



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **Orienting India : Interwar Internationalism in an Asian Inflection, 1917-1937**

Stolte, C.M.

### **Citation**

Stolte, C. M. (2013, October 8). *Orienting India : Interwar Internationalism in an Asian Inflection, 1917-1937*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/21864>

Version: Corrected Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/21864>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/21864> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation

**Author:** Stolte, Carolina Margaretha

**Title:** Orienting India : interwar internationalism in an Asian inflection, 1917-1937

**Issue Date:** 2013-10-08

### 3. Academic Asianism

- 3.1 Asia as the spiritual antithesis of Europe
- 3.2 Asianism at Viśva Bharati University
- 3.3 Shared Asian paths and pasts: imagining Greater India
- 3.4 Student politics: the Asiatic Student Congress
- 3.5 Conclusion

#### 3.1 Asia as the spiritual antithesis of Europe

Now the wild people ... would starve themselves to death; and they have their heels in front, with toes and flat of the foot behind; but certain mouthless people were brought to him, a gentle folk; and they live round the sources of the Ganges, and they sustain themselves by means of vapours from roasted meats and odours from fruits and flowers, since instead of mouths they have only breathing orifices; and they suffer pain when they breathe bad odours.<sup>1</sup>

Defining Asia by its supposed spirituality not only has a long history; it is also a topos with its origins in the West. Ever since the Asian travels of Megasthenes, handed down by Strabo and Arrian,<sup>2</sup> Asia has fascinated Europe. While an element of the ‘mysterious East’ (‘mysterious’ primarily for lack of accurate knowledge beyond the eastern Mediterranean) had continued to mark subsequent accounts, the seventeenth century saw a shift in the European discourse on Asia.<sup>3</sup> As interaction between the continents intensified, so did flows of information. But despite the availability of more accurate information on Asia, the increasing flow of people and goods also produced a more imaginative discourse, re-mystifying, for various reasons, what had been demystified by the trading companies. A small legion of adventurers, missionaries, Orientalists, philosophers, and armchair travellers started to construct Asia as the spiritual counterpart of Europe.<sup>4</sup> From the late seventeenth century onwards, literature on Asia flooded the public domain. Poets, playwrights, and proto-ethnographers answered the demand for *Orientalia*. Among the much-discussed topoi of the ‘Oriental despot’, the ‘effeminate Asian’, and many others, the supposed mysticism of the Orient gradually saw

---

<sup>1</sup> Megasthenes’ observations on Indian religious men, quoted in H. L. Jones, *Strabo: Geography, books 15–16* (1930; repr., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 95.

<sup>2</sup> Megasthenes’ own tract *Indika* does not survive, although some of its contents are given by Strabo in his *Geography* (Book 15) and by Arrian. For a translation of the latter, see P. A. Brunt, *Arrian: Anabasis Alexandri Books V–VII and Indica* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> Literature on Asia continued in the Middle Ages through accounts such as that of Marco Polo and Mandeville, culminating in cosmographies such as that of Sebastian Münster in 1544, whose India still included dragons. However, it must be noted that this discourse was never homogenous and defies categorization as a supposedly uncritical acceptance of a continent populated by dog-faced men and other fantasy creatures. See, in particular, P. Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977); J. P. Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes, 1250–1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed treatment, see K. Teltscher, *India Inscribed: European and British Writing on India 1600–1800* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

itself replaced with an emphasis on the religiosity and spirituality of Asia, which, while informed by Orientalist clichés, was much harder to fit into a worldview of alleged European superiority over a disempowered Asia.<sup>5</sup> To many Romantics, this developed into a new connection between Europe and Asia as the ‘head’ and the ‘heart’, or ‘reason’ and ‘spirit’, respectively. The German poet Friedrich von Hardenberg (1772–1801) for instance, would propose in *Die Christenheit* that Asia should be acknowledged as partaking in the roots of Greek, Biblical, and Christian traditions, a ‘homeland of the spirit’.<sup>6</sup>

The construction of spirituality as a defining characteristic of Asia would become popular in Asia as well as in Europe. In the nineteenth century, this construction of Asian identity ceased to be the purview of European authors.<sup>7</sup> Hindu-reformers like Keshab Chandra Sen also used this well-established myth in writings about what constituted Asian civilization. In an 1883 speech with the programmatic title ‘Asia’s Message to Europe’ he stated:

We have indeed learnt a great deal from the West ... but Europe too must learn of Asia. Who can deny the deep idealism and the lofty spirituality of the East? The marvellous and almost incredible ease with which Asiatic seers have always communed with the Eternal Spirit, gives the lie to the dictum that God is unknowable. Wilt thou, Europe, take away from us our soul substance? Thou shalt not do it. In this sceptical age, Asia must preach with thundering eloquence the Gospel of the Living and Knowable God. ... It is un-Asiatic not to know God.<sup>8</sup>

This discursive strategy, which is often and with some justification called ‘self-orientalization’,<sup>9</sup> is clearly visible in Sen’s phrasing. In line with prevalent Orientalist stereotypes, a peace-making and placid Asia is contrasted with a materialistic and menacing Europe. This leitmotiv permeated many early Indian concepts of Asia.

A first international platform for the global promulgation of East–West stereotypes was the World Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893 in the context of the World Exhibition.<sup>10</sup> The Parliament offered a unique forum for the representatives of Asian religions to reach a Western audience. At the same time, it was a space for encounters between Asian actors themselves, to be consolidated by future transnational cooperation. Pratap Chandra

<sup>5</sup> The same holds true for archaeology and linguistic research, which increasingly located the roots of European culture, language and religion in Asia. For a dissenting view, see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1978). Considering the abundance of critiques of Said’s work, reference will be made here only to a recent work that tackles this particular issue: P. Rietbergen, *Europa’s India: Fascinatie en Cultureel Imperialisme, ca. 1750–2000* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2007), esp. 53–102.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Rietbergen, *Europa’s India*, 212.

<sup>7</sup> The following pages draw on C. Stolte and H. Fischer-Tiné, ‘Imagining Asia in India: Nationalism and Internationalism, ca. 1905–1940’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54:1 (2012): 65–92.

<sup>8</sup> T. E. Slater, *Keshab Chandra Sen and the Brahma Samaj: Being a Brief Review of Indian Theism from 1830 to 1884; Together with Selections from Mr. Sen’s Works* (Madras: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1884), 135.

<sup>9</sup> A. Dirlik, ‘Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism’, *History and Theory*, 35:2 (1996): 96–118.

<sup>10</sup> D. Lüddeckens, *Das Weltparlament der Religionen von 1893. Strukturen interreligiöser Begegnung im 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2002) and R. H. Saeger, *An illustrated and popular story of the world’s first parliament of religions held in Chicago in connection with the Columbian exhibition of 1893*, vols. I and II (Chicago: the Parliament Publishing Company, 1893, repr. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

Majumdar, representative of the Hindu reformist Brahmo Samaj,<sup>11</sup> Gyanendranath Chakravarti from the Indian Theosophical Society, and the self-appointed representative of 'orthodox' Hinduism, Vivekananda,<sup>12</sup> all subscribed to the binary East–West cliché. Vivekananda undoubtedly had the greatest impact on his audience. He maintained that, thanks to its inherent spirituality, Asia—and especially India—was the antithesis of the highly mechanized but soulless West. He was also one of the first Indian intellectuals to build bridges between Asian neighbours: on the way to Chicago, Vivekananda visited Japan and speculated openly about a common future for Asian peoples.<sup>13</sup>

Around the same time, the Theosophical Society popularized this idea further through various publications disseminated not only within India but also worldwide. The Society's veneration of the allegedly 'spiritual East' as opposed to the 'materialist West' was directly informed by the textualized approach to Asia of such romantic Orientalists as William Jones and the earlier German Romantic tradition.<sup>14</sup> While European and American members of the Society used the East–West cliché as part of an inner-civilizational critique that sought to define what industrialized Europe had lost, Asian affiliates such as Gyanendranath Chakravarti, the theosophical delegate to the World Parliament of Religions, later employed it for their own specific agendas, as would Gandhi.<sup>15</sup> The cases of Chakravarti and Gandhi exemplify how successfully the Theosophical Society as a globally recognized platform mediated this stereotype between the West and Asia.

Even though the casting of Asia as the spiritual counterpart of Europe, with the accompanying rejection of violence or aggressive nationalism, would at first glance seem to be a largely academic exercise, the interwar period gave it potential for wider application. The most prominent person to reformulate this Asianist essentialism in support of a (nationalist) cause was Gandhi. Within his specific agenda, the 'spiritual unity' of Asia could become an argument against capitalism, industry, materialism, and imperialism, or indeed one in favour of nonviolence. But unlike inveterate travellers and Asian enthusiasts like Vivekananda and

<sup>11</sup> See P. C. Majumdar, *The World's Religious Debt to Asia. Being the Substance of an Address Delivered at the Parliament of Religions*, Chicago (Lahore: Punjab Brahmo Samaj, 1894).

<sup>12</sup> For Vivekananda's speeches at this forum, see J. H. Barrows, *The World's Parliament of Religions. An interesting and popular story of the world's first parliament of religions held in Chicago in connection with the Columbian exhibition of 1893* (Chicago, 1893), 1.102, 2.968–78. For an analysis, see B. A. Hatcher, *Eclecticism and Modern Hindu Discourse* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 47–70; and I. Chowdhury-Sengupta, 'Reconstructing Hinduism on a World Platform: The World's first Parliament of Religions, Chicago 1893', in *Swami Vivekananda and the Modernisation of Hinduism*, edited by W. Radice, 17–35 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Vivekananda, 'The Abroad and the Problems at Home', in *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 5 (Calcutta: Advaita Ashram, 1979), 209–10.

<sup>14</sup> R. King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and "the Mystic East"* (London: Routledge, 1999), 141–42; and M. Bevir, 'The West Turns Eastward: Madame Blavatsky and the Transformation of the Occult Tradition', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62:3 (1994): 747–67. On the political engagement of the Theosophical Society in India by the same author, see 'Theosophy as a Political Movement', in *Gurus and Their Followers: New Religious Reform Movements in Colonial India*, edited by A. Copley (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> For Gandhi's involvement with theosophical ideas, see M. Bergunder, 'Gandhi, Esoterik und das Christentum', in *Esoterik und das Christentum: Religionsgeschichtliche und theologische Perspektiven*, edited by M. Bergunder and D. Cyranka, 129–48 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2005).

Chakravarti, Gandhi seemed to regard any involvement with the Asian scene as an unfortunate necessity. When he does speak on Asia, it is to construct an Asia that is Europe's antithesis in every respect, an Asia defined by the teachings of the Buddha and the cultural affinity with spirituality and nonviolence that Gandhi believed all Asians shared. He sought to legitimize this image of Asia by participating in the cultural-historical discourse that pervaded the Indian public sphere of the late 1930s, applying several of its most common *topoi*, such as that of the ancient bonds between India and China, to his own agenda. For instance, he redirected the conceit of the monk-missionary, then a popular image of ancient Asian interconnectedness,<sup>16</sup> to demonstrate the antiquity of nonviolence as a concept: 'It is not yet well enough known in India that Lao Tze who was very nearly the contemporary of Gautama, the Buddha, made universally recognised in China his own teaching of Tao. ... Such a spirit of harmony with one's surroundings as Tao's is the very opposite of violence'.<sup>17</sup>

In an article for his newspaper, *Young India*, he brought up this perceived supranational consciousness as a tool in the fight against the imperialist world order, saying, 'Common lot no less than territorial homogeneity and cultural affinity is bringing Asiatic races wonderfully together, and they now seem determined to take their share in world politics'.<sup>18</sup> Still, it would be misleading to portray Gandhi as a champion of Asianism. To his mind, the tension between nationalism and internationalism was particularly strong. Gandhi's goal was autarchy, and on more than one occasion he called a united Asian stand against imperialism (rather than an all-India one) a waste of resources. India should first be capable of standing on her own:

If we are in effect truly unable to help others and only ask for something at their hands it would not conduce to mutual esteem; nor can a healthy alliance grow. ... The link of mere friendship of slavery is not likely to be a real or useful bond. Why do we turn to Russia, China or Turkey? It is not simply the greatness of the past history of these nations that attracts us. ... It is because we believe that there are great movements now going on in those countries which furnish matter for useful study or admiring observation.<sup>19</sup>

#### *'Spiritual Asia' in the life and travels of Rabindranath Tagore*

The model of a division-of-labour, whereby the West would take care of the material development of the world and the East of its spiritual edification, had considerable influence on the Bengali Nobel Prize laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941).<sup>20</sup> Tagore had

<sup>16</sup> J. Alter, 'Yoga in Asia—Mimetic History: Problems in the Location of Secret Knowledge', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 29:2 (2009): 213–29.

<sup>17</sup> *Harijan*, 4 February 1939, 456.

<sup>18</sup> Cited in Prasad, *Indian Nationalism*, 107.

<sup>19</sup> *Young India*, 1 (March 1928): 67.

<sup>20</sup> While Tagore Studies almost constitutes an academic field onto itself, studies of Tagore's engagement with Asianism as a whole rather than with individual Asian countries, though still studied in some detail, are less numerous. See, in particular, M. R. Frost, "'That Great Ocean of Idealism' Calcutta, the Tagore Circle, and the Idea of Asia, 1900–1920', in *Indian Ocean Studies*, edited by S. Moorthy and A. Jamal, 251–79 (New York: Routledge, 2010); S. N. Hay, *Asian Ideas of East and West: Tagore and his Critics in Japan, China and India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970); R. Barucha, *Another Asia: Rabindranath Tagore and*

developed a strong personal connection to Japan's prophet of Pan-Asianism, Okakura Tenshin (1863–1916).<sup>21</sup> Okakura visited India in 1901 and 1902 and met both Vivekananda and Tagore.<sup>22</sup> One year later he published a book entitled *Ideals of the East*, the first sentence of which drove his point home so poignantly that it would later become a sort of mantra for Asianists of various persuasions: 'Asia is one'.<sup>23</sup>

Like many other English-educated intellectuals, Tagore was highly receptive to a message that heralded the spiritual greatness and unity of Asia. All the more so when the harbinger of this imagined Asian interconnectedness came from soaring and uncolonized Japan. The Bengali poet stayed in touch with Okakura until the latter's death in 1913, and made Japan the focal point of his attempts to establish a collective Asian identity. He visited the country thrice between 1916 and 1929. After he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, Tagore's fame allowed him to act as the mouthpiece of the intellectual and political elites of his country. In 'The Message of India to Japan', a speech delivered during his first visit to the Imperial University of Tokyo,<sup>24</sup> he succinctly explained his vision of Asia. He argued that, at a time when the West was still barbaric, a blossoming civilization had existed, which united the whole of Asia from India to Japan, and 'which was not political but social, not predatory and mechanically efficient but spiritual'.<sup>25</sup> Secondly, he portrayed the soulless, materialistic West as an existential threat to Asian peoples: the appropriation of European modernity should occur only highly selectively and under permanent consideration of one's own cultural heritage. Finally, he supported the view that the secularized West could not reform itself. This world-historical role was reserved for Asia, and especially for its emerging leading power, Japan: to re-spiritualize the shallow and self-destructive Western civilization and, in so doing, to save the world itself from destruction. The continuity with Vivekananda's concept of a division-of-labour between East and West is clearly visible here.<sup>26</sup> He appealed to the Japanese elites to distinguish themselves clearly from the West, and to refuse those acquisitions of 'European modernity' that might have a dubious impact.<sup>27</sup>

Of all countries in Asia, here in Japan you have the freedom to use the materials you have gathered from the West according to your genius and to your need. Therefore

---

*Okakura Tenshin* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006); S. Sengupta, 'Continental Contemporaries: Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 10:2 (2009): 320–25; S. Das Gupta, *Tagore's Asian Outlook* (Calcutta: Nava Bharati, 1961).

<sup>21</sup> Bharucha, *Another Asia*, 38.

<sup>22</sup> On Tagore's life, see K. Dutta and A. Robinson's *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad Minded Man* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> Okakura Kakuzo, *The Ideals of the East: With Special Reference to the Art of Japan* (London: John Murray, 1904).

<sup>24</sup> A reworked version was published in English: Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (London: Macmillan, 1917).

<sup>25</sup> Cited in Hay, *Asian Ideas*, 64.

<sup>26</sup> H. Fischer-Tiné, "'Deep Occidentalism'?—Europa und der Westen in der Wahrnehmung hinduistischer Intellektueller und Reformer (ca. 1890–1930)", *Journal of Modern European History* 4:2 (2006): 189–94.

<sup>27</sup> It must be noted that for all his essentializing of Asia and the 'Asian mentality', Tagore remained a cosmopolitan to the end, cautioning repeatedly against full denial of the West, which he also recognized to have spiritual traditions. See L. B. Williams, 'Overcoming the Contagion of Mimicry: The Cosmopolitan Nationalism and Modernist History of Rabindranath Tagore and W. B. Yeats', *American Historical Review* 112:1 (2007): 69–100; and Bharucha, *Another Asia*, 94–98.

your responsibility is all the greater, for in your voice Asia shall answer the questions that Europe has submitted to the conference of Man. In your land the experiments will be carried on by which the East will change the aspects of modern civilization, infusing life in it where it is a machine, substituting the human heart for cold expediency, not caring so much for power and success but for harmonious living.<sup>28</sup>

This scepticism vis-à-vis the modern, which was central to Tagore's Asianism, was received as reluctantly in self-conscious Taisho-Japan as were his universalist fantasies of an Asia whose *raison d'être* it was to save the world. Especially criticized in the Japanese public sphere was Tagore's simultaneous critique of Japanese nationalism and imperialism—he viewed both as 'Satanic excesses of the West' with no roots in Asia.<sup>29</sup> His 'unrealistic anti-modernism' and 'naïve pacifism' showed, according to his critics, that he represented a subjected, humiliated nation. On his later visits to Japan, too, the response was mixed. During his second in 1924, he trashed Japanese aspirations to become a great power in scarcely concealed words:

I have come to warn you in Japan, the country where I wrote my first lectures against Nationalism at a time when people laughed my ideas to scorn. ... Let Japan find her own true mind, which will not merely accept lessons from others, but will create a world of her own, which will be generous in its gift to all humanity. Make all other people of Asia proud in their acknowledgement of your greatness, which is not based on the enslavement of victims [and] upon the accumulation of material wealth.<sup>30</sup>

The reactions of his Japanese hosts were as cool this time as they had been eight years earlier. He fared even worse during his short tour of China that same year, especially with the younger generation, and was booed off the stage by Chinese students.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, Tagore did redirect some of the hopes he had held for Japan to China, and he felt that China would soon wake up to her great responsibilities to other countries.<sup>32</sup> In Penang he said that his visit to China had made him feel 'like one of the great makers of history in Asia who loom large in the domain of Indo-Chinese culture, of a synthesis of cultures of India and China'.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Tagore, *Nationalism*, 59.

<sup>29</sup> The Bengali Nobel Prize laureate was convinced that Japan, after it had overcome the 'sickness' of westernization, would come into its own true Asian Self and rediscover spirituality and nonviolence. Only after the Japanese invasion of China did Tagore find himself forced to rethink his optimism. See R. Tagore, 'A Letter to an Indian Friend in Japan', *Modern Review* 63:6 (1938): 622–6; 623–24.

<sup>30</sup> R. Tagore, 'International Relations (A Lecture Delivered in Japan)', *Viśva Bharati Quarterly* 3:4 (1925): 316.

<sup>31</sup> Described in greater detail in D. Sachsenmaier, 'Searching for Alternatives to Western Modernity: Cross-Cultural Approaches in the Aftermath of the Great War', *Journal of Modern European History* 4:2 (2006): 241–59; 250–52; Dutta and Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore*, 251–52.

<sup>32</sup> Tagore, 'Speech to the children of the Confucian School, Kuala Lumpur, on 6<sup>th</sup> August, 192', in S. Das Gupta, *Tagore's Asian Outlook* (Calcutta: Nava Bharati, 1961), 66.

<sup>33</sup> Tagore's address to the Chinese community at Penang, 24 July 1927, quoted in Das Gupta, *Tagore's Asian Outlook*, 66.



Although there certainly was overlap here with concerns held by individual Japanese and Chinese intellectuals,<sup>34</sup> the vision of an ‘Asian civilization’ as a spiritual ‘Anti-Europe’ and world-redeemer, so widely spread in Hindu reformist circles, had very limited potential outside of India. This, at least, can be gathered from Tagore’s reception in East Asia. That said, Tagore himself never abandon his hopes for Japan. He continued to correspond publicly with Japanese intellectuals such as Yone Noguchi on Asian issues as late as 1938, and speculated that the country would abstain from aggression and find its ‘true Asian self’ again, writing: ‘Japanese and Chinese people, let us hope, will join hands together in no distant future, in wiping off memories of a bitter past. True Asian humanity will be reborn.’<sup>35</sup>

But in India of the 1920s and 1930s, too, marked as it was by the growing impact of the nationalist movement and by Gandhi’s campaigns for mass mobilization, few people shared Tagore’s condemnation of nationalism. It is here that the tensions between nationalism and internationalism manifest themselves most obviously. People didn’t reject Tagore’s message of Asianism so much as his rather elitist cosmopolitanism and intellectual antinationalism. Nevertheless, there were many different audiences for Tagore’s vision for Asia, even if they were relatively small. He was one of few Indian intellectuals who would extend their concept of an Asia defined primarily by an inherent spirituality that set it apart from the West to an Asia that comprised more than the Hindu-Buddhist lands on the continent. In the early 1920s, Tagore had lectured and published on Persia.<sup>36</sup> In 1932, Tagore toured both Iraq and Persia at the invitation of Reza Shah Pahlavi, who also endowed a chair in Persian studies at Tagore’s Viśva Bharati University, which will be treated in section 3.2. On welcoming the first professor to assume the chair in 1933, Tagore had said: ‘Once more we are to light our lamps which ages ago Iran and India placed together on the altar of Asia’s common culture. The hymns we then sang in languages closely allied will yet again reverberate under Asia’s sky; we shall unite our hearts and our minds in quest of the inmost truths of our soul’.<sup>37</sup>

This sentiment of Asian kinship and cultural affinity was strongly present in Tagore’s experiences, meetings, and speeches in Iraq and Persia. In the latter, he visited the tomb of Hafiz (ca. 1326–1390), he noted in his travelogue: ‘I had the distinct feeling that after a lapse of many centuries, across the span of many deaths and births, sitting near this tomb was another wayfarer who had found a bond with Hafez’.<sup>38</sup> In Shiraz he said ‘Asia is wide awake today, she is once more now to offer her spiritual gift to the world, the message of brotherhood of freedom, of federation in the task of establishing peace and goodwill’, and that ‘The revival of this spirit in Iran has given me new hope for Asia’.<sup>39</sup> In Iraq, he addressed a

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, the writings of contemporary East Asian intellectuals close to Tagore’s own position: L. Chi Chao, ‘China’s Debt to India’, *Viśva Bharati Quarterly* 2:3 (1924): 251–61; M. Zumoto, ‘Japan and the Pan-Asiatic Movement’, *News Bulletin of the Institute of Pacific Relations* (Feb. 1927): 8–15; and M. Anahaki, ‘Western Pressure and Eastern Resistance’, *Modern Review* 61:6 (1937): 617–8.

<sup>35</sup> Tagore to Noguchi, letter dated 1 Sept. 1938, in Das Gupta, *Tagore’s Asian Outlook*, 138–51.

<sup>36</sup> R. Tagore, ‘The Indo-Iranians’, *Viśva Bharati Quarterly* 1:3 (1923): 1; Tagore, foreword to *The Divine Songs of Zarathustra*, by D. Irani (London: Allen & Unwin 1924).

<sup>37</sup> R. Tagore, *Journey to Persia and Iraq: 1932* (Kolkata: Viśva Bharati Press, 2003), 13.

<sup>38</sup> Tagore, *Journey to Persia and Iraq*, 50.

<sup>39</sup> Idem, 135–6.

banquet given by King Faisal in Baghdad, rejoicing in the fact that ‘in this machine-driven age’, the king had invited a poet:

I am sure that this individual fact of a poet belonging to a distant corner of the earth and speaking a different language finding his seat of welcome at your Majesty’s table this evening is not a mere accident but has deeper historical significance. It is a generous gesture of the national self-respect of a nascent Asia, its expression of intellectual hospitality. ... I pray that Iraq may realize this great responsibility of a coming civilization.<sup>40</sup>



Fig. 2. Tagore in Persia [Saubhadra Chatterjee, ‘Tagore’s plaque in Iranian Parliament’ *Hindustan Times*, 29 October 2011].

Tagore’s inclusions of Persia in his geography of Asia, and of the poet and Sufi mystic Hafiz in his genealogy of Asian intellectual heritage, demonstrate that definitions of a spiritual Asia did not necessarily exclude Islam. It also demonstrates that Mark Frost’s conclusion that ‘in the Tagore circle’s discussions of Asian civilization, Islam was particularly conspicuous by its absence’ should be treated with caution.<sup>41</sup> This is also evident from the ideas and art of his nephew Abanindranath Tagore, who incorporated Persian themes and styles into paintings. He sought to modernize Mughal styles to counter the influence of Western art, but also created an

<sup>40</sup> Idem, 147.

<sup>41</sup> Frost, ‘That Great Ocean of Idealism’, 25.

Omar Khayyam series.<sup>42</sup> As founder of the Indian Society of Oriental Art, his vision of Asia, too, was an inclusive one. Okakura Kakuzo, who likewise frequented the Tagore circle, wrote that

Arab chivalry, Persian poetry, Chinese ethics, and Indian thought, all speak of a single ancient Asiatic peace, in which there grew up a common life, bearing in different regions different characteristic blossoms, but nowhere capable of a hard and fast dividing-line. Islam itself may be described as Confucianism on horse-back, sword in hand. For it is quite possible to distinguish, in the hoary communism of the Yellow Valley, traces of a purely pastoral element, such as we see abstracted and self-realised in the Mussalman races.<sup>43</sup>

A second audience for Tagore's bridge building with other Asian intellectuals, and for his formulation of an Asian identity based on shared characteristics, was Viśva Bharati, the university which he established at the village of Santiniketan near Bolpur in the West Bengal countryside. This university would continue to be a platform for Asianist activities throughout the interwar period. Transcending the strictly academic, it saw a variety of Asian public figures, revolutionaries, and politicians pass through its gates.

### 3.2 Asianism at Viśva Bharati University

In 1913, Tagore became the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize in literature. Three years later, he embarked on a long trip to Japan and the United States. Partly in reaction to the First World War, he published 'Nationalism', an essay in which he talked about the unity of Man. While on tour, Tagore conceived of a unique educational institution where people would be united with each other irrespective of caste, creed, gender, or nationality: 'The universal family of man that is conceived in future should be initiated in the fields of Bolpur. The stand of Pan Humanism should first be planted here ... to free this world out of the sentiments of nationalism is the last task of my old age'.<sup>44</sup> On 23 December 1921, Tagore formally started the Viśva Bharati with proceeds from the prize money of the Nobel Prize.

But Tagore had other reasons for founding Viśva Bharati. While the idea was decidedly cosmopolitan in its conception, it was Asianist in purpose: Viśva Bharati was a conscious repudiation of the education system that had been introduced in India by the British and sought instead to realize the intrinsic values of ancient Asian education. Simplicity was a cardinal principle. Classes were held in open air in the shade of trees where man and nature entered into an immediate harmonious relationship. Teachers and students shared in a single integral sociocultural life. The curriculum included music, painting, dramatic arts, and other

---

<sup>42</sup> R. Parimoo, *The Paintings of the Three Tagores—Abanindranath Gaganendranath Rabindranath: Chronology and Comparative Study* (Baroda: Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, 1973), 80. With thanks to Byapti Sur for alerting me to this.

<sup>43</sup> Okakura, 'Ideals of the East', 4.

<sup>44</sup> Cited in J. Mitra, ed., *Rabindranath, Santiniketan-Sriniketan: An Introduction* (Santiniketan: Viśva Bharati, 2003), 54.

performative practices. The Indian arts occupied pride of place, but other Asian arts such as Japanese flower arrangement and tea ceremony were also taught.<sup>45</sup>

The Asianist contours of the institution were even more explicitly formulated in its aims and objectives, which remain the guiding principles of the university to this day: 'to bring into more intimate relation with one another, through patient study and research, the different cultures of the East on the basis of their underlying unity; and to approach the West from the standpoint of such a unity of the life and thought of Asia'.<sup>46</sup> Tagore explained his vision in a conversation with educationists in Tehran in May 1932: 'Asia must reorganize her continental life and vitalize her scattered cultures by recognizing their affinities and expressing them in literature, arts, science and civic life'.<sup>47</sup> Scholars from all over the world were welcome in Santiniketan, but to scholars of Asia Tagore had left a more concrete task:

In the East we must never forget to link up our educational institutions with the fundamental values of our undivided spiritual life, because that has been the greatest mission of our ancient universities, which, as you have said, in spite of political vicissitudes, never allowed their vision of humanity to be darkened by racial considerations. Asia owes it to humanity to restore her spirit of generous cooperation in culture and heal the suffering peoples of modern age now divided by cruel politics and materialistic greed which vitiate even the citadels of education. In order to have this intermingling of minds in Asia we must rid our minds that are dark and against reason, of all the aberrations of local history that repel others and with a spirit of intellectual detachment seek out the treasures that have universal value.<sup>48</sup>

In order to achieve this objective, a steady flow of people and funds were needed. This was facilitated by the erection of several institutes and sub-institutes within the university to consolidate bilateral relations with Asian nations. The chair in Persian studies was one example, and when financial difficulties made it hard to maintain the chair on a permanent basis, Tagore took it upon himself to raise funds under the banner of Asianism. To the Aga Khan he wrote: 'I am sure Your Highness knows that my University at Santiniketan attempts to place before the whole world the best gifts of our Eastern civilizations. ... A permanent Persian Chair ... is essential in order that the Islamic Culture may be fully represented'.<sup>49</sup> The Nizam of Hyderabad had funded the Islamic department for very similar reasons. Tagore also asked Tsusho Bodyo, a former Japanese student at Viśva Bharati, to return to Santiniketan to set up a Nippon Bhavan (Japan House) in the late 1930s, but the Sino-Japanese War and the

---

<sup>45</sup> WBSA 69/1925; file 285/25 Note on Viśva Bharati and Santiniketan: 8 December 1930, to the superintendent of Police, Calcutta.

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.visvabharati.ac.in/Heritage/Contents>, accessed 16 November 2011.

<sup>47</sup> Tagore, *Journey to Persia and Iraq*, 151.

<sup>48</sup> Idem, 153.

<sup>49</sup> Viśva Bharati (VB), Rabindra Bhavan Archives (RBA), Tagore Correspondence, File 4: 17 February 1930, to Aga Khan.

Second World War prevented the plan from being carried out.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, a steady flow of books found its way to Santiniketan from Japan throughout the interwar period.<sup>51</sup>

A true hub of Asianist activity was the institute for Chinese studies, founded as Cheen Bhavan (China House) in 1937. Cheen Bhavan was had been built ‘to maintain and nourish the distinctive merit of our respective cultures and not to be misled into believing that what is ancient is necessarily outworn. ... And can anything be more worthy of being cherished than the beautiful spirit of the Chinese culture that has made the people love material things without the stain of greed?’<sup>52</sup> The years leading up to the foundation of the Cheen Bhavan reveal the number and intensity of people and associations involved in the undertaking. As early as 1927, Tagore had made efforts to invite Chinese students and scholars to visit Viśva Bharati.<sup>53</sup> As plans for the Cheen Bhavan became more concrete in the early 1930s, Tagore’s correspondence (and cash flow, as traced by British surveillance) indicates the involvement of the Sino-Indian Society in India, the Sino-Indian Cultural Society in Nanking,<sup>54</sup> the National Research Institute in Shanghai, the Publicity Department of the Kuomintang, and the Chinese Consulate in Calcutta. The latter provided books on China to Viśva Bharati even before Cheen Bhavan was founded.<sup>55</sup> In 1934, it was decided that Cheen Bhavan would provide accommodation to students and teachers, would have two Chairs, in Chinese Culture and Chinese Buddhism respectively, and house a library on China.<sup>56</sup> When the building was finally erected after the monsoon season of 1936, Chen Ta-Chi of the Sino-Indian Cultural Society congratulated Tagore: ‘We sincerely follow you in your noble idea to promote the spirit of Eastern culture, of which the Indian and Chinese culture[s] are the main pillars’.<sup>57</sup> A similar sentiment was voiced by Chiang Kai-shek, who maintained a lively correspondence with Tagore in relation to Cheen Bhavan: ‘It is the responsibility of your great people and mine to safeguard the Asiatic civilization’.<sup>58</sup>

On the student level, the Viśva Bharati goal of ‘bringing into more intimate relation with one another ... the different cultures of the East on the basis of their underlying unity’ was expressed by a steady flow of students to other universities and from other universities to Viśva Bharati. Enthusiasm for this was such that many students found local institutions and patrons paying their expenses. In 1927, Tagore led a delegation from Viśva Bharati to Bali, which ‘wonderful opportunities for coming into close contact with a most interesting phase of Colonial Hindu Culture among a people who are staunch believers in the faith of their fathers,

<sup>50</sup> Nippon Bhavan exists today. Kazuo Azuma, the first translator of Tagore into Japanese and a Viśva Bharati alumnus, rekindled the plans and started fundraising in the 1970s. Nippon Bhavan was formally inaugurated in 1994.

<sup>51</sup> VB, RBA, Tagore Correspondence, File 176(i).

<sup>52</sup> ‘India and China’, *Viśva Bharati Quarterly* 15:1 (1937): 29–34; 32.

<sup>53</sup> VB, RBA, Tagore Correspondence, File 65: 25 June 1927, to Lee Wei-Ja.

<sup>54</sup> Founded in 1933 by Tan Yun-Shan, on his return to China after three years at Viśva Bharati.

<sup>55</sup> VB, RBA, Tagore Correspondence, File 66: 25 June 1931, from C. F. Liu, Consul-General.

<sup>56</sup> NAI, External Affairs—External—progs nos. 329-x, 1943: Sino-Indian Cultural Society.

<sup>57</sup> VB, RBA, Tagore Correspondence, File 65: 23 September 1936, from Chen Ta-Chi.

<sup>58</sup> Idem, file 64: 15 October 1939, from Chiang Kai-shek.

are conscious of their Indian connection and are anxious to renew cultural relations'.<sup>59</sup> In 1939, two Viśva Bharati students, one of whom was Tagore's own granddaughter, embarked on a study of Javanese dancing in the Dutch East Indies.<sup>60</sup>



Fig. 3. Tagore at the Borobudur ['Tagore's visit to Java, 1927': Viśva Bharati Publication Department, Kolkata].

*Santiniketan as a nodal point in Asianist revolutionary networks*

Although few of Viśva Bharati's students have left traces in the historical record, those who engaged in political activism, ran out of money, or raised funds, have left echoes of their activities, especially in British surveillance files. A few examples may offer a glimpse of the extent of this student traffic in Asia and the ways in which it was perceived by the Government of India. As early as 1925, the traffic through Santiniketan was flagged as a 'matter ... of some importance in view of Tagore's reputation and influence abroad'.<sup>61</sup> Two questions wanted answering. What did Santiniketan stand for? And to what extent was 'Bolepur' used by revolutionaries?<sup>62</sup> Soon, it was found that several people at Viśva Bharati were in close touch with the Indian Pan-Asianist Rashbehari Bose, by then a naturalized Japanese citizen, who was wanted in India in connection with the Lahore Conspiracy Case, and who will be treated in more detail in chapter 4. Another person of interest was Balvir Singh Lala, a teacher of Gujarati at Santiniketan. From his intercepted communications, it was learned that Rashbehari Bose was the main contact for receiving and facilitating Viśva

<sup>59</sup> VB, RBA, Tagore Correspondence, file 178: Report of Bali Tour. See also A. Das Gupta, 'Rabindranath Tagore in Indonesia: An Experiment in Bridge-Building', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 158:3 (2002): 451–77.

<sup>60</sup> VB, RBA, Tagore Correspondence, file 178: 14 March 1939 from Surakarta, unsigned.

<sup>61</sup> WBSA, 69/1925; file 285/25 Note on Viśva Bharati and Santiniketan: Home Dept. letter, dated 25 May 1925.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

Bharati's students in Japan, possibly to engage them in Pan-Asian activities.<sup>63</sup> It was concluded that 'from the information on record it is obvious at least that attempts are being made by Indian revolutionaries to exploit Dr Tagore and his Institution for revolutionary purposes. There is nothing to show that Dr Tagore is cognisant of what is going on nor that his Institution has any distinctly revolutionary *raison d'être*'.<sup>64</sup>

From the information available today, it must be concluded that the intelligence branch had miscalculated somewhat. Rashbehari Bose and Tagore shared a strong belief in the re-awakening of Asia, and the need to end European imperialism in Asia in order for Asia to become whole again. Tagore had publicly endorsed the Pan-Asiatic Association in Japan, of which Rashbehari Bose was a member, and this association's mission in India.<sup>65</sup> Tagore's own correspondence, moreover, proves that he was in close touch with Rashbehari Bose throughout the 1930s. Their friendship became strained only in 1937 after the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, when it became clear that Tagore rejected Japanese militarism, while Bose still considered a strong Japan as the best hope for the future of Asia.<sup>66</sup>

But earlier, especially in the early 1930s, Bose regularly helped Viśva Bharati students settle in Japan. For instance, two art students from Viśva Bharati, Biswarup Bose and Kari Haran, had been sent to Tokyo to continue their studies, and Bose found two Japanese gentlemen willing to pay their boarding and lodging for three years.<sup>67</sup> Similar arrangements were institutionalized in 1933 when Bose opened two lodging houses for Indian students funded by Japanese well-wishers from various Pan-Asian societies: 'Asia Lodge' in Tokyo and 'India Lodge' in Kobe, where Indian students were subsidized to live for twenty-five rupees per month.<sup>68</sup> But other connections to Japan raised British suspicions. Kesho Ram Sabarwal, another revolutionary who had fled India for Japan, became Rashbehari Bose's secretary there and involved himself with the latter's Pan-Asian activism. In 1926, he attended the Pan-Asiatic Conference in Nagasaki, at which 'vitriolic anti-British resolutions' were passed.<sup>69</sup> Wishing to return to India, he met Tagore on the poet's visit to Japan, after which Tagore offered Sabarwal an appointment at Santiniketan and petitioned the Government of India to allow him to return.<sup>70</sup> M. K. Majumdar, another Indian activist in Japan, earned Tagore's gratitude for assisting another Santiniketan student who went to Japan for his studies.<sup>71</sup> A third famous Indian Pan-Asian activist in Japan and friend of Bose, Anand

<sup>63</sup> WBSA, 69/1925; file 285/25: Secret information about Rabindranath Tagore's Santi Niketan and Bisva Bharati at Bolpur, district Birbhum.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> WBSA, 69/1925; file 285/25 Note on Viśva Bharati and Santiniketan. Newspaper clipping 'A': 'The aged poet's speech'.

<sup>66</sup> VB, RBA, Tagore Correspondence, file 37: 10 October 1937, to Rashbehari Bose.

<sup>67</sup> VB, RBA, Tagore Correspondence, file 37: 15 July 1930, from Rashbehari Bose.

<sup>68</sup> APAC, IOR, L/P&J/12/163 file on Rashbehari Bose 1923–1926. Note from the British Embassy at Tokyo, 31 May 1933. In 1933, this converted to \$7.80 for room and board: [www.measuringworth.com](http://www.measuringworth.com), accessed 3 April 2013.

<sup>69</sup> APAC IOR, L/P&J/12/163 file on Rashbehari Bose 1923–1926. Anonymous press article, 11 February 1932.

<sup>70</sup> WBSA, 69/1925; file 285/25 Note on Viśva Bharati and Santiniketan: Secret report.

<sup>71</sup> VB, RBA, file 176(i): to M. K. Majumdar, undated.



Mohan Sahay (later of Indian National Army fame), vowed to send his own son and youngest daughter to study at Santiniketan.<sup>72</sup>

In theory, the British were unaware of the letters between Santiniketan and Japan, as there was a gentlemen's agreement that Tagore's mail would neither be intercepted nor censored. The Nobel Prize and his subsequent knighthood (though he returned the latter in 1919 in response to the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre in Amritsar) ostensibly raised him above all suspicion of subversive activities. But the fact that the British were no longer fully convinced of Tagore's own innocence in connection with seditious Pan-Asianist activities (rather than the poets literary exaltations on the merits of Asia), was painfully revealed when a clerk at the Calcutta post office made a mistake. A less than amused Tagore notified the post office that when he opened a letter from Germany, he found a letter from Dacca in the same envelope, from a completely different date. If they were going to read his mail, at least they should try and put it back in the right envelope.<sup>73</sup>

Incoming students were as much of a concern as outgoing ones. While this traffic, too, was always of some concern to the British, it took some time for the net to be tightened around Santiniketan. When a Ms Hoshi proceeded to Santiniketan in 1930, she was flagged as likely to attend the Asiatic Women's Conference, scheduled for 1931 (but postponed to 1933), which was considered to be of some concern.<sup>74</sup> The intelligence officer in question, though, failed to realize that Ms Hoshi was actually Makiko Hoshi, Rashbehari Bose's sister-in-law and one of the most direct connections to revolutionary Pan-Asianism among the Indian community in Japan.<sup>75</sup>

More suspicion arose when in August 1932 three visas were issued to Indonesian students bound for Viśva Bharati from Batavia on the S.S. *Bintang*. All three had been thoroughly checked. Saleh Soeparmaatmadja (sic), nineteen-years-old and of Soedanese (sic) ancestry, had been born in Manondjaja, Priangan (Java) and educated at the Mulo Pasoendan School in Tasikmalaja. His father had guaranteed to pay the school fees. He was joined by an eighteen-year-old boy by the name of Soeprapto, of Javanese ancestry and born in Indramajoe (Java), and a third student by the name of Boediman, whose visa details were unknown.<sup>76</sup> When the local intelligence branch at Suri (Birbhum district) was asked to check whether the students were indeed attending the university, it was found that only Boediman had actually reached Santiniketan, but that he had left during the Puja vacation and never returned. The other two had vanished without a trace.<sup>77</sup> This led the consul general to demand an enquiry as to whether the school was 'tainted with Communism'.<sup>78</sup> The intelligence branch at Calcutta was 'in some doubt as to the present character of the institution, particularly in view of the fact that many terrorists or suspected terrorists have in the past been students at, or were

---

<sup>72</sup> VB, RBA, file 336: from Anand Mohan Sahay, undated.

<sup>73</sup> WBSA, 69/1925; file 285/25: On Viśva Bharati.

<sup>74</sup> WBSA 69/1925; file 285/25 Note on Viśva Bharati and Santiniketan: 8 December 1930, to the superintendent of Police, Calcutta.

<sup>75</sup> VB, RBA, Tagore Correspondence, File 37: from Rashbehari Bose, 1930.

<sup>76</sup> WBSA, 7/32 file 21/32, Visits of foreigners and suspicious subjects to India: 22 September 1932, CG Batavia to Sec to the Government of India, Simla.

<sup>77</sup> WBSA, 7/32 file 21/32, District Intelligence Branch Office, Suri, Birbhum, 16 December 1932, to Special Assistant, DIB, Calcutta.

<sup>78</sup> WBSA, 20.3.28 file no. 311-27, Intelligence Branch Home Dept., 11 January 1933.



connected with, the Santiniketan, and also that there is little doubt that the terrorist of yesterday is going to be the communist of today'.<sup>79</sup> However, they could still find nothing definite to incriminate Santiniketan, and in February 1933, *Viśva Bharati* was declared 'not undesirable for Javanese students, despite Bengali terrorist connections, but neither should it be encouraged. The selection of this university is considered suspicious'.<sup>80</sup>

As the 1930s progressed, it became increasingly clear that Santiniketan was used as a gateway to India for a wide variety of travellers, many of whom were neither students nor scholars—or, in some cases, both scholars and activists. Tan Yun-Shan, professor of Chinese Studies, was an example of the latter. Only a few hours from Santiniketan by rail, Calcutta had a sizeable Chinese community and a local branch of the Kuomintang. The Kuomintang's activities in India had distinct Pan-Asian leanings, and a joining of forces between the Asianist engagement of Santiniketan and the KMT was undesirable. This is exactly what happened when Tan Yun-Shan attended a meeting of the KMT, at which he advised Asiatic countries to follow the example of Japan, which was the only independent country in Asia, amidst shouts of 'Long live Republic' [sic], and 'Down with Imperialism'.<sup>81</sup> It was further noted, that many of the KMT's mail was being sent through Santiniketan.<sup>82</sup> In 1942, a KMT delegation of fourteen men and women, including Chiang Kai-shek himself, visited Santiniketan officially.<sup>83</sup> But in the end, it was when Japan joined the Second World War and started to encroach on British territory that Pan-Asianism in relation to Japan came to be considered an existential threat to the Empire. A decision was finally made to suppress Santiniketan and isolate the school from the outside world:

Santiniketan *Viśva Bharati* is an organ of terrorist movement of India. ... All inmates of this Ashram are pro-Japanese. They create panic all over the world to support terrorist movement of India. In the name of international university they support India's terrorist movement. Boys and girls are corrupted. Please stop all railway communication because their party get strength to create panic and do revolutionary work to help Japanese. ... Shortly some members will go to Assam to persuade the people to help them. Here they create wonderful propaganda for victory of Japan. Hindu, Muslim, Parsee, Chinese, German, French, Christian every one of this Ashram make propaganda in their own community to support this terrorist movement and underground activities.<sup>84</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> WBSA, 20.3.28 file no. 311–27, note 2 February 1933.

<sup>81</sup> WBSA 20.3.28 file no. 311–27, Extract from Weekly Report dated 23 October 1929.

<sup>82</sup> WBSA 20.3.28 file no. 311–27, undated report from Bolpur.

<sup>83</sup> VB, RBA, Tagore Correspondence file 64: Chinese visit to Santiniketan.

<sup>84</sup> WBSA, 69/1925; file 285/25 Note on *Viśva Bharati* and Santiniketan: undated [ca. 1942]: to the Chief Secretary, Government of India, New Delhi. It is interesting to note that in positive reports *Viśva Bharati* was a school or university, and in negative reports an ashram.

*Santiniketan as a centre of Asianist academic relations*

While Tan Yun-Shan had suffered from ‘a proclivity for getting mixed up in political affairs’,<sup>85</sup> not all academics at Santiniketan directly involved themselves with politics. Many Europeans and Asians alike, however, used Santiniketan as a base to discuss what constituted ‘Asian civilization’, whether an ‘Asian identity’ existed, and how to identify a shared Asian past. While many of their writings dealt with bilateral relations—identifying historical relations between India and specific Asian countries—other contributions dealt directly with Asianism as a theme. The political extension of their arguments was that Asia had been ‘one’ in a distant past and a reawakened Asia would be so again.

Their visions of a shared Asian identity received a wider audience in Santiniketan’s own journals, such as the *Viśva Bharati Bulletin*, the *Viśva Bharati Annals*, and the *Viśva Bharati Quarterly*, the last founded in 1923, only two years after the birth of the university itself. At two annas per copy and with an office in Calcutta subsidized by Calcutta University, Santiniketan could count on receiving considerable publicity. The *Viśva Bharati Quarterly* functioned effectively as the institution’s newsletter, research annals, and mission statement all at once. It therefore offers valuable insight not only into academic life in Santiniketan, but also into the kind of research that was carried out and the ways in which the university sought to portray itself to the outside world. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the image Santiniketan chose to project was distinctly Asianist.

A regular feature of every issue was what one might call *Tagoreana*: texts by Tagore himself, or (re)publications and reports from other Asian newspapers writing about the poet. Articles were selected that dealt directly, in some form or other, with the reawakening of Asia. The very first issue reported a rousing address by Tagore attended by over a thousand Chinese students to whom Tagore said, ‘You want to listen to me, but I know it is not to me, the man who comes from India, but you want to hear someone speak who is of Asia. You are glad that I have come to you as, in a sense, representing Asia. I feel myself that Asia has been waiting long and is still waiting to find her voice’.<sup>86</sup> He also urged his audience, ‘We must rise from our stupor, and prove that we are not beggars. That is our responsibility. Search in your own homes for things that are of undying worth. ... We want to find our own birth right. Some of the East think that we should copy and imitate the West. I do not believe it’.<sup>87</sup>

Santiniketan’s mission of educational reform, too, was put forward in the journal as both a catalyst for and an expression of the reawakening of Asia. A special issue called ‘An Eastern University’ was more assertive about the lack of spiritual edification and the lack of a holistic worldview in Western education than the university’s original mission statement and emphasized education as the road to a stronger, more united Asia:

In the midst of much that is discouraging in the present state of the world, there is one symptom of vital promise. Asia is awakening. This great event, if it be but directed along the right lines, is full of hope, not only for Asia herself, but for the whole world. ... The time has come when we must use all our wisdom to understand the situation,

---

<sup>85</sup> NAI, External Affairs—External—progs nos. 329-x, 1943 Activities of Professor Tan Yun Shan.

<sup>86</sup> *Viśva Bharati Bulletin*, no. 1 part II: June, 24: Address at the Temple of the Earth, 25–26.

<sup>87</sup> *Idem*, 25.

and to control it, with a stronger trust in moral guidance than in any array of physical forces. ... The East, for its own sake and for the sake of the world, must not remain unrevealed. The deepest source of all calamities in history is misunderstanding. For where we do not understand, we can never be just.<sup>88</sup>

In giving other scholars and poets a podium for their expressions of Asianism, the *Viśva Bharati Quarterly* could be even more forceful. An editorial note in one of the first issues tells us that the Viśva Bharati professors felt that their university owed a great debt to ‘the subtle unobtrusive influence’ of Japanese scholar Okakura Kakuzo in helping to conceive their institution. As Kakuzo’s ‘dearest dream was this renewal of intimate relations between the members of the Asiatic family of peoples’, they published the following excerpt from his celebrated *Book of Tea*, which, for the selection of this particular passage, constitutes something of an academic war cry:

We Asiatics are appalled by the curious web of facts and fancies which has been woven concerning us. We are pictured as living on the perfume of the lotus, if not on mice and cockroaches. Indian spirituality has been derided as ignorance, Chinese sobriety as stupidity, Japanese patriotism as the result of fatalism. Why not amuse yourself at our expense? Asia returns the compliment. There would be further food for merriment if you knew all that we have imagined and written about you.<sup>89</sup>

In other issues of the journal, scholars from both Asia and Europe contributed to the project of retrieving Asia’s past. Some were personally connected to Tagore; others had been visiting professors at Santiniketan. Early on, the British had noted Viśva Bharati’s preference for ‘continental scholars’ (which the British found very hard to understand).<sup>90</sup> This was reflected by the presence, at Santiniketan, of famous Indologists and Asianists such as Sten Konow from Norway, Maurice Winternitz from Austria, and Giuseppe Tucci from Italy (who will be dealt with in more detail below). Winternitz became a regular contributor to the *Viśva Bharati Quarterly* and extended his knowledge of the history and literature of India to wider Asianist frames, comparing, for instance, Zoroastrian ideas to Buddhism and Brahmanism to encounter shared ideas.<sup>91</sup> Other contributions carried titles such as ‘Leisure and Modern Youth in the West and the East’, ‘What Can Christians Learn from Buddhism?’, and ‘Emerson’s Debt to the Orient’. What these articles have in common, is their positive definition of Asia as the site of an alternative modernity. Theirs was a proactive and changing Asia, which held lessons for the West. This was a direct contradiction of the older European stereotypes of an unchanging, static Asia.

The idea of a proactive Asia was carried on in a very different vein by those historians of Asia—from a variety of academic backgrounds—who looked for historical traces of Indian

<sup>88</sup> *Viśva Bharati Bulletin*: An Eastern University, July 1927.

<sup>89</sup> Author, ‘Whiffs of Far Eastern Fragrance’, *Viśva Bharati Quarterly*, 2:1 (1924): 15.

<sup>90</sup> NAI, Home Political 181, 1925: ‘Political, Social and Educational activities of Sir R. Tagore’s school’: undated report.

<sup>91</sup> M. Winternitz, ‘Ethics of Zoroastrianism from a Comparative Point of View’, *Viśva Bharati Quarterly* 1:1 (1923): 33–53.

activity, expansion, migration, mission, exploration, and expansion elsewhere in Asia. In other words: historical traces of an Indian agency in Asia that could be rediscovered and, perhaps, rekindled as the basis for a shared Asian identity. This was primarily due to the presence of academics at Santiniketan, both as visiting and as more permanent professors, like the aforementioned Giuseppe Tucci from Italy, Sylvain Lévi from France, and Kalidas Nag and P.C. Bagchi from Calcutta. While their lyric exaltations on the links between India and ancient Asia fit very well with the Santiniketan mission statement, *Viśva Bharati* was not at the heart of this movement this time: it merely benefited from proximity to it. The next section will be devoted to the centre of this movement: the Greater India Society in Calcutta and its academic relationships in Asia and Europe.

When Tagore passed away in 1941, he was remembered initially for his contributions to Asia's renaissance. Soon after his death, one of his Philippine friends wrote the following eulogy: 'Begotten Glory of the East that cannot die / As Truth and Lore securely stride on common trail / All mortal hordes devoutly take the pilgrimage / In fellowship of heart and soul with Gurudev / And Asia's mighty poet-seer crosses the bar!'<sup>92</sup>



*Fig. 4. Sylvain Lévi and Tagore [S. R. Rana Papers, Bhavnagar].*

<sup>92</sup> VB, RBA, Tagore Correspondence file 294: poem by Felix C. Driz [excerpt], 21 August 1941.

### 3.3 Shared Asian paths and pasts: imagining Greater India

#### *Imagining Greater India in France*

In view of the emerging anti-imperialist consensus in the Indian and international public spheres, irony does not spare the fact that in the 1920s a further influential Asia-discourse came into being, one that celebrated India's past as a colonizer and 'bringer of civilization' to the rest of Asia. The members of the Greater India Society, established in Calcutta in 1926, were without doubt inspired by Tagore's concept of Asia,<sup>93</sup> but took his idea in another direction. Two of its founders shared an exceptional academic background that was crucial for their views on Asia.<sup>94</sup>

Kalidas Nag (1888–1980) and P. C. Bagchi (1898–1956) had earned their doctorates in Paris with the French Indologists Sylvain Lévi (1863–1935) and Jean Przyluski (1885–1944), and had thus become Orientalists—in the pre-Saidian sense of the word—by training. They derived their concept of Asia from European academic discourses, although they did not draw from the German and English Orientalism prevalent in British India, but rather from the autonomous French variety. What made the theories of Lévi and his students so attractive to Indian intellectuals?<sup>95</sup> In opposition to the widely held paradigms of evolution, which depicted the history of humanity as a sequence of the rise and fall of civilizations (and according to which the 'Oriental' ones were usually represented as extinct or degenerate), French academics were interested in translocal *longue durée* processes of cultural transfer. *Diffusion*, and not *évolution*, explained, in their opinion, the different stages of development, or 'civilizational phases' of nations.<sup>96</sup> In his early writings on the foundation of the fields of epigraphy, literature, and architecture in Indochina, Lévi had pointed to India as the great civilizational force of Asia.<sup>97</sup> Hindu and Buddhist India had, according to him, spread their cultural, spiritual, and material accomplishments throughout a space that reached 'from Persia to the Chinese Sea and from the icy coast of Siberia to Java and Borneo'.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Kalidas Nag was not only an admirer of the poet but also a close collaborator and friend, accompanying Tagore on his tour of France in 1920, and his tour of Asia four years later.

<sup>94</sup> See Susan Bayly, 'Imagining "Greater India": French and Indian Visions of Colonialism in the Indic Mode', *Modern Asian Studies* 38:3 (2004): 703–44; and 'India's "Empire of Culture": Sylvain Lévi and the Greater India Society', in *Sylvain Lévi (1863–1935): Etudes Indiennes, histoire sociale. Actes du Colloque tenu à Paris les 8–10 Octobre 2003*, edited by L. Bansat-Boudon and R. Lardinois, 193–212 (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2007).

<sup>95</sup> The popularity of Lévi spread far beyond the small circle of his students. Tagore invited him to Santiniketan in Bengal, where he was the first foreign visiting professor in 1921–22 at Viśva Bharati. See R. Lardinois, *L'invention de l'Inde. Entre ésotérisme et science* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2007), 211, and K. Nag, *Discovery of Asia* (Calcutta: Institute of Asian African Relations, 1957), 10–1.

<sup>96</sup> S. Bayly, 'French Anthropology and the Durkheimians in Colonial Indochina', *Modern Asian Studies* 34:3 (2000): 581–622.

<sup>97</sup> S. Lévi, *L'Inde civilisatrice: aperçu historique* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1938). A collection of his writings on the topic, which Lévi wrote with two of his students, was translated into English by P. C. Bagchi and published in India: S. Lévi, J. Przyluski, and M. Bloch, *Pre-Aryan and Pre-Dravidian in India* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1929).

<sup>98</sup> Cited in K. Nag, 'Sylvain Lévi and the Science of Indology', *Journal of the Greater India Society* 3:1 (1936): 3–13: 12.

Such messages were easily compatible with a nationalist agenda. Indeed, Lévi himself seems to have been not only an admirer of the ‘genius of India’<sup>99</sup> but also very sympathetic to the cause of Indian independence.<sup>100</sup> Lévi’s Indian followers stressed the active role of ancient India in the cultural fertilization and ‘development’ of Southeast Asia. These *topoi* were taken up time and again in both academic and popular publications,<sup>101</sup> some of which were translated into Indian regional languages. Although these activities earned Lévi the scorn of the British Indian Government, who declared him ‘a French Jew of pronounced anarchical leanings’, it made him a welcome guest in Indian academic circles.<sup>102</sup>

An additional French link to the promulgation of the Greater India thesis was Louis Finot (1864–1935), educated at the École des Chartres of the University of Paris. Having studied Sanskrit under Sylvain Lévi, he later became an expert on Southeast Asia and the first director of the École Française d’Extrême-Orient. In that capacity, his work on Angkor Vat, the origins of ‘Indian colonization’, and Indo-Chinese epigraphy inspired many Greater Indianists, and not least Kalidas Nag.<sup>103</sup> Due to the years Finot spent based, in Hanoi, he was instrumental in creating Asian networks of scholars, both in person and in writing. As a prolific reviewer of Indological works by both Asian and European writers, he came into contact with academic circles in Calcutta. Kalida Nag visited him in Hanoi after his trip through China and Japan with Tagore in 1924. At the behest of Finot, Kalidas Nag visited the ‘wonderful monuments of Hindu Art in Champa and Cambodia’, including Angkor Wat.<sup>104</sup> It is likely that Nag’s admiration of these ‘Indian’ ruins was at least part of the inspiration for the booklet *Greater India*, which he published two years later. When the Greater India Society was established in 1926, Finot helped launch it in several ways, including a very sympathetic note on the society’s aims in the École’s bulletin.<sup>105</sup>

A similar role was reserved for Paul Pelliot (1878–1945), an expert in Sinology and Tibetan studies who had likewise been a student of Lévi in Paris. After graduating in 1897, he moved to the École française in Hanoi, where Finot had just become director. In 1908, he became (in)famous for taking a unique collection of medieval Buddhist manuscripts from a

<sup>99</sup> This was already evident from his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France. S. Lévi, *Génie de l’Inde*, edited by R. Lardinois (Paris: Éditions Allia, 2008).

<sup>100</sup> Lévi and P. C. Bagchi belonged to a Paris society called ‘Les Amis des Orient’ that was shadowed by British intelligence and suspected of involvement in ‘seditious activities’. APAC, IOR, L/PJ/12/219: ‘Afghans and Indians in Paris’, report by Col. Humphrys, 21 Dec. 1925.

<sup>101</sup> P. C. Dasgupta, ‘Cultural Affinity between India and Siam’, *Journal of the Greater India Society* 17:1 and 17:2 (1958): 269–308; and O. C. Gangoly, ‘On Some Hindu Relics in Borneo’, *Journal of the Greater India Society* 3:1 (1936): 97–103; Nag, *Greater India*; P. C. Bagchi, *India and China*, (Calcutta: Greater India Society, 1927); B. R. Chatterjee, *Indian Culture in Java and Sumatra* (Calcutta: Greater India Society, 1927); N. P. Chakravarti, *India and Central Asia* (Calcutta: Greater India Society, 1927); and U. Ghoshal, *Ancient Indian Culture in Afghanistan* (Calcutta: Greater India Society, 1928); Sadananda, *Pilgrimage to Greater India* (Calcutta: Swami Sadananda, 1936).

<sup>102</sup> NAI, Home Political 181, 1925: ‘Political, Social and Educational activities of Sir R. Tagore’s school’: undated report.

<sup>103</sup> Among others, L. Finot, *Notes de l’épigraphie indochinoise* (Hanoi: École Française d’Extrême Orient, 1916); L. Finot, *Recherches sur la littérature laotienne* (Hanoi: École Française d’Extrême Orient, 1917); L. Finot, *Le Temple d’Angkor Vat* (Paris: Mémoires Archéologiques, 1929).

<sup>104</sup> K. Nag, ‘Louis Finot’, *Journal of the Greater India Society* 1 (1934): 171–73; 172.

<sup>105</sup> L. Finot, ‘Greater India Society, *Bulletin d’École française d’Extrême-Orient*, 27 (1928): 504–7.

monastery in Dunhuang to Paris. The manuscripts were written in Tibetan, Sogdian, Uyghur, and Sanskrit, among other languages. If this did not get him on the Greater India radar, nothing would. However, his fame in Indian circles increased exponentially when he noted epigraphic evidence of Indian influence in the history of Funan (ancient Cambodia) in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE. Most importantly, he noted the frequent mention of big ships crossing the seas.<sup>106</sup> The inference that these ships must have been Indian was a small step, taken later by Kalidas Nag.<sup>107</sup>

The thesis that India had been not only a highly developed civilization long before its contacts with Europe but also a hegemonic and civilizational force in Asia, was powerful ammunition in the anticolonial struggle for freedom. The famous Indian historian R. C. Majumdar (1888–1980),<sup>108</sup> one of the co-founders of the Greater India Society and a guest of Finot's in the early years of the *École française*, dedicated a two-volume monograph to the idea of *Ancient Indian Colonies in the Far East*.<sup>109</sup> He made explicit what Kalidas Nag had only hinted at in *Greater India*: India's past as a colonial power had earned it a place in the family of 'civilized nations'. Moreover, Indian imperialism was superior to its European counterparts because it had aimed solely at 'uplifting' the colonized areas instead of exploiting them.<sup>110</sup> Although this emphasis on India's role as colonizer and bearer of culture in Asia is criticized in current historiography,<sup>111</sup> the Greater India Society used it to disprove the image of India in the West as self-centred and static. Vis-à-vis the British, India could position itself as the superior 'colonial power' because its colonisation had been pacifist and benign: India's was an empire of culture.

There was an additional reason why this particular discourse of Asian connections arose particularly in Bengal. As the seat of the British Indian government, Calcutta had a sizeable colonial bureaucratic elite, known as the Bengali *babus*. Originally a honorific title meaning something akin to 'sir', it was an ambiguous category: as the nationalist movement gained strength, it was also used in a pejorative sense. To Indians, it came to be identified with profiting from and being subservient to British administration, and therefore British rule. To the British, it suggested semi-education and a veneer of modernity. To both, it hinted at a complacent and lazy work ethic. This had everything to do with the British categorization of

<sup>106</sup> P. Pelliot, *Le Fou-Nan* (Hanoi: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1904).

<sup>107</sup> Nag, *Greater India*, 23.

<sup>108</sup> R. C. Majumdar is seen as one of the most influential historians of his generation. Later in life he was known mostly for his monumental publication, R. C. Majumdar et al., eds., *The History and Culture of the Indian People*, 11 vols. (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1951–77). His work is criticized in part for its conservative Hindu-nationalist overtones. See also D. Rothermund, 'Die Geschichtsschreibung im unabhängigen Indien: Bürgerlich-nationale, marxistische und subalterne Perspektiven', *Comparativ* 11:4 (2001): 31–39; 31–32.

<sup>109</sup> R. C. Majumdar, *Ancient Indian Colonies in the Far East*, vols. 1 and 2 (Lahore: Punjab Sanskrit Book Depot, 1927). Interestingly, Majumdar's writings on 'Greater India' were republished in the 1990s as *History of the Hindu Colonization and the Hindu Culture in South-East Asia* (New Delhi: Classical Publishers, 1996).

<sup>110</sup> Cited in M. Gottlob, ed., *Historical Thinking in South Asia: A Handbook of Sources from Colonial Times to the Present* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 161–62.

<sup>111</sup> K. N. Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 58–59. For the background and content of this understanding of Hindu-'xenology', see also W. Halbfass, *India and Europe: an Essay in Philosophical Understanding* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991), 172–96.

Indian races.<sup>112</sup> In the order of character traits the British colonizers valued—a love of sport, bravery, ‘pluck’, and a ‘chivalric’ approach to women—the Bengalis occupied the lower rungs of the ladder. While the British acknowledged some Bengalis as being among the educated elites, the British stereotype of them was effeminate, bookish, lustful, and lacking in self-discipline.<sup>113</sup> The Greater India thesis, by contrast, cast Bengal in a more active, adventurous role.<sup>114</sup>

Furthermore, Bengal suffered from its less than central location, especially after it ceased to be the seat of government in December 1911. With the British drawing heavily from the more ‘masculine’ and ‘martial’ races of the north-western regions of the subcontinent for recruitment into the Indian army, funds, irrigation projects, and agricultural improvements also flowed in that direction; unrest in those areas, especially in the Punjab, had to be prevented at all cost. And with the new British seat in Delhi and the political focus on the Northwest Frontier Provinces, Bengal lay on the periphery of British India. The idea of India as a historical actor of note in Asia, and particularly Southeast Asia, spreading culture, religion, language, and architecture by land and by sea, cast Bengal as a centre of importance. Its proximity to Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean placed it at the geographical heart of this perceived glorious Indian past. Both the colonial stereotype of the effeminate, artificial Bengali and the marginalization of the province were turned on its head by the idea of the Bengal region as an expansive, exploring, maritime power. This made the Greater India thesis especially attractive.<sup>115</sup>

#### *The Greater India Society, its publications and impact*

How did the idea that India had once exerted influence on Southeast Asia and beyond lead to the establishment of an institution whose main research agenda was to recapture this heritage? Kalidas Nag’s leadership, and especially his tract *Greater India* supplied the society with a founding text and an international network.<sup>116</sup> Its propositions became the Society’s guidelines for further archaeological and epigraphical projects and cultural missions. In it, the echoes of Lévi and his associates are still audible, but they were translated into specific areas of interest that transcended the strictly academic, and fit the spirit of internationalism, pacifism, and anti-imperialism that permeated international civil society in the interwar period. Nag’s *Greater India* itself was born in such an environment. Its first incarnation was as a lecture read at a symposium on ‘the role of internationalism in the development of Civilization’ at the Peace Congress of Lugano in 1922 before an audience that included such internationalist activists as Romain Rolland, Bertrand Russell, and Hermann Hesse.

<sup>112</sup> On colonial hierarchies of masculinity, see M. Sinha, ‘Giving Masculinity a History: Some Contributions from the Historiography of Colonial India,’ *Gender & History* 11:3 (1999): 445–60: 449.

<sup>113</sup> J. M. MacKenzie, foreword to *The ‘Manly Englishman’ and the ‘Effeminate Bengali’ in the Late Nineteenth Century*, by D. Irani (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), vii. See also I. Chowdhury-Sengupta, ‘The Effeminate and the Masculine. Nationalism and the Concept of Race in Bengal’, in *The Concept of Race in South Asia*, edited by P. Robb, 282–303 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>114</sup> See also Bayly, ‘Imagining Greater India’, 718–9.

<sup>115</sup> See, for instance, H. B. Sarkar, ‘Two Notes on the Cultural Contact between Java and Bengal’, *Journal of the Greater India Society* 1:2 (1934): 51–7.

<sup>116</sup> K. Nag, ‘Greater India’, *The Greater India Society Bulletin*, 1:1 (1926).



In *Greater India*, Nag contended that Ancient India had been the first propagator of internationalism through ‘peace and spiritual unity’ and was therefore central to the development of internationalism as an ideology.<sup>117</sup> As such, India’s internationalism was crucially different from the economic internationalism (‘exploitation’), or imperialistic internationalism (‘compulsion’), which he identified as Phoenicia and Assyria respectively, though a careful reader might find hints of Great Britain. He considered the invocation of the Vedic gods of Mitra, Varuna, and Indra in a peace treaty in Cappadocia in the fourteenth century BC as proof that Ancient India had played a role as international peacemaker.<sup>118</sup> The universalism of the Hindu Upanishadic texts as well as the fact that both Buddha and Mahavira, the founders of Buddhism and Jainism respectively, had dedicated themselves to humanism and non-injury (*ahimsa*), was a further indication of this spirit of ‘tolerance and amity’. Nag called this ‘the soul of Asia’, for similar thoughts might be located in the writings of Lao-Tse, Confucius, and Zoroaster.

In a chapter called ‘Pan-Asiatic Expansion’, Nag formulated the influence of Indian internationalism in the first centuries CE: ‘This grand movement of spiritual conquest, this noble dynamic of cultural imperialism ... soon won for India the inalienable empire over the vast continent, right across Tibet and China to Korea and Japan on the one hand, and across Burma and Indo-China to Java and Indonesia on the other’.<sup>119</sup> This empire was never political, but instead a spiritual conquest ‘that remains to this day a marvel of history’.<sup>120</sup> In a translation of this phenomenon to the concerns of interwar internationalist, regionalist and federalist groups, he noted that ‘all the barriers of geography and ethnography have been swept away by the inundation of international amity’.<sup>121</sup>

The next period of importance Nag discerned, after the ‘first’ and the ‘second’ millennia (up to 500 BCE and 500 BCE–500 CE respectively), was the ‘third’, a millennium characterized by ‘India as the Heart of Asiatic Humanism’. In it, the ‘manuscript roads’ laid down by the Indian poets Kalidasa, Varahamihira, Gunavarman, and Vasubandhu, had fertilized the whole of Asia. Listing the first explorations into archaeology by French, German, Russian, and English academics, Nag outlined an agenda for further research into these material finds as well as inscriptions and manuscripts, which ‘when thoroughly analysed and digested, would revolutionise our conception about the migration of early culture in Eurasia, now viewed generally from the false perspective of isolated national histories of the different countries’.<sup>122</sup> This would inevitably lead, according to Nag, to a clearer picture of the Indian contribution to the cultural unity of Asia.

Southeast Asia presented more of a problem, since ‘this vast area was enveloped in deep obscurity till very recent times’.<sup>123</sup> Most archaeological and epigraphic evidence from this area was dated much later than evidence of Indian influence elsewhere in Asia, mainly in

---

<sup>117</sup> Nag, ‘Greater India’, 5.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Nag, ‘Greater India’, 20.

<sup>120</sup> Idem, 21.

<sup>121</sup> Idem, 25.

<sup>122</sup> Idem, 26.

<sup>123</sup> Idem, 36.

the wake of the spread of Buddhism. The question was how to reconcile the lack of material finds with his periodization of Indian cultural influence. Nag's solution:

We should consider that long before a king feels inclined to get a grandiloquent panegyric of his career inscribed on a rock or a copper-plate, that long before a community is capable of rearing a great architectural monument, a people discovers another people quite normally, propelled by the spirit of adventure, economic or spiritual. So it is not *prima facie* improbable that Indian missionaries reached southeastern Asia by the sea route, about the same period that they had been penetrating the Far Western and Far Eastern regions by the land route.<sup>124</sup>

Nag extrapolated the epigraphic finds by Pelliot in Cambodia to the rest of Southeast Asia, and assumed a wave of Indenisation in the Southeast Asian archipelago. He then formulated this hypothesis as the possible manifestation of 'Hindu colonies' in the Malay peninsula and the Indonesian archipelago as the expression of a Hindu renaissance. Both Brahmanism and Buddhism (and possibly other denominations) would have flourished peacefully there. 'The history of the movement of Hindu syncretism and cultural synthesis in this region of Magna India, has yet to be written'.<sup>125</sup> While conceding that Indian influence in Southeast Asia might, at times, have been accompanied by physical occupation, this influence was nevertheless in first instance cultural. The literary and oral evidence of local stories, legends and myths, which incorporated elements of the Indian epics, would attest to this. And so, Southeast Asia too was moulded into evidence of India's spirit of internationalism, voiced in such a way that it was rendered acceptable to an internationalist interwar audience and at the same time, a rejection of (British) political imperialism and its corresponding hierarchies of race:

The Indian people as a whole stuck substantially to the principle of Peace and Progress. They respected the individuality of the races and nations which came into contact with them, offering their best and evoking the best in others. Thus India managed to leave a record of collaboration in the realm of the Sublime and the Beautiful, quite remarkable in world history. ... That is why, when the names of the great kings and emperors were forgotten, the people of these cultural colonies cherished with gratitude the memory of the services rendered by the innumerable Indian monks and teachers, artists and philanthropists—selfless workers for human progress and international amity.<sup>126</sup>

The research agenda thus outlined by Nag and his associates was taken up by other Greater India Society members and their academic contacts. The Society's aims and objects were: 1) to organise the study of Indian Culture in Greater India, i.e. Serindia, India Minor, Indo-China and Insulindia) as well as in China, Korea, Japan, and other countries of Asia; 2) to arrange

---

<sup>124</sup> Idem, 37.

<sup>125</sup> Idem, 38.

<sup>126</sup> Idem, 44.

for publication of the results of researches into the history of India's spiritual and cultural relations with the outside world; 3) to create an interest in the history of Greater India and connected problems among the students in the schools, colleges and universities of India by instituting a systematic study of those subjects and to take proper steps to stimulate the same; and 4) to popularise the knowledge of Greater India by organising meetings, illustrated lectures, exhibitions, and conferences.

The first of these four aims was met by a variety of projects. Outside of India, cultural missions, joint archaeological excavations and academic exchanges were arranged through contacts with other societies with whom the Greater India Society collaborated actively. Aside from the École in Hanoi, these organizations included the Koninklijk Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen at Batavia, the Chinese Academy of Buddhist Learning at Nanking, the Java Institute of Jogjakarta, and the Sino-Indian Institute of Peiping.<sup>127</sup> Several of the Society's members spent semesters abroad at universities throughout Asia. Moreover, they exchanged their collections and publications, thanks to which the Society was able to set up a sizeable library on Greater India in Calcutta. In India, cooperation with Santiniketan and the Royal Asiatic Society (also based in Calcutta) ensured that international scholars who passed through these institutions could collaborate with the Greater India Society on projects, lectures, and publications. During his time as a visiting professor at Santiniketan, for example, Tucci became a welcome guest at the Greater India Society. This led to collaborative projects throughout India, as well as invitations to Bengali scholars and students to visit Italy. In 1940, the Greater India Society published the report of Tucci's trip to the Swat Valley.<sup>128</sup>

All these activities received wide publicity in the *Journal of the Greater India Society*. This journal, which exclusively published articles related to the study of Greater India, thus met the second of the Society's aims and objectives: publication. In the early years of the journal, the reproduction of epigraphic data on inscriptions in Southeast Asia was predominant. Reference to Southeast Asia in the context of 'Indian colonies', while not absent, was covert as reflected in contributions such as Majumdar's 'The Sailendra Empire'.<sup>129</sup> This historian, later to become somewhat notorious for the Hindu-nationalist overtones in his work, was more nuanced in the Society's journal. Epigraphic and linguistic notes were meant to add to the historiography of, in this case, Sumatra and Java, and not to appropriate it fully as 'Indian'. In a sequel to this article, however, he celebrated the Cholas as a 'great naval power' whose incursions into Indonesia were 'crowned with brilliant success', for reducing the territory of the Sailendras in size. The article also documents Chola embassies to China, where the Cholas received 'unusual honours'.<sup>130</sup> Przyluski framed these

<sup>127</sup> Report, *Journal of the Greater India Society* 1:1 (1934): 85.

<sup>128</sup> G. Tucci, *Travels of Tibetan Pilgrims in the Swat Valley* (Calcutta: Greater India Society, 1940). The collection of sculptures from the Gandhara period, exhibited today by the Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale in Rome, is one of the most important Gandhara collections in the world.

<sup>129</sup> R. C. Majumdar, 'The Sailendra Empire (up to the End of the Tenth Century AD)', *Journal of the Greater India Society* 1:1 (1934): 11–27.

<sup>130</sup> R. C. Majumdar, 'The Struggle Between the Sailendras and the Cholas', *Journal of the Greater India Society* 2 (1934): 71–91.

sentiments more directly when he titled a contribution 'Indian Colonisation in Sumatra', even if the content of the article was not as jingoistic as its title.<sup>131</sup>

The contributions in the *Journal of the Greater India Society* in later years spoke less to the internationalism of the interwar period as it was practiced in associational life around the League of Nations and the international peace movement than to a more forceful rhetoric focused primarily on reclaiming India's past as a strong expansive power. In 1940, Ordhendra Coomar Gangoly (1881–1974) made this clear in a contribution entitled 'Relation between Indian and Indonesian Culture'.<sup>132</sup> Gangoly had abandoned a profitable career in law to become a professor of arts at the University of Calcutta, was associated with Santiniketan, and had been a board member of the Indian Society of Oriental Art. He 'tried to enthuse people to gain and sustain inspiration and enlightenment from this great reservoir of Indian heritage and wake up to the spiritual wealth preserved in this treasure'.<sup>133</sup> In his article, he claimed a colonial *Sonderweg* for India. While other colonizers had always sent their surplus populations overseas ('second-rate men') and had thus developed colonial cultures inferior to 'parental culture', India had sent 'worthy and distinguished representatives, the finest types of Indian intellectual and spiritual giants'.<sup>134</sup> The outlying areas of Greater India had thus developed 'Indian culture to a level of equal eminence with that of the mother-continent'.<sup>135</sup> Moreover, this impressive feat had led to the fact that Indians did not regard their colonies as inferior reflections of India itself (again, one might discern a slight towards Great Britain), but saw them as integral parts of the 'Great Indian Continent', making it into 'one unified and uniform texture woven by the best Indian hands'.<sup>136</sup> Finally, Gangoly took the discourse one step further by contending that

There are no features in Indian architecture or sculpture in the 'Colonies' which cannot be explained as the natural development of essentially Indian art forms in a new environment. Indian art in Siam, Indo-China, Malaya and the Indian Archipelago is a continuation and logical development by Indian hands of the principles and symbols of Indian creation, applied and developed under 'Colonial' conditions.<sup>137</sup>

In case anyone had misunderstood what he was trying to say, he noted once more in his conclusion that the historiography of the so-called 'Indian Influences' in Greater India—ostensibly also the writings of his own Greater India Society associates—demanded a serious modification: 'it is not a question of "influences"'; it is a question of a wholesale transportation ... in all its characteristic features, elements and textures, with all its social and

---

<sup>131</sup> J. Przyluski, 'Indian Colonisation in Sumatra before the Seventh Century', *Journal of the Greater India Society* 2 (1934): 92–101.

<sup>132</sup> O. C. Gangoly, 'Relation between Indian and Indonesian Culture', *Journal of the Greater India Society*, 7 (1940): 51–69.

<sup>133</sup> K. K. Ganguly and S. S. Biswas, eds., *Rupanjali: In Memory of O. C. Ganguly* (Calcutta: O. C. Ganguly Memorial Society, 1986), 4.

<sup>134</sup> *Journal of the Greater India Society*, Jan 1940, 53.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Idem, 56.

<sup>137</sup> Idem, 68.

religious polities, its trade-guilds and industrial systems, its canons of architecture and sculpture'.<sup>138</sup>

The third of the Greater India Society's four aims, of spreading the study of Greater India to educational institutions, was met by a strong alliance between the Greater India Society and the universities of Santiniketan and Calcutta University. At Santiniketan, the exposure of students to Greater Indian thought was facilitated greatly by the strong personal connection between Kalidas Nag and Tagore, as well as the visiting professorships at Santiniketan of Asian and European scholars such as mentioned in section 3.2. Ties to the University of Calcutta were more official. The first president of the Greater India Society was Jadunath Sarkar, the vice-chancellor of Calcutta University, and subsequent vice-chancellors would also serve on the Society's governing council. The same was true for the Calcutta Museum, which was strongly linked to Calcutta University in turn.<sup>139</sup> Moreover, the research library of the Society was housed at Calcutta University in the Asutosh building, a stately mansion on the main campus on College Street.<sup>140</sup> Finally, students were encouraged to take part in the proceedings of the Society and in its organizational structure: 'Recruits are needed not only for shouldering the growing business of the Society, but also for improving the standard of its Journal so as to make India's part in the elucidation of the culture of Greater India worthy of its heritage. The Committee appeals to every lover of Indian culture to rally round its banner and it earnestly trusts that its appeal will not go in vain'.<sup>141</sup>

The fourth and final aim of the Society, which was to popularize knowledge of Greater India, was met by a variety of initiatives. First, the membership in the Society was not limited to scholars. Journalists, writers, poets, and artists took an active part in the Society's meetings. Second, an attempt was made to lower the threshold for reading the Society's publications by keeping the prices artificially low. This was possible, in part, through the significant discount on the printing costs of the journal, provided for by the well-wishers of the Society at the Oriental Press in Calcutta.<sup>142</sup> Other discounted publications included Majumdar's sizeable *Ancient Indian Colonies in the Far East* and P. N. Bose's *The Indian Colony of Siam*. While English-language publications would always be aimed at Calcutta's educated elite, the Society sought to engage a wider audience and to that end, Kalidas Nag's *Greater India* was translated into both Hindi and Bengali, and sold for the below-cost price of one rupee.<sup>143</sup>

Popularization of Greater India was also attempted through the organization of public lectures aimed both at students and a more general audience. Of these, Society scholars gave approximately ten per year.<sup>144</sup> The aim of organizing exhibitions was also met. In 1935, for instance, the goals of engaging both students and the wider public were met by an exhibition of 'Indian Architecture and Allied Arts and Crafts' held at the Senate House of Calcutta

---

<sup>138</sup> *Idem*, 69.

<sup>139</sup> E. S. Craighill Handy, 'The Renaissance of East Indian Culture: Its Significance for the Pacific and the World', *Pacific Affairs* 3:4 (1930): 362–69: 364.

<sup>140</sup> Miscellany, *Journal of the Greater India Society* 3 (July 1936): 214.

<sup>141</sup> Annual Report, *Idem*, 218.

<sup>142</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>143</sup> Prices published on the back flap of the July issue of 1940. This converted to about \$0.25 at the time.

<sup>144</sup> Data taken from the annual reports as published in the *Journal of the Greater India Society* for the years 1934–1942.

University from 8 to 15 February and to which local, regional, and international scholars and institutions had contributed drawings, photographs and antiquities. Some of the exhibits related to Greater India were sent by scholars in Southeast Asia themselves (if not by Southeast Asian scholars). Dr Andreas Nell of Colombo, for instance, contributed photographs not only of ancient Ceylonese monuments but also of modern buildings in Colombo on which ancient Indian architectural features were reproduced. Dr Suniti Kumar Chatterji contributed a painted scroll from Bali, representing the temptation of Arjuna as described in the *Mahabharata*. The exhibition was also the result of intense collaboration between different institutes in Calcutta. The Fine Arts Seminar of the university exhibited photographs and drawings of Borobudur as well as of Angkor Thom and Angkor Wat. A number of Sinhalese, Nepalese, Chinese, Japanese, and Tibetan antiquities were displayed by the Mahabodhi Society of Calcutta. Even private individuals had made contributions to the event in the Greater India spirit: a Mr Abdul Ali and one Srish Chandra Chatterji exhibited their own specimens of Burmese lacquer-work and photographs of Siamese temples respectively.<sup>145</sup>

What was the appeal of the Greater India Society? On the scholarly level, part of its attraction may have been that the Society had an intellectual charisma and an agency all its own. While it drew quite strongly on the scholarship of French Orientalists, its members unequivocally rejected British scholarly notions of what constituted the Indian ‘race’, Indian ‘territory’, or what was meant by terms such as ‘colonial’ or ‘oriental’.<sup>146</sup> Even more so, they used these terms but broke them down and rebuilt them to mean something new. In the Society’s attempt to rewrite the historiography of Indian interaction with the rest of Asia, its scholars also rewrote the terms with which that interaction was to be described.

According to Susan Bayly, many of the claims of the Greater India Society were rooted in narratives of collective loss and displacement, not dissimilar to concepts of *Grossdeutschland* or *la Syrie intégrale*.<sup>147</sup> While parallels between these and comparable discourses are inescapable, the Greater India Society publications and other of its initiatives were characterized not by a sense of victimization, but rather by a somewhat jingoistic approach to past Indian achievements, which opened the door for a new pride in the long reach of Indian culture and the possible resuscitation of that influence. To the wider public, the Society’s appeal may therefore have been located primarily in the reclamation of a glorious past as the basis for a future renaissance. The Greater India discourse did not reject imperialism as a concept, it rejected only British imperialism. If many of the Greater India Society scholars—especially in the Society’s later years—viewed India as a former colonizing power, it was still a ‘good’ colonialism, with the corresponding judgment about British colonialism as ‘bad’. This was a facet of the Greater India thesis that could be used for a variety of political agendas, as the next sections will demonstrate.

---

<sup>145</sup> Data on the exhibition taken from Miscellany, *Journal of the Greater India Society* 3 (January 1935): 83.

<sup>146</sup> Bayly, ‘Imagining “Greater India”’, 707.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

### 3.4 Student politics: the Asiatic Student Congress

#### *Asianism as international relations propaganda between Italy and India*

In the 1930s, the idea of India as an ancient civilizing force in Asia, and the corresponding idea that the 'reawakening' of India would be a catalyst for the reawakening of Asia, transcended academia. Indebted as the discourse had once been to European scholarship, the activities and writings from the Calcutta-based network of scholars now started to influence European engagements with Asia. This section will focus on the ways in which fascist Italy used the scholars of Greater India and their networks to spread cultural propaganda in Asia. Instrumental in the formulation of Italy's policy towards 'Young Asia' was Giuseppe Tucci, who figured in sections 3.2 and 3.3 through his engagements with both Viśva Bharati and the Greater India Society.<sup>148</sup> After an overview of the reasons why Indian students and scholars were attractive to the cultural policies of fascist Italy, the focus will be on the organization which Giuseppe Tucci directed on his return: the Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente (the Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East, or IsMEO). Meetings between Asian scholars and students in Rome under the institute's banner which were intended to forge closer ties between Italy and the East. That these meetings were not driven by academic motivations only, may be gleaned from the presence of Mussolini himself at these meetings.

Why would fascist Italy engage with Asia at all, and with India in particular? Mario Prayer, one of very few historians to have studied the fascist government's policies towards Asia, has offered some suggestions. On a pragmatic level, the young regime needed to gain international legitimacy through fostering relations with other nations.<sup>149</sup> The same held true for trade relations: Asia was seen as a prominent market for new trading ventures for Italian goods. India's advance towards independence would free it from British control, which made it all the more promising. The Italian consulates in Bombay and Calcutta were therefore instructed to encourage Indian groups interested in Italy.<sup>150</sup> A secondary rationale was to encourage Indian princes whose European travels tended to centre on England and France,—to spend time in Italy as well, for it was widely believed that they travelled mainly for the purpose of buying European cars and luxury goods.<sup>151</sup> Another reason had everything to do with the belief that some factions of the Indian nationalist movement were falling under Soviet influence, to the detriment of mainstream of anti-imperialist agitation against the British.<sup>152</sup> This in turn led to the perception that the newly unified state of Italy and India were fighting the same two enemies: international communism on the one hand, and the capitalist-colonialist menace on the other.<sup>153</sup>

<sup>148</sup> On Tucci, see the recent biography by E. Garzilli, *L'Esploratore del Duce*. Vol. 1, *Le avventure di Giuseppe Tucci e la politica italiana in Oriente da Mussolini a Andreotti* (Rome: Asiatica, 2012).

<sup>149</sup> M. Prayer, 'Italian Fascist Regime and Nationalist India, 1921–1945', *International Studies* 28 (1991): 249–71: 250.

<sup>150</sup> M. Prayer, 'Self, Other and Alter Idem—Bengali Internationalism and Fascist Italy in the 1920s and 1930s', *Calcutta Historical Journal* 26:1 (2006): 1–32; 11.

<sup>151</sup> Archivio Storico Diplomatico (ASD) Rome, Affari Politici 1931–1945, Busta 3 (1934): Miscellanea: Viaggi di Principe Indiani in Europa: Foreign Ministry to Ministry of Industry, 25 April 1935.

<sup>152</sup> *Asiatica*, the journal of the IsMEO, would devote considerable attention to it. See, for instance: C. Astorri, 'Il Comunismo in India, 1929–1937', *Asiatica* (1937): 117–25.

<sup>153</sup> Prayer, 'Italian Fascist Regime', 250.

More in line with Greater Indian thought was the notion that Italy and India shared a historical identity as ancient civilizations that had wielded far-reaching influence over their regional environments. Just as India had been a cultural mediator in Asia, so Italy had played the same role in Europe.<sup>154</sup> The sense of an Indian, and a corresponding Asian renaissance, was very compatible with the fascist regime's rhetoric of a restoration of Rome to its former splendour. Fascist Italy therefore framed its rapprochement with India by emphasizing the fact that the Mediterranean civilization of Rome had once been a mediator in East–West relations and now sought to resume that role. The decline of the colonial powers, which was perceived as inevitable, would lead to a re-centring of Italy as the natural mediator between Europe and Asia.

Finally, the notion was put forward that Germany and Britain had forfeited their role in Asia on account of their racist policies. As a similarly 'rejuvenated' nation, Germany might have been Italy's competitor in Asian relations. However, it did not understand Asia's spirituality, and Asians were taking note of their racist propaganda.<sup>155</sup> The British, it was argued, had defined the differences between themselves and native Indians in racist terms. To Indian nationalists, it was expressed that such ideas were in contrast to 'the universal idea of Imperial as well as Catholic Rome and of Italian thought from the philosophical schools in the Renaissance up to Fascism'.<sup>156</sup> Italy offered itself as an alternative site of modernity, with more attention and appreciation for culture and spirituality was found elsewhere in Europe. It proposed itself as the new European interlocutor with Asia, and professed a willingness to support the cause of Pan-Asianism, very much as it had Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism.<sup>157</sup> Both the invocation of past regional hegemony and the argument that Italy was a nonracist, non-colonial power spoke strongly to Indian anti-imperialist sentiments. It was received with enthusiasm in India up to 1936, not only in the small circle of Indian internationalists and Asianists in Calcutta and Europe, but in the wider Indian press.<sup>158</sup> However, the Italian invasion of Abyssinia and the imposition of racist citizenship laws in the same year exposed another side of the Italian regime and marked the end of this discourse.<sup>159</sup>

From the late 1920s to the early 1930s, however, the relationship between India and Italy steadily intensified, with the Bengali intelligentsia and the academic circle around Giuseppe Tucci at the centre of the engagement.<sup>160</sup> From the Indian side, there were several

<sup>154</sup> Prayer, 'Self, Other and Alter Idem', 2.

<sup>155</sup> R. de Felice, *Il Fascismo e l'Oriente: Arabi, Ebrei e Indiani nelle Politiche di Mussolini* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1988), 28.

<sup>156</sup> 'Idea, questa, che è opposta a quella che fu l'idea universale di Roma Imperiale, di Roma cattolica e di tutto il pensiero italiano, dalla scolastica alla Rinascenza ed al Fascismo'. Foreign Ministry note, cited in De Felice, 29n23.

<sup>157</sup> For Mussolini's contacts with Arab nationalists and Pan-Islamists, see De Felice, 29–30.

<sup>158</sup> This discourse ceased abruptly with the Abyssinian invasion. See Framke, *Delhi-Rom-Berlin*, 240–8.

<sup>159</sup> The 1936 decree on imperial administration ruled out the possibility of Ethiopian subjects gaining Italian citizenship. By 1937, an apartheid regime was in force in Italian East Africa. See F. de Donno, 'La Razza Ario-Mediterranea: Ideas of Race and Citizenship in Colonial and Fascist Italy, 1885–1941', *Interventions* 8:3 (2006): 394–412; 405.

<sup>160</sup> Although the Maharaja of Alwar also contributed by inviting the Italian national tennis team for a tiger hunt on his lands, 'to see something of the Indian State and Indian India'. ASD, Affari Politici 1931–1945, Busta 1: Rapporti Politici, letter dated 27 January 1933.



reasons why Italy was an interesting interlocutor. As noted, the fact that Italy was not, at this point, an imperial power, and that it championed the nationalist cause in India helped foster ties between the two countries. In the early 1930s, Mussolini had offered support to Subhas Chandra Bose—incidentally, also a member of the Greater India Society—for his project to found an international league of ‘oppressed peoples’.<sup>161</sup> From a developmental perspective, Italy also appeared to be leapfrogging more advanced countries. This was lauded in Indian newspapers as something to study closely for possibly replication in India. Prayer has noted that ‘the rise of fascist dictatorship in Italy might have created in ideological barrier to deter the sympathies of nationalist India, which had for long pursued the road of parliamentary democracy ... but that the personal involvement in the Indo-Italian intercourse of important figures of the Bengali intelligentsia points to the fact that they did not look at European politics and ideologies as based on mutually exclusive compartments, but tended to interpret them in the light of India’s present requirements’.<sup>162</sup> While this is indeed supported by reports and articles by Indian newspaper correspondents in Italy, it should also be noted that presenting these author’s engagements with fascism as something purely instrumental obscures the fact that some seemed to genuinely admire the fascist project for its own sake. Pramathanath Roy for instance, a former student of Tucci’s, wrote prolifically on fascist Italy and translated a biography of Mussolini into Bengali.<sup>163</sup>

Personal connections such as these were especially important and in this sense, the Calcutta network built around the Greater India Society and Santiniketan was not a closed circle. Other important connections with Italy were those with, for instance, Bengali academics-in-exile Benoy Kumar Sarkar (who is discussed in the introduction) and Taraknath Das. A sociologist and political scientist, respectively, neither had much patience for exaltations of the former glory of Greater India, yet they were still part of the same network. Sarkar, for instance, was greatly drawn towards Tucci’s teacher Carlo Formichi, a Sanskritist whose research had focused on secular and anti-mystic traits of Indian literature.<sup>164</sup> Das shared Nag’s agenda of internationalism as a means for India’s advance. Both, however, were staunch Pan-Asianists who rejected the inherent spirituality of Asia and looked instead towards the new Italy (as well as the new Germany) as an important model for Asia.

In *The Futurism of Young Asia*, published in Berlin in 1922, Sarkar elaborated on his Pan-Asian project. He saw a collective battle of Asians against the political and intellectual dominance of the West. The *leitmotif* of Asian cooperation to him was ‘war against colonialism in politics and against orientalism in science’.<sup>165</sup> He saw no alternative to fast and full modernization. An alliance between Asian nations on that basis would lead to the decolonization and, consequently, the rise of Asia. In his view, Italy deserved attention for its quick rise to an international force to be reckoned with, as well as a new model for state organization and development. In particular, the fact that the Italian economic base was still

<sup>161</sup> De Donno, ‘La Razza Ario-Mediterranea’, 404.

<sup>162</sup> Prayer, *Self, Other and Alter Idem*, 3.

<sup>163</sup> See, among many others, P. N. Roy, ‘Mussolini and the Cult of Italian Youth’, *Modern Review* (1932): 145–46; P. N. Roy, ‘Ideologies of Modern Italy’, *India and the World* 2:7 (1933): 176.

<sup>164</sup> Prayer, *Self, Other and Alter Idem*, 14.

<sup>165</sup> Sarkar, *The Futurism of Young Asia*, iv.

largely rural made it an important example for India.<sup>166</sup> Sarkar's study of the Italian economy did not go unnoticed in Italy, and in November 1929, the president of the Italian Central Institute of Statistics met with Sarkar to devise a project for economic cooperation between India and Italy.<sup>167</sup>

Taraknath Das echoed these sentiments in works such as *Is Japan a Menace to Asia?*, published in 1917 from Shanghai. He answered his own question in the negative, arguing instead that Japan was only a menace to *European* domination in Asia. Full and fast modernization had put Japan on a par with the European nations. The book received a considerable amount of press, due in part to a foreword by former Prime Minister of China Tong Shao-Yi and an appendix by Ichiro Tokutomi of the Japanese House of Peers. The otherwise pro-British *Far Eastern Review* even dubbed it 'the magnum opus' of the Pan-Asiatic movement.<sup>168</sup> Sarkar saw Italy as the Japan of Europe, and located the success of Italy's 'leap forward' in the fascist regime. But unlike Sarkar, Das was not immune to arguments of historical pedigrees. He ascribed part of Mussolini's success in 'touching the national pride and consciousness of the Italian people' in fascist Italy's revaluation of its cultural heritage. He pointed to Italy as a model for providing the Italian people with the vision of 'a Greater Italy under the leadership of a new Caesar'.<sup>169</sup> In this way, Das actually succeeded in marrying Greater India to Young Asia. In the early 1930s, Das's academic engagements would lead him to collaborate more closely with Giuseppe Tucci and the IsMEO, in whose journal, *Asiatica*, he professed joint action by India, Italy, and other anti-British powers to free Asia from imperialist oppression.<sup>170</sup> He also used Rome as a site from which he could publish other anti-British writings.<sup>171</sup>

### *Giuseppe Tucci and IsMEO*

Giuseppe Tucci, had been a student of the prominent Italian public intellectual and Sanskritist Carlo Formichi, and had specialized in Tibet and the history of Buddhism. He had met Kalidas Nag as early as 1921 on Nag's visit to Italy.<sup>172</sup> In 1925, Tucci settled down at Santiniketan where he developed a close relationship with Tagore. At Viśva Bharati he studied Buddhism, Tibetan, and Bengali, while teaching Italian and Chinese, a language in which he was also fluent. While teaching at Calcutta University, he also became active in the Greater India Society. He remained in India until 1931, when he returned to Italy. Together with the Hegelian philosopher Giovanni Gentile, he was instrumental in the foundation of the IsMEO, of which he became the first vice president in 1933. He taught at the University of Rome La Sapienza until his death. Tucci was Italy's foremost scholar of the East, and his

<sup>166</sup> B. K. Sarkar, *The Politics of Boundaries and Tendencies in International Relations* (Calcutta: Raj Chowdhury, 1926), 1.203.

<sup>167</sup> V. Ferretti, 'Politica e Cultura: Origini e Attività dell'IsMEO durante il Regime Fascista', *Storia Contemporanea*, 17:5 (1986): 779–819; 783.

<sup>168</sup> Quoted in Mukherjee, *Taraknath Das*, 101.

<sup>169</sup> T. N. Das, 'India Pays Her Debt to Italy but not to India', *India and the World*, 38:3 (1925): 286.

<sup>170</sup> T. N. Das, 'Alcune verità sulla politica mondiale nel Pacifico', *Asiatica* (1935): 91–4.

<sup>171</sup> For instance, his book on the Pacific Question, from the viewpoint of 'an Oriental'. T. N. Das, *La Questione Pacifico vista da un Orientale* (Rome: Istituto per il medio ed estremo oriente, 1934).

<sup>172</sup> Prayer, 'Self, Other and Alter Idem', 7.

interests, which ranged from Zoroastrianism to Chinese philosophy and philology, made him in many ways the ideal scholar of Greater India.

However, Tucci's interest in India was not purely academic. His move to Santiniketan had been orchestrated by the new fascist regime, and Tucci was intimately involved in Italy's cultural and economic policies in Asia. At Santiniketan, he encouraged Indian students to study at Italian universities,<sup>173</sup> an opportunity for which the Italian government offered full scholarships to those Indians willing to study in Italy. In many ways, Nag and Tucci shared the same agenda for their respective countries: to foster international links through educational and academic activities that were part of larger projects of international prestige, national reputation, and advance of national economic interests. And, as is evident from both their writings, they considered cultural and historical self-consciousness as a means to revive India's role in the world and as a modern nation and a great civilization.

Tucci was a staunch supporter of Italian Fascism, and he used idealized portrayals of Asian traditions to support Italian ideological campaigns. His collaborator at IsMEO (and a former teacher) Giovanni Gentile, was even more firmly entrenched in the fascist regime. He was arguably fascist Italy's foremost ideologue, having been the ghost-writer for Mussolini's *Doctrine of Fascism*.<sup>174</sup> His writings have caused much debate in the historiography of fascism, and led David Roberts to claim that Italian fascism was driven by a more or less coherent set of ideas and could not be adequately explained in terms of opportunism and bourgeois resentment, as most scholars had argued previously.<sup>175</sup> Gentile stressed an indigenous Italian tradition going back to Vico and even to Renaissance humanism and he reformulated the Italian humanist tradition in order to question the conventional justifications for liberal democracy.<sup>176</sup>

As Minister for Education in Mussolini's first government, Gentile was ideally placed to support Tucci's Indian ventures and his plans for Italo-Indian student exchanges. Under the heading of 'cultural propaganda', requests went out to universities to help Indian students who wanted enrol in every way. The Reale Accademia d'Italia, which had been established in 1929 under Gentile's direction, and of which Tucci and Formichi were members, invited Indian academics such as Atal B. Ghosh.<sup>177</sup> When Nag visited Italy again in 1930–1, the Reale Accademia was his link to Italian government. It gave him the opportunity to establish the India Bureau for mutual propaganda. Surendranath Dasgupta was the driving force on the Indian side. He too would later be invited to Italy for lectures on India by IsMEO.<sup>178</sup> Through the network thus established, some Indian students in Rome became prominent fixtures in the Roman academic scene as well as prolific writers on both India and Italy: Amiyanath Sarkar, Moninda Mohan Moulik, and the aforementioned Pramathanath Roy.

---

<sup>173</sup> Idem, 8.

<sup>174</sup> D. D. Roberts, 'How not to Think about Fascism and Ideology: Intellectual Antecedents and Historical Meaning', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 35:2 (2000): 185–211: 200.

<sup>175</sup> Roberts, 'How not to think', 185. See also Z. Sternhell, 'How to think about Fascism and its Ideology', *Constellations*, 15:3 (2008): 280–90.

<sup>176</sup> Roberts, 'How not to think', 201.

<sup>177</sup> ASD, Affari Politici 1931–1945, Busta 1: Propaganda Culturale. Letter of invitation, 9 December 1933; note to universities, 10 November 1933.

<sup>178</sup> Prayer, 'Self, Other and Alter Idem', 9.

The plans to establish IsMEO arose at the same time. Tucci sold it to the government as an institute with a cultural façade (*carattere esteriore culturale*), but that would in reality facilitate and promote technical and economic studies of Indian students at Italian institutes.<sup>179</sup> We can only guess at Tucci's actual intentions with the institute, but IsMEO's prolific publication program and its many conferences, archaeological missions, and other ventures suggest that Tucci succeeded in expanding his Asian network and drawing it to Italy (as desired by the regime), as well as in securing ample resources for the actual study of Asian history and culture. In the year of IsMEO's establishment, Tucci and Formichi went on a long tour of Nepal and Tibet, their favourable reception at the Nepali Maharaja's court carefully recorded by the Foreign Ministry.<sup>180</sup> The Institute itself was formally established in 1933 under the aegis of the Ministry of External Affairs, which spoke volumes of the regime's intentions with IsMEO. It was intended to 'construct a channel with the leading classes of the Asian nations on the road to independence, and above all with India, through the benevolent hospitality offered by university institutes to foreign students in Italy'.<sup>181</sup> Young, vigorous students in particular, the future leaders of independent Asian countries, were thought to be able to reinvigorate nationalist movements throughout the continent. It was decided that fascist Italy 'was looking with sympathy and respect ... to an independent Asia'.<sup>182</sup> From this point onwards, IsMEO's activities with respect to the Asianist movement can therefore be traced through the archives of the Foreign Ministry. And these activities started immediately upon the institute's foundation, which was celebrated by a 'Settimana romana degli studenti orientali', a 'Roman' week for those Asian students who found themselves in Europe. Funds would be provided to offer hotels and other facilities in Rome to whichever Asian student would like to participate.<sup>183</sup> This Oriental student week in December 1933, and in particular its Asiatic Students Congress, is the subject of the next section.

#### *Claiming Asia: IsMEO and the Asiatic Students Congress*

The Asiatic Students Congress was convened by IsMEO from 22 to 27 December 1933. Gino Scarpa, the Italian Consul at Calcutta, had applied to all the Italian consulates in Europe to provide lists of Asian students, so that he might select participants from them. Indian students resident in Britain were among those who responded, to the dismay of the British. However, intelligence services were at a loss to grasp the exact purposes of the congress, or exactly who attended.<sup>184</sup> According to their estimates, eight hundred to one thousand students attended, one hundred of whom were Indians. In reality, the number of attendees was lower and the percentage of Indian students was much higher: of the 585 actual participants, 113 were Indian university students, and an undisclosed number of additional Indian participants came

<sup>179</sup> Ferretti, 'l'IsMEO durante il regime fascista', 785.

<sup>180</sup> ASD, Affari Politici 1931–1945, Busta 1: Rapporti Politici, report 12 December 1933.

<sup>181</sup> 'di costruire un canale con le classi dirigenti dei paesi asiatici sulla via dell'indipendenza, e soprattutto con l'India, attraverso la benevola ospitalità offerta dalle istituzioni universitarie agli studenti stranieri in Italia'. Ferretti, 'l'IsMEO durante il regime fascista', 792.

<sup>182</sup> Prayer, 'Italian fascist Regime and India', 260.

<sup>183</sup> ASD, Raccolte Generale 1927–1946 (hereafter RG), Busta 23: 9 November 1933.

<sup>184</sup> APAC, IOR, L/P&J/12/475: Institute for the Middle and Far East and the Asiatic Congress.

from the Roman ecclesiastical institutes, mainly from Propaganda Fide. As can be seen from the table below, almost half the participating students came from India and China.

<i>Number of participants by country:</i> <sup>185</sup>	
Afghanistan	6
Arabia	6
China	156
Egypt	54
Japan	39
India	113
Iraq	6
Palestine	12
Persia	34
Siam	4
Syria	30
Vatican	125
<i>Total</i>	<i>585</i>

On the first day of the Congress, the assembly was addressed by Giovanni Gentile. The second day, however, attracted far more attention from newspapers and intelligence services alike: Mussolini himself addressed the students and outlined the need for Italian cooperation with Asia. His speech, all but forgotten today,<sup>186</sup> was sent to all Italian embassies and consulates for dissemination, not just in Asian countries, but as far afield as the consulate in New York.<sup>187</sup> It was also sent to the major newspapers of Italy, such as *L'Azione Coloniale*, the *Corriere della Sera* and *Il Lavoro Fascista*. Mussolini himself reiterated his views three weeks later in an article in 'Il Popolo d'Italia'.<sup>188</sup> The excerpt of Mussolini's speech that attracted the most attention and was quoted in full in most correspondence on the congress, was his reflection on the former glory of the Roman Empire which was now being restored to its former greatness and resuming its international role. Rejecting 'someone's' oft-repeated statement that 'East and West will never meet', he stated that in ancient times, Rome had achieved an actual union between Europe and Asia on the shores of the Mediterranean. The 'reciprocal creative understanding' (*reciproca comprensione creativa*) between West and East thus created was the basis of the history of civilization, and it was to this 'universal' union that one must return in order to preserve civilization.<sup>189</sup> This came very close indeed to the calls for Asia to 're-spiritualize the West' as urged by the early Asianists discussed in section 3.1, and it is also reminiscent of the message promulgated by Tagore, who had met Mussolini

<sup>185</sup> ASD, RG, Busta 24: Congresso Studenti Asiatici a Roma. Copy of *Jeune Asie* 1:1 (1934) with congress statistics.

<sup>186</sup> The only two historians who have mentioned the Congress in some detail are Ferretti, 'Politica e Cultura' and Mario Prayer, 'Italian Fascist Regime'. De Felice mentions it only in passing (pp. 198 and 205).

<sup>187</sup> ASD, RG, Busta 24: Congresso Studenti Asiatici a Roma. Telegramma Convegno Studenti Asiatici a Roma, 26 December 1933; Telegramma destinatorio Consolato New York, 31 December 1933.

<sup>188</sup> B. Mussolini, 'Estremo Oriente', *Popolo d'Italia*, 17 January 1934.

<sup>189</sup> ASD, RG, Busta 24: 'Discorso Duce a Congresso degli student Asiatici'.

twice in the 1920s and had undoubtedly discussed these matters with him.<sup>190</sup> It also echoed Tucci's concept of 'Eurasia' as a unitary civilization.<sup>191</sup>

The next part of Mussolini's speech was devoted to a critique of the imperialist powers of northern Europe, which had, instead of an equal union based on the best of both East and West, created a relationship based on subordination and materialism, using Asia as a market and a source for raw goods (*fonte di materia prime*). These powers, said Mussolini, were incapable of understanding Asia, and they had created and diffused an image of Asia as Europe's enemy. It was these joint forces of capitalism and liberalism, which had taken over the world, that fascist Italy was combating today. The fascist renaissance that Mussolini heralded as a spiritual renaissance above all (*rinascita soprattutto spirituale*), would lead Italy and the Mediterranean to resume its role as a cultural unifier. In a time of mortal crisis, civilization could be saved by the collaboration of Rome and the Orient, which was the reason the congress was convened: it would augur in a restoration of a community, of a tradition of millennia, of constructive collaboration.<sup>192</sup>



Fig. 5. Inaugural meeting of the Asian Students Congress [*Young Asia* 1:1 (1934), Kern Collection].

Mussolini's speech was very well received. Italian reports raved especially about the reaction of Indian students who claimed that Il Duce's words 'had penetrated deeply into our hearts' (*sua parola e penetrare profondamente nel nostro cuore*).<sup>193</sup> *Il Lavoro Fascista* confirmed that the young Asians had been full of admiration and interest throughout their stay in Rome. The *Corriere della Sera* printed the speech in full. *Young Asia* also published the speech together

<sup>190</sup> Prayer, 'Italian fascist regime', 252.

<sup>191</sup> R. Gnoli, *Ricordo di Giuseppe Tucci* (Rome: IsMEO, 1985), 7.

<sup>192</sup> ASD, RG, Busta 24: 'Discorso Duce a Congresso degli student Asiatici'.

<sup>193</sup> ASD, Affari Politici 1931-45, Busta 1: weekly report, 2-9 January 1934.

with statements from several student statements including Bharati Sarabhai, who had also delivered a speech to the Congress. Her statement indicates how well Il Duce's message, and his allusions to the historical grandeur of Asia, had been received. She stated that the old world that Italy represented was not antithetical to Young Italy's aspirations, just as Asia's grand history would form the basis of its future.

Asia, too, has its wonderful heritage of culture, glory and greatness. It is the mother of religion and the arts. We in Asia today are working to create a harmonious structure on the basis of our ancient civilisation; we are striving to adapt ourselves to the changing conditions of the modern world and to find our legitimate position in the political and intellectual life of the world of today. It is indeed apt that we should meet in Rome, for Italy too has had similar problems to face. At this moment we are in the throes of a renaissance; but we are sure of the future and the dawn of a new era gives joy and enthusiasm to our efforts. We shall bear your words in our minds, Duce; you will not forget our aspirations also, we hope.<sup>194</sup>

The success of this gathering was not lost on the British. They noted that while most of the attending students were only too happy to be awarded a free trip to Rome and regarded it mostly in that context, the Indian, Arab, and Afghan students had taken 'full advantage of the opportunities for discussion' and had succeeded in putting themselves on the map of the regime.<sup>195</sup> The 'Bengali element' was of special concern, in particular the aforementioned Pramathanath Roy and Amiyanath Sarkar, Rome correspondent of the *Liberty* newspaper in Calcutta and an associate of Subhas Chandra Bose, who had also attended the congress, a fact overlooked by many of his biographers.<sup>196</sup> According to British intelligence, Bose took his presence in Rome in December 1933 as an opportunity to study fascist youth organizations.<sup>197</sup> In an interview with the *Giornale d'Italia*, Bose said that 'the Mahatma is more than ever our venerated leader and guide of the national movement, but in the Indian National Congress, to which the Mahatma himself belongs, the active group feels more than ever the need of adopting decisive and efficacious tactics, such as those we admire so much in fascism'.<sup>198</sup>

After the Congress, a Confederation of Oriental Students (Confederazione di Studenti Orientali) was set up by Indian, Syrian, Afghan, and Persian students, and Amiyanath Sarkar was appointed to the board. This confederation, which appropriated the Congress as having

<sup>194</sup> 'Speech delivered by Miss Bharati Sarabhai, representative of the Indian Students', *Young Asia* 1:1 (1934): 16.

<sup>195</sup> APAC, IOR, L/P&J/12/475: Institute for the Middle and Far East and the Asiatic Congress.

<sup>196</sup> Subhas Chandra Bose's most recent biography does detail his Rome visit: S. Bose, *His Majesty's Opponent: Subhas Chandra Bose and India's Struggle Against Empire* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 93–4. The only other biography to treat Subhas Chandra Bose's activities in Rome is L. A. Gordon, *Brothers against the Raj: A Biography of Indian Nationalists Sarat and Subhas Chandra Bose* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 276, 278. It is not mentioned in M. Gopal, *Life and Times of Subhas Chandra Bose as Told in his Own Words* (New Delhi: Vikas 1978); H. Mukherjee, *Bow of Burning Gold. A Study of Subhas Chandra Bose* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1977); or H. Toye, *The Springing Tiger: A Study of Subhas Chandra Bose* (London/Bombay: Allied, 1959).

<sup>197</sup> APAC, IOR, L/P&J/12/475: Institute for the Middle and Far East and the Asiatic Congress.

<sup>198</sup> *Giornale d'Italia*, 29 December 1933.



been the first gathering of ‘its members’, proceeded to speak for all Asian students in Europe.<sup>199</sup> For his part, Sarkar also tried to make Rome the new centre of Indian students in Europe. This served a twofold purpose: it would mean increasing Indian control of the confederation, and by uniting Asia’s youth it would serve to fortify ‘United Asia’ against the imperialist powers. Thanking their sponsors the Gruppo Universirario Fascista (GUF), Amiyanath wrote on behalf of the Confederation that not only had they offered Indian students a safe place to meet in Europe, they had put them in close touch with their brothers of other Asiatic nations.<sup>200</sup>



Fig. 6. Board of the Oriental Students Association with president Suzanne Liao and secretary-treasurer Amiyanath Sarkar under a Roman bust [Young Asia 2:1 (1935), Kern Collection].

The confederation was provided with an office at the University of Rome La Sapienza, probably courtesy of the GUF. They proceeded to make a survey of all Asian students in Europe—their universities, the courses they were enrolled in, and where they lived. Confederation members received a multilingual journal that strongly echoed Benoy Kumar Sarkar’s philosophy of Asian youth and modernity. The first issue of *Giovane Asia/Jeune Asie/Young Asia* reveals some of the reasons why the students saw Rome as a good place for their Asianist activities. Noting that in Rome, they had come together ‘without distinctions of race, nationality or religion’ to ‘contribute to the progress and the prosperity of all countries of Asia’, they once again thanked their sponsors profusely:

<sup>199</sup> To be fair, the constitution did require that at least seven members of the confederation second any statement. ‘La Confédération des étudiants orientaux’, *Jeune Asie* 1:1 (1934): 25.

<sup>200</sup> Amiyanath Sarkar, ‘Oriental Students Association,’ *Jeune Asie*, 1:1 (1934): 32.



The honour of this lofty initiative belongs to the Great Man of the Italian state, and we should acknowledge its value. I consider it my duty to reiterate once more, on behalf of all my colleagues, our indebtedness to the Chief of the Italian government, to the organizers of IsMEO, to our dear fascist comrades at the university of Rome and finally to all who have helped us in our task and have made us comfortable during our stay in Rome by their reception, their friendliness and their willingness to help.<sup>201</sup>

The Congress, and the Confederation of Asian Students that emerged from it, demonstrates the versatility of Asianism as a rallying point in this period. By proposing the Mediterranean as a site of both historical and current interaction, the Asian Students Conference blurred the lines between the two continents so that Italy could become the sponsor of an Asianism recast in a fascist mould. Supported by a regime sympathetic to the cause of Young Asia, for three years it managed to rally a sizeable number of Asian students in Italy and elsewhere in Europe to speak out against imperialism. The organization was generously funded by the GUF, and *Young Asia* had a lavish layout, with glossy photographs of Asian student gatherings and a heavy cover. It was issued several times, and aside from the regular subscribers it was sent to student representatives and press in both continental Europe and the United Kingdom, albeit it clandestinely in the latter case.

To the dismay of the British, Indian participation in the organization only increased. In June 1934, a group of female Indian students visited Rome and met Mussolini. Their visit, paid for by the Italian government, was publicized in the Italian press as well as in *Young Asia*,<sup>202</sup> and when a second Asian Students Congress was convened in Rome in December 1934, the participation of young Indians far surpassed its previous share of attendees. Members of the Federation of Indian and Ceylonese students abroad were now the most important group of participants, alongside Indian student associations from Berlin, Munich, Rome, Vienna, and Dresden.<sup>203</sup> Aside from the GUF, IsMEO had facilitated this increase: on the wings of the first Congress' success, Tucci had managed to convince the government to make scholarships available for Indian students. Aside from keeping the abovementioned Moninda Mohan Moulik in Italy, these scholarships further fortified IsMEO's Indian connections.<sup>204</sup>

<sup>201</sup> Introduction, *Jeune Asie* 1:1 (1934): 3.

<sup>202</sup> ASD, RG, Busta 32: 'Visita in Italia di Studentesse Indiane', 2 November 1934; 'Il Duce Greets Indian Women', *The Statesman*, 2 October 1934; 'Visit of Indian Lady Students to Rome', *Young Asia* 1:3 (1934): 37.

<sup>203</sup> 'The Second Congress of Oriental Students, Rome 1934', *Young Asia* 2:1 (1935): 1; 'The following is a list of Oriental student organisations in Europe which were represented at the second congress of Oriental Students', *Young Asia* 2:1 (1935): 17.

<sup>204</sup> ASD, IsMEO Files, 1934, 7 November 1934, Calcutta to Rome, Borse di studio per studenti Indiani.



Fig. 7. Visit of Indian women to Mussolini [Young Asia 1:3 (1934), Kern Collection].

But the Confederation at La Sapienza was not destined to become an enduring organization. From 1936, the discourse that had surrounded this temporary Italo-Asian alliance started to sound different. Earlier, the invocation of past Roman regional hegemony and the image of Italy as a nonracist, non-colonial power had spoken strongly to Indian anti-imperialist sentiments. But from the Abyssinian invasion and Italy's racist citizenship laws of 1936, the same words took on new meaning.<sup>205</sup> The earlier sympathy for Italy's rise from agricultural nation to industrial and political power of note, gave way to a strong sense of solidarity with Abyssinia. Indian public opinion called for a boycott of all things Italian and regular 'Abyssinian solidarity days' were observed throughout India.<sup>206</sup> The Abyssinian war had exposed the imperialist agenda of the Italian regime and with it disqualified Rome as a sponsor of Asian anti-imperialism.

### 3.5 Conclusion

The Asianist discourse that emphasized the inherent spirituality of Asia and the Greater India thesis that offered an Asian identity on a more Indocentric basis achieved a large audience in the interwar period. While both the 'spiritual Asia' and the 'India Magna' theses drew on

<sup>205</sup> The 1936 decree on imperial administration ruled out the possibility of Ethiopian subjects gaining Italian citizenship. By 1937, an apartheid regime was in force in Italian East Africa. See De Donno, 'La Razza Ario-Mediterranea', 405.

<sup>206</sup> 'Abyssinia Day', *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 9 May 1936, 8; 'India and the Abyssinian War', *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 24 October 1935, 15.

European thought, they were not driven by it. The interwar years saw a reformulation of definitions of Asian spirituality and Asian culture previously used by religious reformers such as Keshab Chandra Sen. These concepts were tailored to fit a new Asianist agenda that drew on this discourse to reject Western imperialism, Western culture, and Western education. Significantly, this was not a rejection of the global in favour of the local; rather, it was a rejection of foreign elements that were deemed incompatible with a perceived Asian identity.

It is important to note that these Asianists did not link identity markers such as religiosity and spirituality to an idea of Asia as static and unchanging as argued by adherents to evolutionist schools of thought. Rather, the focus was on diffusionist models of civilization, which were more suited to ideas of an Asian renaissance. As a consequence of this focus, there developed a close engagement with the academic centres of continental Europe where such models were prevalent. The transnational academic networks so created radiated outwards from Bengal, with Viśva Bharati and the Greater India Society as its most significant hubs. There, scholars, intellectuals, and artists from all over Asia as well as Europe met and shared their thoughts. Through their respective projects, scholarships, lectures, and publications, these discourses had a far wider reach than the elite minds that had conceived of them.

Another consequence of the collaboration with the academic circles of continental Europe was a close engagement with new concepts of cultural and political rejuvenation as promoted by fascist Italy. Influential scholars such as Benoy Kumar Sarkar and Taraknath Das applied these new concepts to Asia and Asian rejuvenation. These ideas also gained currency among Indian students resident at universities in continental Europe, and found expression in the Oriental Student Association and its journal *Young Asia*. Both the organization and its publications were sponsored by the Italian government. The 'orientalisation' of Rome as a bridge between Asia and Europe and as a sponsor of the anti-imperialist struggle against the powers of Northwest Europe, lost credibility with the outbreak of the Abyssinian war in the late 1930s. *Young Asia* ceased publication, and the Indian public sphere professed solidarity with Abyssinia and abandoned its interest in Italy as a potential model. IsMEO and its great supporter Giuseppe Tucci likewise refocused their attention, directing their efforts at cultural cooperation with Japan. Tucci lectured on 'racial purity' throughout Japan the crucial months of late 1936 and early 1937, during which time the Istituto italo-nipponico (Italian-Japanese Institute) was opened in cooperation with IsMEO.<sup>207</sup>

The discourse of Asian religiosity or spirituality had a longer afterlife. But as the internationalist moment of the interwar period drew to a close, this Asia-concept came to be determined more by what it excluded than what it included. The Asianism of the Tagore circle had not limited itself to a Hindu-Buddhist Asia. The same Asian spirituality was attributed to Persian poetry and art, as well as Islam and Sufism. However, as the internationalist moment of the interwar years drew to a close, so too did such inclusive concepts. Instead, the academic discourses of Asian spirituality and of Greater India set adopted in a Hindu-Nationalist register that explicitly excluded Islam. Such new concepts of Asian identity were given expression by Hindu-nationalist publications such as *Organiser* and *Hindu Outlook*. The former used the Greater India thesis to formulate an Asia that was fundamentally Hindu-

---

<sup>207</sup> On IsMEO's Japanese engagements in the years leading up to the war, see Ferretti, 'Politica e cultura', 800–1.

Buddhist. In a series entitled 'India's Eastern Empire', Islam was identified as both foreign and incompatible with that identity: 'Hindusthan still lives in the heart of the Javanese. So deep and penetrating was the influence exercised by the Hindu culture that even after centuries of conversion to Islam, the Javanese still have profound admiration for the Epics. Everyone in the island is familiar with them'.<sup>208</sup> This line would harden during the post-war regionalism of the 1940s and 1950s. As Jawaharlal Nehru and his colleagues formulated an Asia that shared trajectories of colonization and decolonization, the Hindu Mahasabha proposed a Hindu-Buddhist bloc against a Muslim bloc in *Hindu Outlook*.<sup>209</sup>

Finally, the Greater India thesis set in into a political register. Nehru, known as a rigorous proponent of secularism, was among its politically more moderate supporters. He cited Sylvain Lévi's *l'Inde Civilisatrice* several times in his widely read *Discovery of India* and *Glimpses of World History*.<sup>210</sup> One might speculate that the attempts at Asian integration during Nehru's term in office were inspired partly by the idea of Greater India,<sup>211</sup> and indeed the theme resurfaced at Asian Relations Conference in 1947, the proceedings of which are treated in chapter 5. At that conference, Sir Sri Ram's welcome address read: 'In future we shall all ... visit each other's countries often, ... even if not on the scale on which contacts existed at one time between southeast Asia and the kingdoms of the Pandyas and the Cholas'.<sup>212</sup> Sarojini Naidu, the Edwardian poet and ardent interwar internationalist who had been elected to preside over the conference, adopted a similar rhetoric in a conscious attempt to encourage Asianism in the new post-war constellation of a decolonizing Asia. However, one need not take an Asianist perspective to locate problems inherent in conceptions of 'India Magna', especially during decolonization. The idea of India as a benign colonial power was pervaded by a paternalistic attitude towards 'Island India' or Southeast Asia, perceived as culturally similar. Such rhetoric was politically volatile, not least because of the existence of large Indian diasporas in Southeast Asian countries.<sup>213</sup> This was one of the reasons why anti-Indian attitudes prevailed in Ceylon and Malaya, and Burma saw multiple pogroms against Indian minorities in the 1930s.<sup>214</sup>

To the academic circles treated in this chapter, it became clear in the 1940s that the concepts of Asian identity as defined by Asian spirituality or by the spread of Indic religions and cultures, had far outlived their academic base. As independence and the possible partition of the country drew near, the Hindu right firmly appropriated the concept of Asia as a Hindu-Buddhist continent. The idea that 'civilization' was 'Hindu-Buddhist' came to carry the connotation that it was 'non-Muslim', and the rhetoric was domesticated as a Hindu-nationalist tool. The Greater India Society continued its activities, but its voice was inaudible

<sup>208</sup> J. C. Khanna, 'India's Eastern Empire II—Indonesia', *Organiser*, 7 August 1947, 4.

<sup>209</sup> The Editors, 'Foreign Relations Department', *Hindu Outlook*, 25 February 1951, 5.

<sup>210</sup> J. Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (1946; repr., New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 200–10, and *Glimpses of World History* (1934; repr., Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1964), 101–5; 136–40.

<sup>211</sup> See also Jaffrelot, 'India's Look East—Policy', 38–40.

<sup>212</sup> *Report on the Proceedings and Documentation of the First Asian Relations Conference, New Delhi March–April 1947* (New Delhi: Asian Relations Organization, 1948).

<sup>213</sup> See S. Amrith, 'Tamil Diasporas across the Bay of Bengal', *American Historical Review* 114:3 (2009): 547–72; M. Mann, *Geschichte Indiens vom 18. bis zum 21. Jahrhundert* (Paderborn: UTB, 2005), 207–75.

<sup>214</sup> For Southeast Asian scepticism, see also Keenleyside, 'Nationalist Indian Attitudes Towards Asia', 221.

in the clamouring of the Hindu-right press.<sup>215</sup> Moreover, the Greater India discourse was only tenable in the absence of actual international conflict between the Asian lands whose historical trajectories they sought to unite. The year 1959, which saw the demise of the *Journal of the Greater India Society*, also marked the start of the conflict between India and China, and thus the eclipse of any ideas of Hindu-Buddhist brotherhood.

---

<sup>215</sup> In particular, 'Long Live Greater Bharat', *Organiser*, 16 November 1949; 'Bharat Must Save Tibet', *Organiser*, 23 November 1949, 'Why India Should Recognize Israel', *Hindu Outlook*, 4 April 1950, 'The International Aspects of Hindu Nationalism' *Hindu Outlook*, 8 November 1953, 'Pan-Islam, A Living Force', *Organiser*, 22 February 1957.

