



**Sehdev
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Dr. Sehdev Kumar, Professor Emeritus, has recently returned to Canada after a 4-month lecture tour in 11 countries in Asia. Author of recently published, 'Matters of Life & Death: Reflections on Bioethics, Law and the Human Destiny', his forthcoming book is entitled '7000 Million Degrees of Freedom'.

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“Is it merely an illusion that the political, cultural and economic map of the world is changing so fast that it may be quite unrecognizable in the next two decades? Certainly, in many countries in Asia - China, India, South Korea, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia - it is changing at a dizzying pace that makes many wonder if this is going to be the Century of Asia.

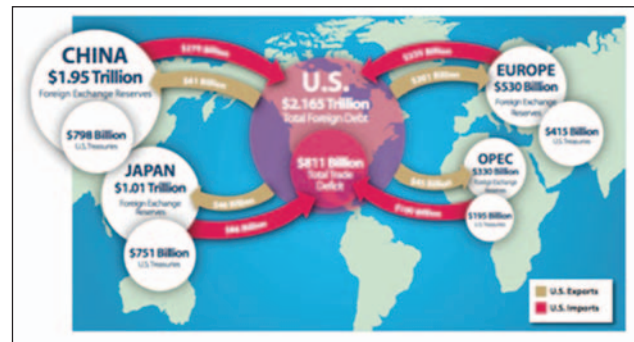
At the end of 19th century, in 1889, observing the vast and humiliated country of China, Rudyard Kipling (famous for his 'White Man's Burden'), wrote: "What will happen when China really wakes up, runs a line from Shanghai to Lhasa, and controls her own gun factories and arsenals?"

In one manner or another, that could be asked today of many other countries in Asia: as they throw away their colonial past, challenge their own feudal and other archaic structures and traditions, rejuvenate the aspirations of their young, and step into the 21st century, not as 'White Man's burden', but as equals, or even more, in every walk of life, the world may rediscover Asia - and two of its most prominent ancient civilizations, India and China - with new eyes.

More than 500 years ago, Christopher Columbus in 1492 and Vasco da Gama in 1498, set out to discover India by two different routes; a whole new world was revealed in that discovery; in 1770s, Adam Smith, called these as "the two greatest events recorded in the history of mankind... What benefits, or what misfortunes to mankind may hereafter result from these great events, no human wisdom can foresee."

That encounter of Europe with Asia changed the fortunes of Asia and the imperial powers greatly: from the beginning of the Christian era until 1800s, half the world's population lived in Asia, and Asia accounted for 50% of the world's produce, with India and China as the largest economies of the world. By 1900, half the world's population still lived in Asia (though devastated by increasing famines), but their share of the world's

Is this the Century of Asia?



produce had been reduced to 20%.

All that is now changing once again: in the next decade, it is estimated that the economy of China will surpass that of USA, and India's will be close behind. In the past three decades, as hundreds of millions of people moved from acute levels of poverty to various stages of middle class in China noticeably, but also in other parts of Asia, the issues of 'development' for larger and larger populations become crucial for social and political stability of every country.

In the heat of politics and economics, sometimes the three most crucial forces in the economic and cultural transformation of Asia and its rise in this century are overlooked:

Demography

Asia as the largest continent, both in area and population, has almost 60 percent of the world's population, with India and China together counting for 35% of it. In addition to the absolute size of the population, what is crucial is the demographic distribution in different age groups. The median age in a country defines the age where half of the population is below that number, and another half above it. The country with the highest median age, 46.5 years, in the world is Japan. For many Japanese that is a very scary situation, with an aging population that is not being replaced either by new births or new immigrants.

The median age of other large countries in Asia is very different: China 37.5 years, India 27, Indonesia 30. Rightly, in India, Prime Minister Modi speaks in terms of 'youth dividend'.

What is so special about today's youth in Asia: they are more confident than ever before. They are not cowed down by colonial inferiority complexes; they are global in their outlook and tastes, more enterprising, more desirous of material and social well-being and its possibilities, more well-connected, less mired in dogma and religious obscurantism, more resourceful, more outgoing, and more wishing to live than to die in foolish wars.

Asian students, and students of Asian origins, invariably are at the top of their classes in Canada and the US.

If the youth in India and in other Asian countries can be provided opportunities for education and training, and



if they are given more freedom and more level playing field, they can, and will, achieve much to transform not only their own lives but of their societies at large.

Women

The most remarkable feature of change of life in Asia - and to varying degrees in other parts of the world - is the changing place of women in the society. Not only in urban centres - where women are to be seen in every walk of life and in every profession - but increasingly in smaller towns and in rural areas as well. This is apparent by the presence of women in civil services, in all professions, in politics, in business, in media, in public life in general. And this change seems to be occurring faster than any other societal change. There are no moral grounds on which this change can be thwarted or opposed by any group of people.

There are many, for good reasons, who feel that the change is not coming fast enough, or is not pervasive enough. But there is no stopping its profusion in education, in professions, in business, in politics; in fact, in all walks of life.

Communication Revolution

The coming of communication revolution in the past 30 years all over the world, but certainly most specifically in Asia, has shaken the social and political fabric of all societies. Three decades ago only a few privileged people had landlines in Asia; they were not only expensive but also unreliable. Now, mobile phones and internet have penetrated the interiors of all countries.

India alone has almost a billion mobile phones, connecting families with each other, but also with the world at large: the ordinary citizens with civil servants, politicians and with all others. The social media has shattered all notions of 'iron' or 'bamboo' curtains on information, news, ideas, opinions and gossip, and has created a new definition for participatory democracy.

These three remarkable features - demography, women and communication revolution - are defining the new century and the rise of Asia in it.

The real challenge for rising Asia would be to curtail militarism and barbaric ways of solving conflicts, and to usher peace and prosperity harmoniously. That would be the most significant departure from the earlier centuries.