

## PART I

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# **Sustainable Development: Theories and Practices**

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-89717-4 — Sustainable Development: Asia-Pacific Perspectives  
Edited by Pak Sum Low  
Excerpt  
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# 1 Asian identities

AMARTYA SEN

*Department of Economics, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA*

**Editor's note:** This chapter was the keynote address of Professor Amartya Sen, who received a Lifetime Achievement Award on 28 March 2007 conferred by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) on its 60th anniversary. The editor is most grateful to Professor Sen for kindly giving his permission to use this address, fittingly, as the opening chapter of the book. The original speech, titled 'Asian immensities', is reproduced here, with only the addition of the keywords, which are provided by the editor to highlight the key elements of the chapter. Professor Sen changed the title to '*Asian identities*' before the publication of this chapter.

## Keywords

Asian; identities; immensities; diverse beliefs; global civilization; diverse beliefs; education; religion; parliament; communication

It is marvellous that we are gathered here to celebrate the 60th anniversary of this wonderful organization, ESCAP, which is such a pre-eminent part of the United Nations system. I am also delighted to see that the rich history of ESCAP is being put together in a report that the Executive Secretary has appropriately commissioned (and which is already available in a pre-publication form), called 'The First Parliament of Asia', an apt name for an interactive process in Asia in which ESCAP has played such a leading role over the last six decades. I am very fortunate to be here and to be able to join in these anniversary celebrations.

As the subject of my talk I have chosen the expression 'Asian Immensities', which draws on a phrase made famous by W. B. Yeats, the poet: 'Asiatic vague immensities'. For various reasons the term 'Asiatic' is no longer much favoured: it somehow got, at least in the opinions of some, too mixed up with a racist description. And we Asians may not see ourselves as being engulfed in 'vagueness' in the way Yeats – and indeed many other Western observers – decided that we definitely were. But we can hardly dispute the immensities that are attributed to us. Asia is a huge part of the world, covering around 60% of the entire world population, and its immensities have been widely recognized for a very long time.

However, Asia's immensities are not confined only to its population size and geographical area but also encompass Asia's role in world history. Indeed, to take a clue from the report commissioned by the Executive Secretary, we have to look at the tradition in Asia of talking to each other, which is invoked in his choice of the word 'parliament' – a word that literally means a speech or a conversation. The celebration of that tradition is indeed very ancient in Asia, going back to the championing of that tradition by many

Asian authors, from Emperor Ashoka in the third century BC in India and Prince Shotoku in seventh-century Japan. Later on in this talk I must try to discuss why that tradition has been so momentous in the making of what we can call the world civilization, with rich contributions coming from Asia.

But first a bit of personal background. My own sense of belonging to Asia goes back a long time. While I am from India, my family is from Dhaka in Bangladesh, where I spent a large part of my childhood. When India and Bangladesh played each other in world cup cricket in the West Indies earlier this month, I was in the happy position of being able to celebrate something no matter which side won! I was also privileged in my early childhood to be in Mandalay in what was then called Burma (I still call it Burma, I must confess), and I have truly wonderful early memories of Mandalay as an immensely graceful city with an exquisite pagoda, among other objects of beauty, and of course very friendly people.

However, I also imbibed my Asianness from my school days in Santiniketan in India – a school that was started by Rabindranath Tagore, the visionary poet and writer. The school had an international orientation, but rather than looking only towards Europe – Britain in particular – which was quite common in British India, Tagore's school was particularly involved with Asia, with specific provisions for teaching about China, Japan, Korea, Indochina, Malaya, Java, Bali, and of course Thailand: I remember those classes well.

Tagore's enchantment with Asia received further support when he visited this country, Thailand. He came to the Vajiravudh College in this city to give a lecture and was received by my friend Anand Panyarachun's father, who was then heading Vajiravudh. Since our school curriculum reflected the influence of what Tagore learned in his travels in Asia, I see myself as a beneficiary – both direct and indirect – of long-standing Asian connections, which had a strong influence on my thinking from very early days in my life. So it is a very special privilege for me to be able to participate in the celebrations of the 60th anniversary of 'the first parliament of Asia'.

I mentioned earlier the fact that the immensities of Asia have received recognition in Europe for a very long time. However, I should also mention that those immensities have not always been admired and praised in the Western countries, and indeed sometimes they have appeared to Europeans to be rather terrible, with seriously damaging and corrupting influence on Europe. Now that ‘Islamophobia’ is quite common in parts of Europe, and many Europeans like to insist that the European Union should officially assert its uniquely ‘Christian roots’, it is worth recollecting that not that long ago, Nietzsche, the great German philosopher, asserted that we Asians were responsible for, yes, Christianity – and we did much damage to Europe through spreading it to gullible Europeans. Nietzsche argued that ‘Christianity did everything possible to orientalize the Occident’, and went into some eloquence in denouncing Asia and Christianity in the same breath: ‘Christianity wants to destroy, shatter, stun, intoxicate; there is only one thing it does not want: *moderation*, and for this reason, it is in its deepest meaning barbaric, Asiatic, ignoble, un-Greek’.<sup>1</sup> Before signing up to the view that the essence of Europe lies in Christianity, perhaps Europeans should take some note of Nietzsche’s diagnosis about the presence of Asian mischief there – and the views of others like Schopenhauer, another great European philosopher, who was convinced that given its contents, the New Testament ‘must somehow be of Indian origin’!<sup>2</sup>

Confusion about Asia has occurred time and again in European thought, and there is a long tradition also of seeing a uniformity within Europe that may or may not actually exist. On our side though, in Asia, we are happy to take the blame, if any, for Christianity, and also for Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and Shintoism, and for many other systems of belief, including of course agnosticism and atheism, in which, too, Asia has an ancient history (Sanskrit, for example, has a much larger atheistic and materialistic literature than what exists in any other classical language in the world). Our immensity lies not just in our size, but also in our willingness to accept that we can have diverse beliefs and disparate life styles and can still cultivate constructive interactions with each other. Indeed, we have been doing so for thousands of years in history, coming down all the way to the present with ESCAP’s role as a ‘parliament of Asia’, which we are celebrating today and which is a continuation of a very long tradition. If Asia has a strong claim to dignity, it lies not in our exclusivity or separatism, but in our acceptance of variety and the possibility of learning from each other.

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, translated by Marion Faber and Stephen Lehmann (London, Penguin Books, 1994), p. 85.

<sup>2</sup> This occurs in *Parerga und Paralipomena*; see Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (New York, State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 112.

On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of ESCAP, it is appropriate to ask why interactions across the borders of a country are so consequential and significant. This is a subject of great importance in the turbulent world in which we live. There are two ways of thinking of the history of civilization in the world. One way, which I shall call the ‘fragmentary approach’, segregates the beliefs and practices of different regions into self-contained entities and sees distinct civilizations as ships passing at night, without any communication with each other. The other, which I shall call the ‘inclusive approach’, pays full attention not just to the divisions between regions, but also to the interdependences involved, possibly varying over time, between the manifestations of civilization in different parts of the world.

We know, of course, that Western technological and cultural pursuits have recently had quite a profound impact on the rest of the world, but the ancestry of global ideas and innovations go back much longer than the interactions following the industrial revolution, which brought Europe into unique prominence. Indeed, Asia played a central part in the making of what we can now call the ‘global civilization’. Asia’s claim to civilization does not lie in its efforts to build some impenetrable uniqueness that could not be repeated anywhere other than in Asia. It lies rather in our efforts to develop knowledge and understanding from which the whole of humankind can benefit.

Partitioned and separatist comprehensions of world history have recently become increasingly popular in Europe and America, and this fragmentary approach has come much into prominence, especially in the threatening form of the so-called ‘clash of civilizations’. The idea of some kind of a clash of civilizations has figured from time to time in the past, but it is only recently that the entire subject has been elevated to the position of being a central concern in many Western countries today. In this transformation, a major intellectual role has been played by the publication, in 1996, of Samuel Huntington’s famous book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. And more recently, the dreadful events of 11 September 2001 have not only ushered in a period of awful conflicts and distrust in the world, but have also magnified the ongoing interest in the alarming thesis of an almost inescapable ‘clash of civilizations’. Indeed, many influential commentators have been tempted to see a firm linkage between the profusion of atrocities that we see around us today and the civilizational divisions, primarily along religious lines. This is, in fact, a continuation of Nietzsche’s denunciation of Asiatic mischief in Europe, even though Nietzsche himself placed Christianity as the central feature of that Asiatic abuse. That role is now given to Islam, through a similarly impoverished understanding of global civilization.

There is indeed a huge muddle in that thinking. Consider what is often called ‘Western science’. Despite that regionalist

nomenclature, what is identified as the content of Western science clearly draws on the innovations of ideas, reasoning, and technology that happened across the world – not just in the West. There is a chain of intellectual relations that link Western mathematics and science to a collection of distinctly non-Western works, for example Chinese, Iranian, Indian, and Arab innovations in mathematics. Even today, when a modern mathematician in, say, Princeton or Caltech invokes an ‘algorithm’ to solve a difficult computational problem, he/she helps to commemorate the contributions of the ninth-century Arab mathematician, Al-Khwarizmi, from whose name – Al-Khwarizmi – the term ‘algorithm’ is derived: the term ‘algebra’ comes from the title of his book, *Al Jabr wa-al-Muqabilah*. Al-Khwarizmi was an Asian and a Muslim, but that cannot be the most relevant description of him in the present context: the focus has to be on the mathematical contribution and leadership of Al-Khwarizmi. He was concerned not with spreading Islam or with engulfing Europe in ‘Asiatic vague immensities’, but with extending a more precise understanding of mathematics and science – at home and abroad.

The flowering of global science and technology since the European Enlightenment is not an exclusively West-led phenomenon; it was impacted by international interactions, many of which originated far away from Europe, quite often in Asia. Consider the development and use of printing, which Francis Bacon put among the advances that ‘have changed the whole face and state of things throughout the world’. The technology of printing was, of course, a great contribution of East Asia, with Korea, Japan, and China competing with each other to get there first. The early printing technologists in ninth-century Asia were all Buddhist engineers, since Buddhism was very committed to spreading enlightenment and understanding to all, which is greatly helped by the use of printing.

In these efforts the national boundaries were persistently breached. Consider the first printed book in the world – or, to be exact, the first printed book that is actually dated. That book was the Chinese translation of a Sanskrit treatise from India on Buddhist philosophy, *Vajracchedika-prjnaparamita Sutra* (sometimes referred to as the *Diamond Sutra*), translated into Chinese from Sanskrit in the early fifth century: it was printed four centuries later in AD 868. The translator of the *Diamond Sutra*, Kumarajiva, was half-Indian and half-Turkish, lived in a part of eastern Turkistan called Kuch and travelled extensively in India, and then moved to China, and headed the newly established institute of foreign languages in Xian in the early fifth century: incidentally this was the first institute of this kind in the world – dedicated to foreign languages. The history of ‘the first parliament of Asia’, commissioned by Mr Kim Hak-Su, the Executive Secretary of ESCAP, can be, in a very general way, traced back to the time when the Koreans, the Chinese, and the

Japanese were competing to be able to speak extensively to the world with speed and efficiency and when they were willing – and indeed eager – to publish books coming from countries other than their own. It is also worth noting that the book *Diamond Sutra*, printed in Chinese translation, carried a statement of purpose in the accompanying announcement of this first fruit of printing: ‘Reverently made for *universal free distribution*’. What a huge vision this was, from AD 868, of which Asia and the whole world can claim to be proud inheritors!

The greatness of ideas went hand in hand with progress in high technology. Think of the nature of ‘high technology’ not right now – at the *end* of a millennium when the West is clearly dominant – but at the *beginning* of the millennium, around AD 1000. The high technology in the world of AD 1000 included paper and printing, the kite and the wheelbarrow, the crossbow and gunpowder, the clock and the iron chain suspension bridge, the magnetic compass, and the rotary fan. Each one of these cases of high technology of the world a millennium ago was very well established and extensively used in China, and was practically unknown in much of the rest of the world, including of course Europe and the West. But the knowledge of these technical innovations gradually moved from one country to another and became a part of global civilization.

What we now call ‘Western science’ draws not only on indigenous innovations (important as they were, through the Renaissance and European Enlightenment), but also on using the fruits of early progress in many non-Western parts of the world. Sometimes we can see some remnant marks of that global history in the nature of surviving words and language. I talked earlier about the Arab origins of the idea of algorithm; let me give another example, drawing from trigonometry. The ancient Indian mathematician Aryabhata had developed and made extensive use of the concept of ‘sine’ (central to trigonometry), in the fifth century. He called it *jya-ardha*, which literally means half-chord in Sanskrit. From there the term moved on in an interesting migratory way, as Howard Eves describes in his *An Introduction to the History of Mathematics* (1990, p. 237):

Aryabhata called it *ardha-jya* (‘half-chord’) and *jya-ardha* (‘chord-half’), and then abbreviated the term by simply using *jya* (‘chord’). From *jya* the Arabs phonetically derived *jiba*, which, following Arabic practice of omitting vowels, was written as *jb*. Now *jiba*, aside from its technical significance, is a meaningless word in Arabic. Later writers who came across *jb* as an abbreviation for the meaningless word *jiba* substituted *jaib* instead, which contains the same letters, and is a good Arabic word meaning ‘cove’ or ‘bay’. Still later, Gherardo of Cremona (ca. 1150), when he made his translations from the Arabic, replaced the Arabian *jaib* by its Latin equivalent, *sinus* [meaning a cove or a bay], from whence came our present word *sine*.

This is a part of the global history of world civilization, involving Indians, Arabs, and Italians, and it would be difficult to wipe all that out in the gross nomenclature of ‘Western science’ or ‘Western mathematics’.

The fragmentary approach to civilizations is foundationally mistaken. The critically important interactions across borders, often involving Asian countries, are crucial not only in understanding Asia’s role in world history, but also for an adequate understanding of the evolution of global civilization as a whole.

Before I end, I must say a few words on why the old tradition of talking to each other remains so important in the world today – no less so in Asia. The issue has relevance in global politics and in international diplomacy. The refusal of some powerful countries in the world to talk to others has substantially contributed, I would argue, to making the world more unstable and violent today. There is no substitute for talking – no serious alternative to the ‘parliamentary’ method – in making the world a peaceful place.

However, aside from its diplomatic and political relevance, the tradition of talking and interacting with each other has huge relevance for the making of social and economic policies, which is a primary concern of ESCAP. This applies to the whole world, but it remains critically important in Asia as well. Given the wide variations in achievements in different Asian countries, we have an enormous amount to learn from each other – from the respective successes and failures, in different fields, of different countries.

To a certain extent this has been happening quite strongly already, but the force and impact of this creative process can be further enhanced. The pace of economic progress has been much faster in Asia than elsewhere in the world over many decades now. Not surprisingly, countries have been learning from each other and correspondingly adjusting their respective economic policies. For example, in the economic changes made in India in recent decades, the experiences of countries like China and South Korea, and going further back, of Japan, have had quite a considerable effect. However, the process can be much further extended since there are still countries in this region that are struggling with their economic progress. Lessons of scrutinized experience can easily move across borders.

Aside from trade-related considerations, there have been major contributions of planned expansion of human capabilities – through education, healthcare, and so on – in raising the pace of economic expansion in one country after another in Asia. For example, an emphasis on education and skill formation has been a prime mover of change. Even at the time of the Meiji restoration in the middle of the 19th century, Japan already had a higher level of literacy than Europe, even though Japan had not yet had any industrialization or modern economic development, which Europe had experienced for nearly a century. That focus

on developing human capability was intensified in the early period of Japanese development, in the Meiji era (1868–1911). Education consumed a huge part of the budgets of the towns and villages, for Japan as a whole, and the results achieved were commensurate with that investment. By 1906, Japan was close enough to complete literacy. By 1913, though Japan was economically still quite underdeveloped, it had become one of the largest producers of books in the world – publishing more books than Britain and indeed more than twice as many as the United States.

To a great extent, the same priority can later on be seen all over East and Southeast Asia, though often this came rather more hesitantly and slowly. South Korea, Singapore, Thailand, China, and other countries have tended to follow this general approach with excellent results. The successes of the market economy in these economies, which have been widely praised (it is certainly an important part of a fuller story), have rested on the working of many other institutions along with the market. In India, school education had lagged and is only now catching up, but India’s own economic expansion has been fed by its success in technical higher education, and the capability expansion resulting from this has been fruitfully used in information technology, pharmaceuticals, and other specialized sectors of modern production.

I do not have the time and the opportunity to try to list all the different ways in which Asians have learned from each other. But I must briefly mention some fields in which scope for further learning remains possible. This I do in the form of a sequence of questions: they are meant to be examples of useful inquiries – not in any way an exhaustive list.

- What can others learn from China’s rapid progress in life expectancy in the pre-reform period through social intervention at a time when the country was still very poor? Are the comparable experiences of Sri Lanka and the state of Kerala in India driven by similar processes of imaginative social policy?
- What does Thailand’s healthcare practice teach us about the possibility of an early health transition, including managing the prevention and control of epidemic diseases like AIDS?
- Is there something to learn from Singapore’s success in building a constructive and peaceful multicultural society?
- What do we learn from religious coexistence in Indonesia, Malaysia, India, and Bangladesh in overcoming community-based confrontations?
- Are there lessons for others in India’s and Japan’s success with multiparty democracy?
- Can the sharing of the fruits of rapid economic growth be made less unequal in countries where they are very unequal

(for example China and also India), since there are other countries in which that is not the case?

- The long-standing blot in Asia's record in gender justice through higher female mortality rates compared with what could be expected on the basis of male mortality may have been reversed in many Asian countries, but can this terrible inheritance of Asia be made into a thing of the past in *all* Asian countries and regions?
- What should be done about natality differential against women in the form of sex-specific abortions, which is quite widespread in many countries such as South Korea, China, and even in the Northern and Western states in India (though not in the South and the East of India)? Why should 'son preference' be so strong even in countries in which women do so very well in many other ways, especially since that is not the case in other parts of Asia?
- Has Asia been doing enough in leading the world opinion on how to manage, and in particular not to mismanage, the global challenges that we face today, including those of

terrorism, violence, and global injustice? Do we take an adequate interest in the problems of Africa, our sister continent, which has faced much worse adversities than we have? Asia's first parliament, which is a part of the global parliament of the United Nations, can also be a parliament in which the problems of the entire world receive serious notice.

I end my talk with these questions, which I believe deserve our attention. There are many questions to ask and many answers to seek. The relevance of these questions does not in any way diminish the value of what Asia has already achieved – over the recent years, over many centuries, and indeed over millennia. We have reason to be proud of what we Asians have been able to do for ourselves and for world civilization. But there is a lot to do still. The celebration of the past achievements of Asia's parliamentary inclinations as well as its vast immensities is also a good moment to think of the future. I would like to be able to say *the best is yet to come!* On that rather cheerful note, let me conclude this talk by thanking you all for listening.