

Title—Imagining Asia in India: Nationalism and Internationalism (1905-1940)

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Place: Indian Subcontinent

Time: 1905-1940

Argument Synopsis:

Stole and Fischer-Tiné's article offers an overview of several distinct concepts of Asia and pan-Asian designs, which featured prominently in both political and civil society debates in India during the struggle for independence. Asianisms refer to the discourses and ideologies that claim Asia can be understood as a homogenous space with shared characteristics and they note that the focal point of this is generally East Asian varieties of regionalism. In the nineteenth century, the only accepted criteria for being 'civilized' and for recognition of national sovereignty consisted of the values of Christianity and the Enlightenment. However, this changed after the Second World War with the rise of an alternative understanding of civilization. In terms of organization, the article begins with a chronological overview of India's engagement with Asia before turning to examine three Asianist discourses in greater detail.

Stole and Fischer-Tiné reveals references to other Asian states in the Indian public sphere as early as the mid-nineteenth century. The Japanese victory in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05 crushed the belief of the 'natural' superiority of the white race, while also demonstrating the power of modernization in Meiji Japan. This victory gave Asianist thought a new direction. Following the end of the First World War, the conception of Asia in accordance with the principle of self-determination spread throughout India. The rhetoric of pan-Asianism found expression in the post-1945 period through a series of Asian conferences, most notably the Bandung Conference in 1955. Following their overview, Stole and Fischer-Tiné turn to their three examples of rhetoric, all chosen because they were developed in India between 1905 and 1930 with origins in Bengal. All three soon developed into pan-Indian, partly even global, movements for Asia.

The first example was the message of Rabindranath Tagore, who argued that a blossoming civilization once united the whole of Asia and claimed that the soulless materialistic West was an existential threat to Asian peoples. His message was anti-modern and very critical of Japanese imperialism and nationalism—he did not have a good reception in East Asia and his rhetoric had little export potential. The second example was that of the Greater Indian society (established in 1926), a discourse that celebrated India's colonizing past as a bringer of civilization to South Asia. This idea that India had been a hegemon and civilizational force in Asia fueled the anti-colonial struggle for freedom. The third example was young Asia, or Asia as the site of a superior modernity. This discourse explicitly resisted the idea of the inherent spirituality of Asia and saw no alternative to full and modernization across the continent. Stole and Fischer-Tiné concludes by arguing that Asia in this period was a free-floating signifier, a container to be filled with meaning when a particular agenda so required.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Asianisms: discourses and ideologies that claim Asia can be defined and understood as a homogenous space with shared and clearly defined characteristics
- Concept of Asia is so popular among artists, politicians, etc. is because there is no clear definition
- Asianism should be considered as more of a discursive mode rather than a specific political project