse projects. In an era of heightened maritime interconnection, not only does Calcutta become a key reference point for Indian nationalist thinking, it also establishes itself as one of the most cosmopolitan centers of knowledge in the Indian Ocean world.

This is the accompanying story of Calcutta's intellectual history that the remainder of this essay will explore. In particular, the following discussion suggests that simultaneous to the rise of *Swadeshi*, and surviving well after its decline, Calcutta became home and inspiration to some of the more definitive expressions of pan-Asianism and an influential discourse of Asian civilization.⁸ In such discussions the presence of the Indian Ocean was never far away. Not only did it sustain the practical communications through which Calcutta literati (and those who joined their discussions from overseas) read, traveled and discovered the wider world beyond their city's shores, it also generated the cosmopolitan arena through which their ideas about Asia were disseminated. Not least, the Indian Ocean provided the historical authority and the metaphorical language through which a new universalism was increasingly expressed. In the writings of prominent Calcutta-based literati, Asian civilization became an "ocean of idealism" through which, in the distant past as well as in their more immediate present, "waves", "currents" and "ripples" of Indian thought repeatedly washed up on distant "shores" and "beaches" to unite the region as one unified whole.

Before we examine these "waves", "ripples" and "currents" in detail, let us first begin at their point of origin with some of those important developments that marked Calcutta's emergence as a global intellectual center.

⁸ For an alternative discussion of this theme, see Prasenjit Duara, "The Discourse of Civilisation and Pan-Asianism", *Journal of World History* 12, vol. 1 (2001): 99-132.

The enlightened city

In 1908, the *Imperial Gazetteer* remarked of the Bengal press that "a great change has generally taken place in its character, tone and literary style". It went on to elaborate:

The principal characteristics of such papers at the present time are the increasing prominence given to political and administrative questions, a reckless, exaggerated and occasionally disloyal tone, and a colloquial, ungrammatical, and anglicized style. *With the spread of English education, the papers published in English by Bengalis are rapidly growing in importance.*⁹

This latter point is of some significance. Late nineteenth century Calcutta, like other colonial port-cities across British Asia, had experienced a major expansion in Western-style, English-language education. By 1908, the city was home to four daily English-language papers edited by Europeans, and five edited by Indians (the *Bengalee*, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, *Indian Mirror*, *Hindoo Patriot* and *Bande Mataram*). The city's total of nine English-language periodicals compared with the 23 vernacular journals that circulated in the same year, the most influential of which were the weekly *Hitabadi*, *Basumati* and *Bangabasi*. Of these, the *Bangabasi* magazine was especially popular, at one time achieving an unprecedented subscription list of 50,000, partly through its repeated assertions that the discoveries of Western science had been anticipated by the ancient Aryans.¹⁰

Inevitably, the readership for Calcutta's English-language periodicals paled by comparison. In 1908, the *Imperial Gazeeteeer* estimated that although one in five males in the city was literate, the English-speaking population numbered just 29,000, compared with 435,000 Bengali-speakers and 319,000 Hindi-speakers.¹¹ Nonetheless, the "rapidly growing" importance of the Indian English-language press

⁹ *Imperial Gazetteer: Vol. VII* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), p. 337. My emphasis.

¹⁰ Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth Century Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), p. 11.

¹¹ *The Imperial Gazetteer of India, Vol. IX*, pp. 261, 267-9, 283. The statistical breakdown for literacy from the 1901 Census for Calcutta is 20.9% amongst males and 3.8% amongst females. Among Christians, 75.9% were literate, among Hindus 26.5% and among Muslims 12.2%

can be gauged by examining its broader national and regional circulation. For instance Calcutta's monthly *Modern Review*, which first appeared in 1907, quickly became something of a "New Yorker" for the Indian Ocean world. The journal's articles were frequently summarized or lifted wholesale by other periodicals across the region (this was an age before copyright) and the *Modern Review* as a whole became the model for similar *Reviews* in other Indian cities and in Ceylon. In Calcutta, the *Modern Review* also appeared in Bengali as *Prabasi*. Sumit Sarkar's claim that the "Indian colonial intelligentsia of the nineteenth century chose Indian languages, and not English, as their primary, indeed overwhelmingly predominant, media for imaginative expression" overlooks an obvious point: Indian literati who wrote in English periodicals (or whose works appeared, as Tagore's initially did, in English translation in such periodicals) knew that what they published might be picked up and read across the Empire. As we will see, well before the advent of what Sarkar terms the "Indo-Anglian" writing of "post-colonial times" (a genre that he argues emerged under "conditions of intensified globalization"), Bengalis writing in English had discovered a wider national and even global public.¹²

Increasingly, the enhanced transport links that Calcutta experienced with other parts of India, and across the Bay of Bengal with Ceylon, Burma and the Straits Settlements, brought this wider public closer to home. In the 1880s and 1890s, European Theosophists journeyed north from their international headquarters in Madras, established Theosophical branches in Calcutta and thereby connected the city with a regional community of text which preached the superiority of Aryan civilization from Bombay to Batavia. Meanwhile, from 1892, the Colombo-born Buddhist reformer and one-time Theosophist protégé Anagarika Dharmapala selected Calcutta as the ecumenical center for his global Buddhist mission — the base from which he lobbied for the preservation of Bodh Gaya (the ancient site of

¹² Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, pp. 173-74. Sarkar is clearly thinking of fiction, but even here his argument neglects the rise of English-language periodicals run for and by Indians, and their publication of Indian-authored verse and short-stories. The *Modern Review* featured English translations of Tagore's short-stories and poems from December 1909.

the Buddha's enlightenment), received Buddhist pilgrims from across the region, and coordinated fund-raising efforts with his co-religionists in Burma, Ceylon and Siam.¹³

Moreover, as Calcutta's contacts with other parts of the Indian Ocean world intensified, the city's local intelligentsia made increasing assumptions as to the broader region's cultural unity. Especially towards the end of the nineteenth century, in the writings of Keshub Chunder Sen, Swami Vivekenanda and Bhudev Mukhopady, three connected ideas about Asian civilization coalesced and became paramount: that India and Asia were essentially one; that Asian civilization had eschewed European materialism and was the wellspring of a superior spirituality; and that, in consequence, the civilizations of Asia and Europe were bonded together in a relationship that was complementary.¹⁴ Capturing all of these ideas, Bhudev asserted that the global role of Hinduism was to:

absorb *all other Indian cultures* and spread to Europe and the entire world the light of true knowledge and virtue. The way of knowledge has been cleared by Bacon, Descartes, Kant and others. The Hindus have given China, Japan and the rest of Asia the light of faith, they will bring to Europe an even purer, brighter light of ineffable charm.¹⁵

What is equally evident by the turn of the century is that the unified Asia that Bhudev and other Calcutta literati imagined, and which they believed Indian civilization had largely created, was one that they could, if they so chose, increasingly experience at first hand. Two celebrated Calcutta luminaries who capitalized on a burgeoning Indian Ocean lecture circuit were Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore. In 1893, on his way to the Chicago Parliament of Religions, Vivekenanda traveled through Japan, and on his return from America in 1897 he

¹³ Mark Ravinder Frost, "'Wider Opportunities': Religious Revival, Nationalist Awakening and the Global Dimension in Colombo, 1870-1920", *Modern Asian Studies* 36, no. 4 (October 2002): 936-67; also *Enlightened Empires: New Literati in the Indian Ocean World, 1870-1920* (Singapore: Singapore Univ. Press, *forthcoming*).

¹⁴ This is to paraphrase (and modify slightly) the conclusion of Stephen Hay in *Asian Ideas of East and West: Tagore and His Critics in Japan, China and India* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1970). For Hay's fuller discussion see *ibid.*, pp. 21-6.

¹⁵ Quoted by Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered*, p. 86. My emphasis.

visited Ceylon. Here, he lectured in Colombo and a Vedantic society was shortly after established in his honor. Two decades later, Tagore visited Japan via the Straits Settlements and Hong Kong (as we will see), and on three later occasions lectured in Ceylon (in 1922, 1934 and 1943). Tagore was following in the footsteps of his elder brother Satyendranath (the renowned composer and author) who had in 1859 journeyed to Ceylon in the company of Keshub Chunder Sen. Such tours enhanced the regional celebrity of Bengal's leading literary lights — in the case of Tagore's visits to Colombo, his lectures and the performances of this theatrical troupe had the effect of inspiring several Ceylonese writers and artists to follow him back to his ashram at Santiniketan. At the same time, such tours also ensured that intellectual currents that emanated from Calcutta reached an Indian Ocean public whose participants might never actually step foot in the city.

Thus, a nineteenth century revolution in maritime communications ensured that ideas about Asian unity became grounded in greater first-hand acquaintance with the region and in regular pan-Asian intellectual sociability. Arguably the most important site for this new sociability was the Tagore family's residence in the northern Calcutta suburb of Jorasanko (incidentally, a site also revered by many people today as the heart of the "Bengal Renaissance"). Here the artists Abanindranath and Gaganendranath Tagore, the poet Rabindranath himself and his nephew Surendranath, entertained learned guests from Europe fascinated by the "East". But perhaps more importantly, here the Tagores also played host to those Asian literati and artists who claimed to *represent* that "East". From 1900 to 1920, the Tagore salon transformed itself from being the hub of Bengali and then Indian nationalist aesthetics into a key center for pan-Asian idealism, and it is to three of the most important thinkers who participated in this transformation that we now turn.

The visitor from Japan

Born in the port-city of Yokohama in 1862, the Japanese art critic Okakura Tenshin (Kakuzo) would be remembered as one of the Tagore's most influential Asian

visitors. The child of a samurai family that had set up as silk merchants, Okakura entered in 1875 what would later be known as Tokyo University, where he became closely associated with William A. Houghton, a teacher of English literature, and Ernest F. Fenellosa, a Harvard-educated political philosopher with a keen interest in Japanese art. After graduating, Okakura entered government service with the Ministry of Education and began to assist Fenellosa in the preservation of Japan's artistic heritage, accompanying his American associate in 1886 on a two-year tour of Europe and the United States to study the most advanced methods of art research. On his return to Japan, Okakura became involved in a range of activities and institutions dedicated to Japanese arts, crafts and architecture, and in 1893 he made his first journey to China to study and collect Chinese artworks. However, it was his journey to India in late 1901 that was to prove the defining experience in his rise to international prominence.

Surendranath Tagore, who made Okakura's acquaintance at a Calcutta reception organized in his honor by Sister Nivedita (the Irish devotee of Vivekenanda), has left us with an evocative depiction of his Japanese friend's Indian sojourn. At Jorasanko, Okakura worked on his "next book on the Awakening of Asia" while the rest of the Tagore family spent "wildly exhilarating evenings, sitting around his table, listening to his glowing passages deploring the White Disaster spreading over the East, in its intellectual and spiritual surrender to the western cult of Mammon". Then, in the spring of 1902, Surendranath accompanied Okakura on a tour of architectural monuments across North and Western India. During this trip, writes Surendranath, Okakura's "samurai heart went out at once to the Sikhs of the Golden Temple, and of the *kripan*-cult". On "entering any temple", he goes on, "Okakura went barefoot, wearing a *dhoti* in Indian fashion, — for him all shrines were to be approached with reverence".¹⁶

By the close of Okakura's eleven-month stay in India, he had produced his first major book, *The Ideals of the East*. Following its publication in London in 1903, the work

¹⁶ "Kakuzo Okakura by S. Tagore", *Okakura Kakuzo: Collected English Writings*, vol. 3, edited by Sunao Nakamura (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1984), pp. 233-42.

circulated back in India where it "created a sensation among the English-speaking intelligentsia".¹⁷ Okakura begins the *Ideals* with his now famous exclamation: "Asia is one. The Himalayas divide, only to accentuate, two mighty civilisations, the Chinese with its communism of Confucius, and the Indian with its individualism of the Vedas". He then continues:

But not even the snowy barriers can interrupt for one moment that broad expanse of love for the Ultimate and Universal, which is the common thought-inheritance of every Asiatic race, enabling them to produce all the great religions of the world, and distinguishing them from those maritime peoples of the Mediterranean and the Baltic, who love to dwell on the Particular, and to search out the means, not the end, of life.¹⁸

The structure of the *Ideals* indicates that it was probably re-drafted in response to the suggestions of Sister Nivedita who also worked with Okakura on his subsequent *Awakening of Asia* and was a habitu   of the Tagore salon.¹⁹ Both the work's opening and its final chapter on Asian ideals in society and art are manifestos calling for a revival of traditional practices and values (especially those of Indian religion and Chinese ethics) and for a pan-Asian unity in the face of encroaching Westernization. The intervening chapters, drawn from lectures Okakura had earlier given in Japan to European disciples of Vivekananda, provide the justification for his introductory claim that it has been "the great privilege of Japan to realise [Asia's] unity-in-complexity with a special clearness. The Indo-Tartaric blood of [the Japanese] race was in itself a heritage which qualified it to imbibe from the two sources [India and China] and so mirror the whole of Asiatic consciousness." As an "unconquered race" Japan was the true repository for Asiatic thought and culture:

Thus Japan is a museum of Asiatic civilisation; and yet more than a museum, because the singular genius of the race leads it to dwell on all phases of the ideals of the past, in that spirit of living Advaitism which welcomes the new without losing

¹⁷ Hay, *Asian Ideas*, p. 39.

¹⁸ "The Ideals of the East", *Okakura: Collected Writings*, vol. 1, edited by Sunao, pp. 6-129, 13.

¹⁹ "A bibliographical introduction", *ibid.*, pp. 433-36; see also Rustom Barucha, *Another Asia: Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin* (New Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006).

the old ... The history of Japanese art becomes thus the history of Asiatic ideals — the beach where each successive wave of Eastern thought has left its sand ripple as it beat against the national consciousness.²⁰

Although the *Ideals* clearly reveal Okakura's powerful nationalist sentiments, much effort is spent in describing Asia's civilizational unity. Moreover, the language Okakura employs to do so is significant, indicative of a scholar who sees the past through the lens of the present. In Okakura's writing, India no longer stands as the primary center of Asian civilization (Japan, by remaining politically independent has usurped this crown). Rather, India along with China form the two cultural poles of an ecumene bound together by historical maritime communication. "Down to the days of the Mohammedan conquest", Okakura explained:

went, by the ancient highways of the sea, the intrepid mariners of the Bengal coast, founding their colonies in Ceylon, Java and Sumatra, leaving Aryan blood to mingle with that of the sea-board races of Burma and Siam, and binding Cathay and India fast in mutual intercourse.

"Long systolic centuries" may have followed in which China and India shrank back on themselves. However, the "old energy of communication lived yet in the great moving sea of the Tartar hordes". Moreover, Buddhism served as "that great ocean of idealism, in which merge all the river systems of Eastern Asiatic thought".

Throughout the *Ideals*, Okakura repeats this use of maritime metaphors to capture the intellectual exchange that he believed once generated Asian unity. As we have seen, Japan, in Okakura's eyes, was "the beach where each successive wave of Eastern thought has left its sand ripple as it beat against the national consciousness."²¹ Elsewhere, the author seems influenced by his own recent voyage across the Indian Ocean:

²⁰ "Ideals of the East", *Okakura: Collected*, edited by Sunao, pp. 14-16.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-16.

For if Asia be one it is also true that the Asiatic races form a single mighty web. We forget, in an age of classification, that types are after all but shining points of distinctness in an ocean of approximations.²²

In the final chapter of the *Ideals*, entitled "The Vista", Okakura further underlines his argument that Asia was once a unity bound together by religion and by centuries of maritime communication. In this respect, pilgrimage, the "travel-culture" of the time as Okakura referred to it, was and remained fundamentally important:

Asia knows, it is true, nothing of the fierce joys of a time-devouring locomotion, but she has still the far deeper travel-culture of the pilgrimage and the wandering monk

The "human intercourse" of the wandering "Indian ascetic" and the "Japanese peasant-traveller", whose cultural contributions were born out of harmonious interaction with nature and their fellow man, was what made Asia distinct. Such habits of journeying Okakura describes as unique "modes of experience" or "interchange". The "task of Asia today", he then argues, "becomes that of protecting and restoring Asiatic modes":

We know instinctively that in our history lies the secret of our future, and we grope with a blind intensity to find the clue ... But it must be from Asia herself, along the ancient roadways of the race, that the great voice shall be heard.²³

In her "Introduction" to the *Ideals*, Sister Nivedita was at pains to balance Okakura's claim that Japan represented the perfection of Asian aesthetics with the argument more familiar to Calcutta literati that India was the origin of all Asian civilization. In so doing she pointed to the Buddhism which she claimed Okakura saw "pouring into China across the passes of the Himalayas and by the sea-route through the straits" as in reality "the name given to the vast synthesis known as Hinduism..." Nivedita likewise drew on Okakura's notion of a "great ocean of idealism" uniting Asia: the

²² Ibid., pp.13-14.

²³ Ibid., pp. 129-32.

Ideals was, in her view, about how "waves of Indian spirituality have worked to inspire nations" across this expanse. Moreover, with modern maritime communications in mind, she went on to predict:

The process that took a thousand years at the beginning of our era may now, with the aid of steam and electricity, repeat itself in a few decades and the world may again witness the Indianising of the East.²⁴

Such a reading was most probably the preferred one amongst Okakura's Indian audience, which included many of Bengal's leading intellectual lights, for whom *The Ideals* was said to have come as a "revelation".²⁵ Leaving aside the jostling for national and religious pride-of-place contained within the work, its core thesis — that Asia had once been united during a golden age of cultural exchange and civilization — would have been immediately attractive to Indian readers. In today's age of so-called "Asian values" such an argument might hardly seem novel, but as Nivedita's introduction underlined, it represented in its day a major intellectual turning point. Okakura had shown Asia "not as the congeries of geographical fragments that we imagined, but as a united living organism, each part dependent on all the others, the whole breathing a single complex life."²⁶

The houseguest from Ceylon

In between Okakura's visits to Calcutta, the Tagores received another houseguest from overseas who proved to be just as influential a proponent of the region's civilizational unity. Though the Ceylonese Eurasian Anananda Kentish Coomaraswamy never met Okakura in person, both men knew of each other's work and before Okakura's death they both corresponded. In addition, both men shared mutual friends and associates through their participation in the Tagores' international circle. Like Okakura, Coomaraswamy eventually joined the Boston

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 7-11.

²⁵ On the impact of this work on Bengali nationalists see Rathindranath Tagore, *On the Edges of Time*, 2nd ed. (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1981), pp. 68.

²⁶ "Ideals of the East", *Okakura: Collected*, p. 11.

Museum of Fine Arts, having brought to the United States a significant collection of artworks amassed during his own travels across Asia. From Boston after 1917, when he took up his curatorship, Coomaraswamy would produce his most important scholarly works on Asian aesthetics and on what he termed the "Asiatic philosophy of Art" that underlay its essential "diversity in unity".²⁷ However, it appears that fundamental to his later writings on this subject were the years previous to his move to Boston, during which he paid frequent visits (in "the pilgrim spirit" as he himself put it) to India, Calcutta and the Tagore's residence at Jorasanko.

Educated in England, Coomaraswamy emerged from University College, London in 1900 with a B.Sc. in Geology and Botany. Returning to Ceylon in 1902, he became director of the Mineralogical Survey of Ceylon, a body set up by the British partly in response to his research findings. However, in his spare time Coomaraswamy dedicated himself to the study of Ceylonese arts and architecture and grew increasingly distressed at what he saw as the unimpeded inroads made by Western civilization into traditional Ceylonese life. In 1905, simultaneous to the emergence of the Swadeshi across the Bay of Bengal, he launched his own agitation for the rejection of Westernization and the revival of local manufactures, arts and crafts. The letters, lectures and pamphlets he circulated for this cause led the following year to the creation of the Ceylon Social Reform Society, of which he became the founding President.

The following year, Coomaraswamy made the first of what would be several visits to India in the coming decade, his second series of visits between 1909 and 1913 including a two-year sojourn. In Calcutta, he befriended Abanindranath Tagore and like Okakura settled effortlessly into the Tagore salon.²⁸ In fact, just as they had done with Okakura, the Tagores played a major role in supporting Coomaraswamy's career. The Indian Society of Oriental Art, established in Calcutta by the Tagores and

²⁷ "Introduction to the Art of Eastern Asia", *Coomaraswamy: Vol. 1 — Selected Essays, Traditional Art and Symbolism*, edited by Roger Lipsey (New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 101-27.

²⁸ A drawing made by Nandalal Bose of Abindranath's studio circa 1910 shows Coomaraswamy, surrounded by books and a hookah, reclining on a sofa in earnest discussion with Sister Nivedita, while in the background other Tagores lie on chaise longues, sleeping or reading.)

their European associates, offered the Eurasian from Ceylon a platform from which to express many of his formative ideas. The Society also entrusted him with the task of organizing an exhibition of past and contemporary Indian art for the All-India Exhibition in Allahabad at the end of 1910.

By the time Coomaraswamy set off across North India to collect works for this exhibition, his intellectual star was on the rise. According to one contemporary, his essays on national aesthetics in English-language journals, especially the *Modern Review*, already brought him a "kind of hero worship" that his public lectures (which "made an impression on young minds and left crowds of them to ruminate on his central ideas") further enhanced.²⁹ Back in Calcutta, Coomaraswamy scored a hit with *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists*, a best-seller he had co-authored with Sister Nivedita (completing two-thirds of the text after her death in 1911) that featured lavish illustrations by Nandalal Bose, Abanindranath Tagore and their school.³⁰

In both Ceylon and India, Coomaraswamy's writings on the need for "national" aesthetics made essentially the same point. The inhabitants of these two countries had forgotten how to express their distinctive cultural selves and instead were colluding in an unthinking adoption of western habits and mores that deprived them of their respective national identities. In a seven page essay entitled *Borrowed Plumes*, the pamphlet which launched the "Ceylon Social Reform" campaign in 1905, Coomaraswamy tells us how he was led to question the value of advancing Westernization by the incongruous appearance outside his home in the Kandyan highlands of a Sinhalese mother and child dressed in the "borrowed plumes" of European fashion. However, what is striking in this short work is how quickly the author's reflections on Ceylon's battle with Westernization lead him to imagine a struggle not of national but of civilizational proportions:

²⁹ These are the words of Muhammed Hafiz Syed, a prolific writer, scholar and translator, quoted by Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: Vol. 3 — Life and Times*, p. 88.

³⁰ Sister Nivedita and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists*, 5th ed. (London: George G. Harrap and co, 1920), first published in 1913.

I thought how different it might be if we Ceylonese were bolder and more independent, not afraid to stand on our own legs and not ashamed of our own nationalities. Why do we not meet the wave of civilisation on equal terms, reject the evil and choose the good? Our eastern civilisation was here 2,000 years ago; shall its spirit be broken utterly before the new commercialism of the West; or shall we be strong enough to hold our national ideals intact, to worship beauty in the midst of ugliness, to remember old wisdom and yet not despise the new.³¹

Coomaraswamy's broader civilizational concerns were apparent again a few years later when he wrote directly on Swadeshi in India. In an essay entitled "The Deeper Meaning of the Struggle" he warned of the dangers of an Indian nationalism that surrendered itself to materialism and particularism:

Five hundred years hence it will matter little to humanity whether a few Indians, more or less, have held official posts in, or a few million bales of cloth been manufactured in Bombay or Lancashire factories; but it will matter much whether the great ideals of Indian culture have been carried forward or allowed to die. It is with these that Indian Nationalism is essentially concerned, and upon these that the fate of India as a nation depends.³²

As these writings suggest, Coomaraswamy was never really a political nationalist, despite being fêted by his Madras publishers Ganesh and Co. as a "nation builder" of modern India. Rather, Coomaraswamy viewed the importance of Swadeshi-style action in terms of the cultural autonomy it granted its participants and the cosmopolitan possibilities it offered. Poets and artists, he claimed, did more to build up nations than did politicians and it was in the cultural sphere that nationalist energies ought to most be applied. He judged that, in meeting "the wave of civilisation on equal terms," the various nationalities of Asia would come to a greater appreciation of those cultural ties that bound them together. That he had by 1914 distanced himself from the anti-colonial political struggle in Asia was due, in no small

³¹ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Borrowed Plumes* (Kandy: Industrial School, 1905).

³² Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Essays in National Idealism* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1981), pp. 1-2.

part, to his belief that the most significant battle with European colonialism was one that required Asians to seek out their common cultural idealism.³³

Such an attitude comes across particularly strongly in Coomaraswamy's 1907 address to the Ceylon Social Reform Society, delivered on the eve of his departure for India and entitled "India and Ceylon". In this lecture he expatiated on the "mental and spiritual relation" between the two countries and asked his audience to consider whether "Ceylon is in the future to belong in these respects to India or to Europe? Is India to be our motherland still or shall we prosper more as orphans?" To revive Ceylon's "social institutions, wealth, power, arts, industries and sciences" the country's leaders had to realize "that India in the past has been the chief factor in the growth of civilisation and culture, and that in that work even Ceylon has played no insignificant part". India represented an "open book" for the Ceylonese to study, in that it shared so many of the latter's "difficulties and doubts."

As his lecture continued, it became clear that the kind of nationalism Coomaraswamy advocated, far from accentuating the "differences between men" and hindering "a realisation of the brotherhood and unity of humanity", in fact implied "internationalism". "Nationalism", he argued, was "essentially altruistic": it was a "people's recognition of its own special function and place in the civilized world". "Internationalism" was "the recognition of the rights of others to *their* self-development, and of the incompleteness of the civilized world if *their* special culture-contribution is missing".

Arguing further in this vein, Coomaraswamy insisted that "India without Ceylon is incomplete ... The nobler of the two great Indian epics unites India with Ceylon in the mind of every Indian". As a "mirror" to India, Ceylon provided "a more perfect window through which to gaze on India's past than can be found in India itself". His parting advice for his fellow Society members was that they should travel to India "in the pilgrim spirit", direct young men to study at Indian universities, read Indian

³³ On Coomaraswamy's attitude to political nationalism and the role of poets and artists in nationalist struggles see Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: Vol. 3 — Life and Times*, pp. 83-4, 90.

papers and magazines and send "at least one representative to the [Indian National] Congress".³⁴

After Coomaraswamy arrived in India, his concept of a pan-Indian civilization that incorporated Ceylon broadened significantly. His writings from 1907, once he had been exposed to the cosmopolitan milieu at Jorasanko, reiterated the idea that India was the wellspring of *all* Asian civilization. When he wrote about India and Asia in the following decade, he effortlessly (and without hesitation) slipped from discussing one entity to considering the other; and this without the supporting evidence that he would later have to hand in Boston to back his implicit claim that the two were identical. In his series of Indian essays entitled *The Dance of Shiva* (first published in 1918) "India" and "Asia" seamlessly merge. India's present condition as a "co-operative society in a state of decline" becomes within a few paragraphs "the decay of Asia" and its "rapid degradation", a degradation caused by Europe's reduction of all "Asiatic" society "from the basis of *dharma* to the basis of contract". Elsewhere, the movement of "Young India" towards "national education and social reconstruction" is quickly recast as the "development of Asia", a process in which the Western world must play a more positive role lest Asia's "degradation" lead to a replica of a Western "Industrialism or Imperialism" that might menace "European social idealism".³⁵

When Coomaraswamy arrived in America in 1917 to take up his appointment with the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, his sense of pan-Asian purpose traveled with him. In one of his earliest reports for the institution that he was to be associated with until his death in 1947, he wrote:

The Museum now possesses the materials for a logical presentation of Asiatic art as a consistent whole — a unity in that sense which Mr Okakura so often insisted upon. It is precisely the art of India, linked as it is on the one hand with that of Persia, and on the other hand with that of China — the whole foundation of Chinese Buddhist

³⁴ *Ceylon National Review* 2, no. 4 (July 1907): 15-22.

³⁵ *The Dance of Shiva*, revised ed. (New York: Noonday Press, 1969), pp. 19-20, 166.

art being formally Indian — which needs to be represented in any museum pretending to deal fundamentally with the art of the Far East: and it is only due to various accidents that the art of India, which is to so great extent an art of *sources*, has been so long neglected.³⁶

Such an outlook shaped Coomaraswamy's major contribution to art history: his 1927 study *Indian and Indonesian Art*, which in fact covered most parts of modern South, Southeast and East Asia, and which argued that Indian influence had extended to China, Korea and Japan through both overland and sea routes.³⁷ The following decade, he re-affirmed his Okakura-like position that "Asia, in all her diversity, is nevertheless a living spiritual unity" by drawing out common philosophical approaches to art as revealed by learned men in India, Japan and China.³⁸

But there was another key shift in Coomaraswamy's thinking evident by the time he left India and likewise at least partly attributable to his Calcutta sojourn with the Tagores. In his remarkable 1916 essay "Intellectual Fraternity", he took the occasion of the war in Europe to argue that not just Indian thinkers but "Lao Tze" and "Jesus" — as well as "Plato and Kapt, Tauler, Behman and Ruysbroeck, Whitman, Nietzsche and Blake" — all, if one looked deeply enough, shared streams of thought in common. Moreover, he wrote, "it is not only in Philosophy and Religion — Truth and Love — but also in Art that Europe and Asia are united ..." Where the two civilisations differed was in their accumulated wisdom over the ages: "the fullness of the Asiatic experience ... still contrasts so markedly with European youth." Nonetheless, the two sides remained compatible "and we must demand of a coming race that men should act with European energy, and think with Asiatic calm ..." The problem of the current age was that "European progress has long remained in doubt, because of its lack of orientation". But in this "present hour of decision" there

³⁶ *Annual Report of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts*, 1917, quoted by Walter Whitehill, *Museum of Fine Arts, Boston — A Centennial History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1977), vol. 1, p. 365.

³⁷ A. K. Coomaraswamy, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1972), pp. 150-55.

³⁸ Coomaraswamy, "Introduction to the Art of Eastern Asia".

was hope, since Europe had discovered Asia, whose task it was now to reorient the West toward the creation of "a social order founded on Union".³⁹

Such hopes for what Coomaraswamy at the outset of this essay termed "a common civilisation of the world" were certainly influenced by his visits to London in the early 1900s and his discovery there of Blake, Nietzsche and of the other European writers whom he listed. Nonetheless, his new universalism retained a direct connection with Calcutta as part of a discussion almost simultaneously shared by the Tagores. For, in the very same year that "Intellectual Fraternity" appeared in print, Bengal's favorite literary son (as he later recalled) was standing with an international friend looking out over the sea near the Japanese port of Yokohama, when his thoughts also turned to the horrors of the European war. And just as Coomaraswamy had done, so Rabindranath Tagore came to the conclusion that what mankind needed was the nurture of a common, universal, civilization.

Tagore's eastern odyssey

Tagore's personal journey through Swadeshi to pan-Asianism, and eventually to universal humanism, has been charted by several studies and biographies.⁴⁰ Unsurprisingly, it was a journey that both Coomaraswamy and Okakura were closely associated with. Coomaraswamy supported Tagore's work through his Indian essays, translated Tagore's poems into English and became a regular guest at Tagore's ashram at Santiniketan. As for Okakura, Tagore described the Japanese art-critic as his "intimate friend" and following their meeting in 1902 became (at least until 1916) a confirmed Japanophile. Following Okakura's first visit to India, the Tagore family welcomed a number of Japanese artists whom Okakura had recommended. Indeed, at a time when Tagore's patriotic Bengali songs were being sung down Calcutta streets by Swadeshis on the march, the Tagore salon was revealing its increasing eclecticism. At Jorasanko, Rathindranath and Surendranath Tagore

³⁹ "Intellectual Fraternity", *Dance of Shiva*, pp. 135-39.

⁴⁰ See especially Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-minded Man* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995); Hay, *Asian Ideas*; Bose, *A Hundred Horizons*.

established the "Vichitra" [multi-coloured] club, which hosted, among other events, Chinese- and Japanese-themed banquets, pageants and literary soirees.⁴¹

Tagore's own literary adventures east of Calcutta began in earnest around the time he first made Okakura's acquaintance. In 1901, the Cambridge don G. Lowes Dickinson published his *Letters from John Chinaman*, an indictment of the activities of Western powers within China and a defense of China's civilizational superiority over Europe.⁴² Tagore, under what was a widespread impression that the then anonymous author of the *Letters* was a genuine Chinese official, reviewed the work for *Bangadarshan* [The Vision of Bengal], the Bengali periodical he was then editing. Typical of his generation, Tagore surmised from the *Letters* that "there is a deep and vast unity among the various peoples of Asia" and that "Indian civilisation is one with Asian civilisation". But what Tagore added to the discussion was the notion that the progress other countries had subsequently made with this civilization might be for Indians a source of national pride:

If we can see that our ancient civilisation has spread to China and Japan then we can understand that it has a great place as an expression of human nature, that it is not merely the words of manuscripts. If we can see that China and Japan have experienced success within this civilisation, then our own inglorious and impoverished condition disappears, and we can see where our real treasure lies.

Tagore also rehearsed the charge that trade and politics dominated European civilization whereas the key aspects that defined Asian civilization were its spirituality and effective social organization. He believed, along with Okakura and Coomaraswamy, that Asia was locked in a civilizational struggle in which its spiritual life was threatened by an invasion of Western materialism. The struggle now demanded, and would further consolidate, pan-Asian solidarity. "Asia is growing

⁴¹ Dutta and Robinson, *Tagore*, pp. 209.

⁴² G. Lowes Dickinson, *Letters from John Chinaman and Other Essays* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1946), pp. 7-44.

ever more eager to defend this life", the poet wrote. "In this we [of India] are not alone; we remain linked to the whole of Asia".⁴³

When the Swadeshi movement began, Tagore invested it with a wider pan-Asian significance from the outset. During the anti-partition agitation of 1904-5, reports of Japan's victories over Russia in the Korean peninsula simultaneously filtered through to Calcutta and inspired Tagore to take up a Japanese theme in his writings. One of his three *haiku* poems from this period links a past when monks journeyed from India to Japan with the teachings of the Buddha, to a present in which Indians now came to Japan's door "as disciples, to learn the teachings of action". In mid-1904, Tagore took the opportunity of a public lecture on "Swadeshi Samaj" to further elaborate his pan-Asian sentiments. In Bengali he told his audience of a time when:

China, Japan and Tibet, who are so careful to bar their windows against the advances of Europe, welcomed India with open arms as their *guru*, for she had never sent out armies for plunder and pillage, but only her messages of peace and good will. This glory, which India had earned as the fruit of her self-discipline, was greater than that of the widest of Empires.⁴⁴

Swadeshi, at least when Tagore and Coomaraswamy spoke, was not merely an expression of local and communal difference but a celebration of the civilization that India had given to the rest of Asia — and to be understood in these broader international terms.

Following the end of the Swadeshi campaign (until he was drawn out again in 1917 by the internment of the Theosophist and Home-Ruler Annie Besant) Tagore turned his back on nationalist politics in protest against the violence advocated by Bengali revolutionaries. As a consequence he found that he was, to a degree, ostracized by Calcutta's literary circles. Yet, this respite from the public eye also allowed him to explore first-hand the cultural unity that he presupposed Indian civilization had

⁴³ Tagore's review is quoted at length by Hay, *Asian ideas*, pp. 34-5.

⁴⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 43-4. This lecture was also later published in English. See Rabindranath Tagore, *Greater India* (Madras: S. Ganesan, 1921).

gifted the rest of the region. In February 1913, Tagore visited Okakura in Boston and during their meeting (so the poet recalled) his Japanese friend brought to life once more the splendors of an Asian civilization and spirituality awaiting "another opportunity to have the fullness of illumination". Okakura requested that Tagore accompany him to China so that the poet might know her truly.⁴⁵ Though their joint-pilgrimage never eventuated (Okakura died a few months after their reunion in Boston) such a journey continued to lure Tagore in the next two years, becoming a reality in 1916 when he undertook to lecture in Japan.

Unlike Tagore's subsequent journeys across the Indian Ocean, which inspired him to pen some of his most evocative songs and poems, his first voyage east from Calcutta came as a rude shock.⁴⁶ The ugliness and sameness of the ports of Rangoon, Penang, Singapore and Hong Kong offended his aesthetic sensibilities, leading him to rail against the capitalism and industrialization that had (in a practical sense) brought Asia closer together.⁴⁷ Yet, however much he might himself be discomforted, these same industrial connections had brought the fame of the Indian Nobel prize-winner to many parts of the region in advance of him.

This fact was no more evident than when Tagore first set foot on Japanese soil. Extensive national press coverage of his arrival in Kobe meant that when he emerged from Tokyo station he was greeted by a crowd estimated in the region of 20,000 to 50,000. Following his address to the Nihon Bijutsuin [The Japan Art Academy] on the unity of Asian art (a fitting subject considering that Okakura had been the founder of this institution), he was invited to lecture at Tokyo Imperial University. Dressed all in white and wearing a Daoist cap that had been a gift from Okakura, Tagore addressed a packed auditorium of around 2,000 people that included over one hundred Indians and a similar number of European and

⁴⁵ Tagore quoted by Hay, *Asian Ideas*, pp. 48-49.

⁴⁶ On these subsequent voyages see Bose, *A Hundred Horizons*, pp. 233-71.

⁴⁷ Dutta and Robinson, *Tagore*, pp. 200-1.

Americans. Speaking in English, Tagore's subject was "The Message of India to Japan".⁴⁸

Though Okakura's *The Awakening of Japan* was not then available in Japanese translation, anyone who had read the original 1904 English edition ought to have immediately recognized a familiar literary presence. Perhaps Tagore even felt that his lecture fulfilled some remaining mission of Okakura to Japan that the latter's death had conspired to cut short. Just as Okakura had in *The Awakening* (as we will shortly see), Tagore began his argument with the assertion that all Asia had till recently been placed under the "bondage of dejection" and had been subject (in language that directly recalls Okakura's own) to the "darkness of night". But then, suddenly, "Japan rose from her dreams and in giant strides left centuries of inaction behind, overtaking the present time in its foremost achievement". Again echoing Okakura's earlier work, Tagore insisted that he did not believe that Japan had attained its current position by "imitating the West", but rather because she was a "child of the Ancient East". Finally, in a passage reminiscent of the *Ideals of the East*, Tagore described to his audience a united Asia that had once existed before the "darkness" fell:

I cannot but bring to your mind those days when the whole of Eastern Asia from Burma to Japan was united with India in the closest ties of friendship, the only natural tie which can exist between nations. There was a living communication of hearts, a nervous system evolved through which messages ran between us about the deepest needs of humanity ... ideas and ideals were exchanged, gifts of the highest love were offered and taken; no difference of languages and customs hindered us in approaching each other heart to heart; no pride of race or insolent consciousness of superiority, physical or mental, marred our relation; our arts and literatures put forth new leaves and flowers under the influence of this sunlight of united hearts; and races belonging to the different lands and languages and histories acknowledged the highest unity of man and the deepest bond of love.

⁴⁸ On Tagore's arrival in Japan see Hay, *Asian Ideas*, pp. 57-63.

The Japan of the present day, Tagore argued, had before it the "mission of the East to fulfill". Western civilization had "presented before the world grave questions": the conflict between the "individual and the state", "labour and capital", "the man and the woman", and "the greed of material gain and the spiritual life of man", to name but a few. Tagore therefore exhorted the Japanese nation to apply its "Eastern mind", its "spiritual strength", "love of simplicity" and "recognition of social obligation", so as "to cut out a new path for this great unwieldy car of progress, shrieking out its loud discords as it runs". "Of all countries in Asia," he asserted, "here in Japan you have the freedom to use the materials you have gathered from the West according to your genius and your need. Therefore your responsibility is all the greater, for in your voice Asia shall answer the questions that Europe has submitted to the conference of Man."⁴⁹

Islam and the idea of Asia

Between 1900 and 1920, members of the Tagore circle used ideas and expressions to convey Asia's cultural unity that so overlapped we might easily imagine them regularly borrowing one another's scripts. It is true that their individual writings on Asia never cohered into a systematic ideology; nevertheless, in fundamental respects they articulated a shared intellectual sensibility. All of these writers agreed that Asia had been united in the past by centuries of interaction and exchange. All thought the present age demanded that Asians once again become conscious of the deep, underlying unities that shaped their common experience — whether it was to save Asia from the West, or, indeed, to save European civilization from itself.

But the way these writers imagined that Asia had actually become "one" brings to light a major omission. Tagore, Okakura, Coomaraswamy and Nivedita all presumed Asian civilization was derived from the key elements of Hinduism, Buddhism and, to a lesser extent, Confucianism. Buddhism took pride of place and was crowned as

⁴⁹ The "Message of India to Japan" was later published as "Nationalism in Japan" in R. Tagore, *Nationalism* (Delhi: Macmillan, 1976); see especially pp. 29-42. See also Okakura's "The Awakening of Japan", *Okakura: Collected Writings* — vol. 1, edited by Sunao, pp. 169-264.

"that great ocean of idealism" — the primary means by which past cultural exchange and common ideals had generated a regional unity. Other faiths such as Daoism or Zoroastrianism rarely received a mention. In the Tagore circle's discussions of Asian civilization, Islam was particularly conspicuous by its absence. The great world religion that through text, trade and pilgrimage had over the centuries renewed and intensified global interconnection from Batavia to the Bosphorus was largely overlooked.

Not only that, when Okakura took up his pen, those historical figures who professed Islam's tenets were increasingly depicted as the great disrupters of Asia's golden age of cultural intercourse. In his 1903 *The Ideals of the East* (perhaps under the influence of Sister Nivedita) Okakura described Islam as "Confucianism on horseback, sword in hand" and implied the existence of a "Western" Asia, which in the case of Baghdad and her "great Saracenic culture" demonstrated "Chinese, as well as, Persian, civilisation and art".⁵⁰ However, a year later in *The Awakening of Japan*, a book that was equally well-received by Calcutta elite, Okakura painted a starkly contrary picture. Revisiting the notion of the golden age of "Buddhaland", he revised his earlier narrative of Asian civilization by pointing out the source of its decline:

The decadence of Asia began long ago with the Mongol conquest in the thirteenth century. The classic civilisations of China and India shine brighter by contrast with the night that has overtaken them since that disastrous irruption. The children of the Huang-ho and the Ganges had from early days evolved a culture comparable with that of the era of highest enlightenment in Greece and Rome, one which even foreshadowed the trend of advanced thought in modern Europe. Buddhism, introduced into China and the farther East during the early centuries of the Christian era, bound together the Vedic and Confucian ideals in a single web, and brought about the unification of Asia. A vast stream of intercourse flowed throughout the extent of the whole Buddhaland. Tidings of any fresh philosophical achievement in the University of Nalanda, or in the monasteries of Kashmir, were brought by

⁵⁰ "Ideals of the East", pp. 13-14. The same views are evident in Okakura's *The Awakening of the East*. See *Okakura: Collected Writings* — vol. 1, ed. Sunao, pp. 146-47.

pilgrims and wandering monks to the thought centers of China, Korea and Japan. Kingdoms often exchanged courtesies, while peace married art to art. From this synthesis of the whole Asiatic life a fresh impetus was given to each nation ... Thus, while Christendom was struggling with mediaevalism, the Buddhaland was a great garden of culture where each flower of thought bloomed in individual beauty.

"But alas!" Okakura continued, "the Mongol horseman under Jenghis Khan were to lay waste these areas of civilisation, and make of them a desert like that out of which they themselves came". The Mogul emperors of Delhi who "had embraced the Arabian faith as they sped on their conquest through southern Asia" not only "exterminated Buddhism, but also persecuted Hinduism". It was:

a terrible blow to Buddhaland when Islam interposed a barrier between China and India greater than the Himalayas themselves. The flow of intercourse, so essential to human progress, was suddenly stopped ... By the Mongol conquest of Asia, Buddhaland was rent asunder, never again to be reunited ... We have not only permitted the Mongol to destroy the unity of Asia, but have allowed him to crush the life of Indian and Chinese culture. From both the thrones of Peking and Delhi, the descendants of Jenghis Kahn perpetuated a system of despotism contrary to the traditional policies of the lands they had subjugated. Entire lack of sympathy between the conquerors and the conquered, the introduction of an alien official language, the refusal to the native of any vital participation in administration, together with dreadful clash of race-ideals and religious beliefs, all combined to produce a mental shock and anguish of spirit from which the Indians and Chinese have never recovered ... So in India the reactionary uprising of the Marathas and the Sikhs against the Mohammedan tyrants, though partially successful, did not crystallize into a universal expression of patriotism. This lack of unity enabled a Western power to shape her destinies.⁵¹

In their concept of Asia's geographical and cultural boundaries, other members of the Tagore circle were less hard-line. Sister Nivedita, Coomaraswamy and Tagore all imagined India to lie at the heart of Asia, with "Eastern Asia" stretching out from

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 178-82.

Burma to Japan and "Western Asia" comprising Persia, Arabia, and perhaps long ago (at least in Nivedita's eyes) the Nile delta and ancient Greece. However, the primary focus throughout their writings was on a cultural zone that linked India with the civilisations of China, Japan and the countries in between. Nivedita's first chapter in the *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists*, claimed that ancient Egypt and Arabia were destined "from their geographical positions, to be overrun and suffer destruction of their culture". Remarking in passing that "civilisation" in "Western Asia" would in future "accumulate" again, she turned to discussing the historical intercourse between India, China "and half a dozen minor nations" during the "Gupta empire", intercourse which "only the rise of Islam was effective in ending".⁵²

Coomaraswamy writings before 1920 similarly focused on an Asia that spread out east from India. On occasion, they even presented the influence of Islamic culture as a disruption and a divergence. Writing on Ceylon, Coomaraswamy argued that the island's history gave a better insight into India's past civilization because its art and literature were "free from Mohammedan influence". In a later discussion of Rajput painting, he depicted the compositions of the Mughal court as some worldly deviation from the long Indian tradition of spiritual painting. Though he agreed that "Western Asia" (especially Persia) had cultural achievements of its own, as late as 1932, his theorizing about the philosophical unity that underlay "Asiatic art" had still not engaged directly with this oeuvre. One of his studies, in his own words, excluded "the art of Western Asia, more specifically Muhammedan art, though it would be interesting and well worth while to show to what extent Muhammedan art is truly Asiatic".⁵³

By comparison, Tagore would appear to have been least dismissive of the Islamic world's contribution to a unified Asian civilization. In his youth, the poet dreamt of being a Bedouin and devoured *The Arabian Nights*. After 1920, he visited Iraq and

⁵² Nivedita and Coomaraswamy, *Myths of the Hindus*, pp. 1-3.

⁵³ Coomaraswamy, "India and Ceylon" and his "Introduction to the Art of East Asia". Coomaraswamy eventually engaged with "Western Asia" in 1933 when he became the Boston Museum of Fine Art's Fellow for Research in Indian, Persian and Mohammedan Art. On Coomaraswamy's attitude to Mogul and Persian painting see Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: Vol. 1 — Life and Times*, pp. 94-104, 260-65.

Persia (whose contribution to Bengali culture he acknowledged) as well as Java, where he lamented the sight of a once great Muslim society now under European subjugation.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, before 1920, Tagore seems to have had little contact with Muslim intellectuals in India. As his "Message of India to Japan" indicates, he was then primarily concerned with the "Eastern Asia" that Okakura had promised to show him.⁵⁵ In effect, though the explicitness of Okakura's rejection was exceptional, the Tagore circle shared in the exclusion of Islam's contribution both to Asian civilization and to the historical intercourse on which they believed that Asian unity had rested. Their discovery of Asia invariably led these thinkers to look from Calcutta further east, along the ancient highways where, in their eyes, the "great ocean of idealism" was most immediate and apparent.

Ideas of Asia in circulation

What, then, was the impact of these ideas? Did they remain confined to the rarefied atmosphere of the Tagore salon, amounting to little more than an elite side-show set against the grander narrative of popular Asian nationalism? Or, did they have an influence beyond Jorasanko, and become embedded in the wider consciousness of early-twentieth century Asian literati?

Certainly, Tagore's "Message of India to Japan" in 1916 was a failure. His lectures in Tokyo stimulated considerable debate for a time within Japanese intellectual circles, with various "writers, religious leaders, philosophers and pan-Asianists", so historian Stephen Hay has written, using the poet's arrival to set forth "their own views on the issues he raised in their respective spheres".⁵⁶ Nevertheless, outright support for his message — that Japan should develop a modernity which held true to Asian social and spiritual ideals and so inspire the rest of the region — was minimal. Tokyo's two main daily newspapers were notably muted in their response and once Tagore had

⁵⁴ Dutta and Robinson, *Tagore*, pp. 144-45, 277-80, 315-22; Bose, *A Hundred Horizons*, pp. pp. 233-71.

⁵⁵ Tagore, *Nationalism*, pp. 40-41. Tagore's engagement with Bengal's Muslim literati appears to have begun in the 1920s through his friendship with the young poet Kazi Nazrul Islam. In 1926, Tagore agreed to speak at the University of Dhaka, the same institution whose creation he had opposed the previous decade.

⁵⁶ Hay, *Asian ideas*, pp. 118; see also pp. 82-123.

left Japan's shores, his idea that all Asians shared a common civilization passed (for a time) out of mind with him.⁵⁷ Tagore, himself, was stung by the way, as he recalled, some Japanese newspapers had praised his utterances for their "poetical qualities, while adding with a leer that it was the poetry of a defeated people".⁵⁸ His reception in Japan pushed him to an even stronger rejection of the Western-inspired nation-state as the be-all-and-end-all of Asian liberation.

However, across a colonized Indian Ocean arena — one that had received from the British Empire its regional *lingua franca* — the taste for such pan-Asianism was more evident. Even a brief survey of the Anglophone press across two port-cities of the Bay of Bengal reveals periodicals that reprinted, paraphrased, imitated, emulated and even pre-empted many of the core ideas about Asian unity articulated at Jorasanko.

Buddhist periodicals in Colombo and Calcutta seized on the idea that India was the original well-spring of an Asian civilization that had spread out through Okakura's ancient "Buddhland". Repeatedly these journals featured articles, lectures or portions of books that highlighted, as one author saw it, a past golden age when "the high culture of ancient India was seen by the Greek and Chinese who came to India centuries before the invasion of India by Arabs and Europeans".⁵⁹ The Colombo *Buddhist* in 1895 (lifting a leader published originally in the Calcutta *Indian Mirror*) advocated the "sea-voyage moment" and called on Indians "to visit Asiatic countries, chiefly the Buddhistic ones", which "their ancestors in the far past helped to educate and civilise after the fashion of the then existing Hindu religious and philosophic ideals". A decade later the *Maha Bodhi Journal* featured on one occasion the lecture of the Reverend Farquar, a Calcutta clergyman, and, on another, an article by Coomaraswamy on the migration of Indian art, so as to emphasize that India under Buddhist rule had spread civilization to both China and Japan. The same journal

⁵⁷ Of course, the idea that "Asia is one" would from the late 1930s become the rallying call for Japan's military conquests across Asia.

⁵⁸ Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 23.

⁵⁹ The quote is from Pramatha Nath Bose, *The Illusions of New India* (Calcutta: W. Newman & Co., 1916), reviewed and summarized by the *Maha Bodhi Journal* (from hence *MBJ*) 24, no. 6 (June 1916): 146-51.

sometimes presented India's civilizing role across Asia in squarely racial terms. "What Buddhism has done for non-Aryan peoples to civilize them," an article on "Ancient India" posited, "may be learnt by the historical works treating of Burma, Siam, China, Japan, Mongolia and Tibet".⁶⁰

These same periodicals likewise reveal the deep impression made by the claim that "Asia is one". Interestingly, when this notion was contested, as occurred in 1916, it elicited a response from no less a figure than the former Bengali revolutionary Lala Lajput Rai. Lajput Rai was prompted to defend of Asia's perceived unity publicly by the appearance in India of another work by G. Lowes Dickinson (the same author responsible for the *Letters of John Chinaman* that had partly inspired Tagore's early expression of pan-Asianism). In his *Essay on the Civilisations of India, China and Japan*, Dickinson argued that "the East is not a unity, as implied in the familiar antithesis of East and West. Between India, on the one hand, and China or Japan, on the other, there is as great a difference as between India and any western country". Lajput Rai's response was published in the *Calcutta Modern Review*, then summarized and given further circulation by Annie Besant's *New India* paper in Madras. According to the Madras organ, Lajput Rai successfully demonstrated that there was at the present time a "fundamental unity" between India, China and Japan, partly because Western influences were "producing more or less the same results and threatening to make the East a bad and imperfect copy of the West". The West threatened each nation's "individual" ethos as well as its shared "continental" character. But despite such a threat, Asian countries manifested a greater "unity" than ever before because they were bound together by the "sameness of their religions, intellectual and social outlook, and in a manner also the sameness of their economic life".⁶¹

⁶⁰ "The Hindus and the Japanese", *Buddhist*, 24 May 1895; "India and Japan", *MBJ* 25, no. 8 (August 1907): 109-12; A. K. Coomaraswamy, "Indiana — on Indian Art in China", *ibid.*, vol. 20, no. 7 (July 1912): 216-18; "Ancient India", *ibid.* vol. 20, no. 4, (April 1912): 117-20; see also "India's influence on Japan in the past", *ibid.*, vol. 16, no. 6 (June 1908): 85-87; and "Japan and India", *ibid.*, vol. 18, no. 8 (August 1910): 585-86.

⁶¹ Dickinson, *John Chinaman and other essays*, pp. 45-87; "The Unity of the East", *New India*, 6 December 1916.

Undoubtedly, the dominant Asian story during this period (at least in terms of column inches) was the present and historical relationship between India and Japan. Pre-empting the Tagore circle's discovery of Japan by a few years, journals in Calcutta and Colombo drew attention to the heightened presence of Japanese scholars and monks in South Asia who traveled to the region to study, to teach or to undertake orientalist research. The *Indian Mirror* recorded in 1895: "Japanese visitors have been coming among us for the last few years, and we have looked upon them in much wonder, and some disdain, for the Japanese do the grossest injustice to themselves in their externals". Nonetheless, the same leader recommended that Indians visit "the first independent country in Asia" so as to understand the "spiritual power behind the Japanese race", a power the paper believed to be Buddhist. The "revival of veneration and love for India among the Japanese" was a cause for joy: "The Buddhists have many more things in common with the Hindus than the Europeans can possibly have, and are our brothers in spirit, though not in blood". The contemporary exchange that the *Indian Mirror* advocated was to consist of Japanese teaching the Hindus "manly virtues", while the Hindus in turn would re-initiate the Japanese into the "great spiritual religion which was preached to all nations in the time of Asoka"⁶² On another occasion, the same paper aired the views of Japanese monks themselves. The Reverend Daito Shimaji asserted:

Japanese were spiritually united with the Indians 1350 years ago ... It is, therefore, our sincere wish that the two nations would soon come to a better understanding of each other and entertain a closer relation materially as well as spiritually.⁶³

Formal bilateral discussions with Japanese aristocrats, merchants and students also received press coverage. In 1910, the *Maha Bodhi Journal* noted that a certain Count Otani had arrived in Calcutta to persuade Dharmapala of the need for further Buddhist propaganda efforts in Japan because, as he put it, many Japanese Buddhists still believed India was "in heaven" (Dharmapala had earlier visited Japan with the Theosophist Henry Steele Olcott). Later that year, the same journal

⁶² Reprinted as "The Hindus and the Japanese", *Buddhist*, 24 May 1895.

⁶³ Rev. Daito Shimaji, "India and Japan in Ancient Times", *Indian Mirror*, 8 December 1909; reprinted in *MBJ*, vol. 18, no. 2 (February 1910): 372-74.

reported on activities of the Indo-Japanese Association (established in 1904), whose purpose was to enhance trade relations between both countries. At around the same time, Indian students studying in Japan became prime movers in the establishment of another pan-Asian association, the Asian Solidarity Society, which in its brief eighteen-month existence brought together not just Indians and Japanese but also some Chinese.⁶⁴

In addition, several books and articles featured in these periodicals reinforced the claim that Japan represented an alternative model for Asian modernity. In the same year that Tagore presented his "Message of India to Japan", his friend Pramatha Nath Bose published his *The Illusions of New India*. In this work, Bose argued that the British in India had created a class of educated Indian "who can hardly be said to have a mind of his own — It is more or less a shadow, a reflection of the Western mind". What Indians needed instead was a Japanese-style education in economics, hygiene, aesthetics, culture, morals, and science. Japan had learnt its science — "science which was new to Europe as well" — from the West, but the ethics of the State she had derived from "the system of Confucius" and the "ethics of religion, morality and hygiene from Buddhist India".⁶⁵

The closer attention that editors and contributors paid to Japan, no doubt largely through the writings of Okakura, meant that Confucianism also emerged to take its place alongside Buddhism as the philosophical inspiration behind Japanese advances. The Allahabad *Hindustan Review*, for instance, featured an article by the American P. S. Reinsch, entitled "Energism in the Orient", which claimed that Japan had the "virility of a giant" and had taken "the two foremost sages [Buddha and Confucius] for her spiritual and ethical guidance".⁶⁶ Whereas in 1895, Japan's defeat

⁶⁴ "News and Notes", *ibid.*, vol. 18, no. 2 (February 1910): 378-84; "Japan and India"; Rebecca E. Karl, *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Durham; N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2002), pp. 169-76.

⁶⁵ "Review of 'Illusions of New India' by Mr Pramatha Nath Bose", *MBJ*, vol. 24, no. 6 (June 1916): 146-51. See also "What Lessons India should Learn from Japan at the Present Moment", *ibid.* vol. 16, no. 9 (September 1908): 137-40, reprinted from the *Indian Mirror*. Pramatha Nath Bose was the well-known author of *Epochs of Civilisation* and *A History of Hindu Civilisation under British Rule*.

⁶⁶ The global journey of this article is revealing in itself. Reinsch's piece first appeared in the Chicago *International Journal of Ethics* in July 1911, before being picked up by Allahabad's *Hindustan Review*,

of China had been portrayed by at least one Buddhist paper in Colombo as the victory of a "modified Buddhistic metaphysic" over the "unspirituality, narrowness and selfishness of the old Agnostic's philosophy", by 1910 Confucian teachings and commentaries were being featured in the *Maha Bodhi Journal*, the flagship pan-Buddhist magazine organ across India, Burma and Ceylon.⁶⁷

Finally, the Tagore circles' own ideas about Asian unity made a significant impact beyond the Indian Ocean. As we have begun to appreciate, Okakura and Coomaraswamy, as respected scholars who took up appointments in the U.S., fed their thoughts about Asian aesthetics directly into Western academe, helping to sustain an orientalism that some critics might accuse of being essentialist and reductionist.

Likewise, Tagore himself, although he did not take up an academic appointment, became a prime mover in orientalist scholarship back in India. A few months after his revelatory moment at Yokohama, he wrote to his son Rathindrinath (then in charge of his ashram at Santiniketan) outlining his plan for the creation of a world university.⁶⁸ In pursuit of this project, Tagore relied heavily on the support of Sylvain Levi, the French orientalist then building his career around establishing the migration of Indian civilization into central and eastern Asia. In late-1921, Levi arrived at Santiniketan for the launch of Tagore's Visva-Bharati University and to set up its department of Chinese and Tibetan studies. Such a grand educational edifice to Asia's civilizational unity continues to thrive over 80 years later.

In a sense, the founding constitution of the Visva-Bharati University represents the Tagore circle's closing manifesto on Asian unity — the point at which two decades of discussion finally become institutionalized. By today's standards the university's overall *raison d'être* might sound rather postmodern: to study the mind of man "in

and then reprinted again from this latter periodical in the *Maha Bodhi Journal* early the following year. See "News and Notes", *MBJ* vol. 20, no. 1 (January 1912): 30-32.

⁶⁷ "Buddhism v. Confucianism", *Buddhist*, 8 March 1895; "Confucius and some of his Sayings and Apotheograms", *MBJ* 17, no. 9 (September 1909): 309-11; and vol. 18, no. 12 (December 1910): 685-88.

⁶⁸ Hay, *Asian ideas*, pp. 126-27.

its realisation of different aspects of truth from diverse points of view". Nonetheless, its more immediate goals recall those "exhilarating" evenings spent in debate at Jorasanko:

[1] To bring together ... the various scattered cultures of the East, the fittest place for such endeavour being India, the heart of Asia, into which have flowed the Vedic, Buddhist, Semitic, Zoroastrian, and other cultural currents originating in different part[s] of the Orient from Judea to Japan; to bring to a realisation the fundamental unity of the tendencies of different civilisations of Asia, thereby enabling the East to gain a full consciousness of its own spiritual purpose, the obscuration of which has been the chief obstacle in the way of [2] a true co-operation of East and West, the great achievements of these being mutually complementary and alike necessary for Universal Culture in its completeness.⁶⁹

Only, the discourse of Asian civilization had by now transformed into an academic discipline with a clearly defined set of desired outcomes. And it was at this point — as the first students filed into their lecture halls and took their places to listen to renowned authorities such as Sylvain Levi — that the idea of Asia entered a new stage in its Indian Ocean history, becoming a concept that would henceforth be as much "passed down" as it was "passed around".

Another orientalism?

The dynamic nature of the idea of Asia that the Tagore circle and other Asian literati explored raises an immediate question: how can we argue that such an idea was simply, at its heart, a European orientalist construction?

Obviously, the broader context in which this discourse of Asian civilization was generated and circulated was colonial: "Asia is one" was especially well received amongst multilingual literati accustomed to life in colonial entrepôts, the maritime nodal points through which European imperialism worked most visibly to knit the

⁶⁹ Quoted in Hay, *Asian ideas*, pp. 133-34.

region closer together. But if we went further and argued that the idea of Asia as a cultural unity was largely a European orientalist fantasy — one swallowed wholesale by colonized minds across the Indian Ocean world — then we would be on less stable ground.

European orientalist scholarship, especially European archeological excavations of Buddhist sites in India, certainly inspired the literati we have studied in their imagining of a golden Asian past. Nonetheless, the impact of European orientalism should not be overstated nor asserted without some sense of chronology. For one thing, as the careers of Okakura and Coomaraswamy indicate, certain orientalist scholarship was informed by Asian thinkers from the outset. But more than that, the concept of a unified Asia appears to have become embedded across the Indian Ocean world (at least in the port-city journals of India and Ceylon) before European scholars were drawn on to systematically substantiate it. By the time these scholars did make an impact, the idea that Asia was one (with India at its heart) had gone global, thanks largely to the writings of Asian literati who derived their arguments from their experience of the region and who already presupposed its cultural unity.⁷⁰

For Asia was by now an entity that the region's inhabitants — utilizing modern methods of social communication and engaging in transoceanic debates — had begun to explore, to imagine and to define for themselves. So much so that in key respects, the discourse of Asian civilization emanating from within the Indian Ocean world stands clearly apart from representations of the "East" or the "Orient" that Edward Said and his followers have seen as embedded in Western literature and the Euro-American academy.⁷¹ In looking back at the "Night of Asia", as Okakura called it, certain Asian writers did reiterate the belief that in comparison with the West, their societies had become atrophied, bereft of internal stimuli, even effeminate and

⁷⁰ For a fuller discussion of the contribution of European orientalists to the "Greater India" idea of Asia after 1920 see Susan Bayly, "Imagining 'Greater India': Indian Visions of Colonialism in the Indic Mode", *Modern Asian Studies* 38, no. 3 (2004): 703-44.

⁷¹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1994).

lacking in "manly virtues". However, such a condition was seen to be historically contingent and not an inherent or defining characteristic of the region. The Asian past the literati we have studied preferred to invoke was one in which the region was united by maritime intercourse and the ecumenical strands woven by wandering pilgrims — a golden age of peaceful coexistence and dynamic cultural exchange that only passed with the arrival of foreign invaders. In this respect, Islam was the main historical culprit but the foe in more recent time was clearly European colonialism.

Moreover, in the early-1900s Asia's golden age appeared on the verge of a rebirth. Once more we return to the point that many Asian literati seemed as much inspired by the "that great ocean of idealism" of the present they lived in as by an ancient one that had come centuries before. The modern Indian Ocean might have relied on steam and electricity for its "energism", it might have been punctuated by ugly, industrial port-cities; nonetheless, it was an equal source of visionary aspiration and cosmopolitan hope — the grand universal filter through which even a provincial expression of difference such as the Swadeshi Movement took on a far greater pan-Asian, even global, significance.

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