

A dialogue of civilisations

China is actively promoting the idea of confluence of civilisations. Why is India so inactive?



SUDHEENDRA KULKARNI

Is the 21st century going to be marked by a fruitful conversation among civilisations or marred by a frightening conflict of civilisations? This is one of the most vigorously debated questions in our times.

In the closing decade of the last century, Samuel Huntington, a noted American political scientist, put forward the thesis of 'The Clash of Civilisations'. He claimed that the future trend of world politics would be defined by the conflict between Western and non-Western civilisations. His belief: the West's superior civilisation would triumph in this clash. Many in America and Europe lapped up his thesis, since it had appeared soon after the end of the Cold War, which saw the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the U.S. as the sole superpower.

Since then, numerous public figures around the world have countered Huntington's theory. Notable among them was Mohammad Khatami, Iran's President from 1997 to 2005. To its abiding credit, the United Nations endorsed his counter-concept and proclaimed 2001 as the "UN Year of Dialogue among Civilisations".

A new Cold War?

The U.S. has become a diminished power in the past three decades. Nevertheless, it appears that Huntington's argument still has backers in the Donald Trump administration. One of its high-ranking officials has sought to paint the current U.S.-China trade war on the canvas of a 'clash of civilisations'.

In a recent speech, State Department Policy Planning Director Kiron Skinner alerted Americans to the "long-term threat" posed by China, and said that countering this threat is "a fight with a really different civilisation". She described the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union as "a fight within the Western family". In contrast, she said, "It's the first time that we will have a great power competitor that is not Cauca-



sian." In addition to arrogantly proclaiming civilisational superiority, her remark was plainly racist. Many around the world are today wondering: is Washington planning a new Cold War? Will the world have to pay a heavy price once again?

It is against this backdrop that we should see the significance of a new initiative by Chinese President Xi Jinping. In recent years, no leader has been championing the need for inter-civilisational dialogue for world peace and common prosperity more forcefully and consistently than Mr. Xi. He is also the only contemporary global leader proposing such dialogue as a path to reach a much loftier goal, of "building a community of common future for mankind", which he expounded at the UN's 70th anniversary summit in 2015.

In the debate on whether there will be a conflict or confluence of civilisations, three questions become pertinent. Are all civilisations equal? Can dialogue really help in addressing the big challenges before the world today? And how should nations learn from one another? Mr. Xi has answered these squarely.

In his speech at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris in 2014, Mr. Xi said: "All civilisations are equal, and such equality has made exchanges and mutual learning among civilisations possible. All human civilisations are equal in terms of value. They all have their respective strengths and shortcomings. There is no perfect civilisation in the world. Nor is there a civilisation that is devoid of any merit. No one civilisation can be judged superior to another."

Speaking at the 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in Oc-

tober 2017, he highlighted the relevance of this debate to the newest, and one of the most pressing, problems facing the entire planetary population: climate change. He said the world needs to make a transition from "industrial civilisation" to "ecological civilisation", and learn to create "harmony between man and nature", a noble teaching embedded in all the world's civilisations, cultures and religions.

Dialogue of civilisations

He continued his advocacy by hosting a major 'Conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilisations' in Beijing last month, in which I participated as a non-governmental delegate. Over 2,000 participants representing the 48 Asian countries, and also many distinguished personalities from other continents, attended the event. In his keynote, Mr. Xi stressed the importance of Asia, a continental "cradle of civilisations" that "covers a third of the earth's land mass and has two-thirds of the world's population". Explaining the purpose of the conference, he said, "The world today is moving toward greater multipolarity, economic globalisation and cultural diversity, and is becoming increasingly information-oriented. All this points to promising prospects for the future. Meanwhile, instability and uncertainties are mounting and the global challenges faced by humanity are becoming ever more daunting, calling for joint responses from countries around the world." His prescription: "to meet our common challenges and create a better future for all, we look to culture and civilisation to play their role, which is as important as the role played by

economy, science and technology."

In an indirect reference to the protectionist and supremacist stance being adopted by the U.S., Mr. Xi cautioned: "Civilisations don't have to clash with each other; what is needed are eyes to see the beauty in all civilisations... If countries choose to close their doors and hide behind them, human civilisations would be cut off from each other and lose all vitality. We Asian people hope that all countries will reject self-exclusion, embrace integration, uphold openness and promote policy, infrastructure, trade, financial and people-to-people connectivity."

History is witness to how civilisations decline and die when they become exclusivist. Mr. Xi put it well: "We need to stay open and inclusive and draw on each other's strengths. All living organisms in the human body must renew themselves through metabolism; otherwise, life would come to an end. The same is true for civilisations. Long-term self-isolation will cause a civilisation to decline, while exchanges and mutual learning will sustain its development."

Why was India absent?

As an Indian, I was happy when Mr. Xi in his speech made a special reference to India's contribution to the richness of Asian civilisations by mentioning the *Rigveda*, Ganga and Indus rivers, and, above all, the priceless gift of Buddhism. However, again as an Indian, I was assailed by a disturbing thought: when China is taking the lead in spiritedly championing inter-civilisational dialogue within Asia and around the world, why is India, inheritor to one of the richest and oldest civilisations, so inactive at the governmental level? Also, why didn't India send an official delegation to the conference?

An official delegate could have presented a picture of India-China civilisational solidarity, which is best described by this poem by Rabindranath Tagore, who is as highly respected in China as in our own country: "Once I went to the land of China, / Those whom I had not met / Put the mark of friendship on my forehead / Calling me their own".

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Confronting news avoidance

Initiatives such as slow news, seen as effective antidotes to breaking news, offer hope at a time of information overload



A.S. PANNEERSELVAM

One is rarely reminded of literature when reading an exhaustive domain survey. The 2019 Reuters Institute Digital News Report, which covered 38 markets globally across six continents, documented an increasing phenomenon - news avoidance. It pointed out that improved technology increases access to news but also makes it easier to avoid it.

Reading this section of the survey, I was reminded of Toni Morrison's insightful observation about "our own rapidly disintegrating sense of belonging". On receipt of the 2008 PEN/Borders Literary Service Award, the Nobel laureate said: "Certain kinds of trauma visited on people are so deep, so cruel that unlike money, unlike vengeance, even unlike justice and rights, or the goodwill of others, only writers can translate such trauma and turn sorrow into meaning, sharpening the moral imagination. A writer's life and work are not a gift to mankind; they are its necessity." What she said about writing in general applies to journalism too.

There are multiple reasons for news avoidance. According to the Reuters Institute study, polarisation, misinformation, and low trust may not be the only issues facing the news industry. In its data this year, it found that almost a third (32%) of its respondents said that they actively avoid news - three percentage points more than in 2017. This, according to the study, may be because the world has become a more depressing place or because media coverage tends to be relentlessly negative - or a mix of the two. News avoidance figure reached a staggering 11% even in Japan where reading the news is often seen as a duty.

Uneven fallout

Ruth Palmer and Benjamin Toff, in their prediction for journalism in 2019 for the Nieman Journalism Lab at Harvard University, pointed out that for a growing number of people, navigating the stresses of daily life involves opting out of following the news. Their biggest concern was that the news avoidance will most probably play out unevenly, and hence it may increase existing inequalities. For instance, they rightly pointed out that a gender gap in news avoidance is cause for alarm because, "if women, and lower-income women in particular, are less informed about political affairs than other

groups, they may be poorly positioned to advocate for themselves politically." It is important here to recollect the response of a woman in 24-35 age group in the U.K.: "News is a major negative and has a huge impact on everyone who watches it. There is never any positive or happy news."

Mr. Toff argued that for news avoiders, the high costs of consuming news in terms of time or emotional resources are not offset by the perceived benefits because the value of political information as social currency may be low. A study by the Pew Research revealed that seven out of 10 Americans have news fatigue. In this study, it was clear that feeling overwhelmed by the news is more common among those who follow the news less closely than among those who are avid consumers. Hence, journalists may not be the best judges to understand the growing distance between citizens and news.



Joshua Benton, director of the Nieman Journalism Lab, collated some of the comments for a short article on news avoidance by Isabelle Roughol, senior editor-at-large at LinkedIn, to understand the range of factors that has contributed to news fatigue. He found out that by focussing too much on trust factor and the polarising voices on Twitter, news managers are missing the larger group that just doesn't like the meal news media have been serving: "The ones who find the news we produce disempowering, stress-inducing, and, frankly, not worth the time and effort."

The increased access, the unending news cycle where news is breaking every second, and the proliferation of platforms that offer news have led to a form of news overload. In this context, initiatives such as slow news, seen as antidotes to the debilitating effect of breaking news, offer hope. The proponents of this model are looking to respond with more meaningful, inclusive, and less relentlessly negative coverage - often developed in closer collaboration with audiences. The Reuters study revealed that explanatory journalism is resonating well with the younger readers. To paraphrase Toni Morrison, we need a language that helps restore a sense of belonging.

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SINGLE FILE

Creating sanctuaries of hope for migrant workers

Promises like 'Housing for All by 2022' fail to address the needs of migrants

MADHURIKA SANKAR



There is a wilderness within our borders. It's so vast that it covers an entire nation, with around 100 million inhabitants, one-fifth of our labour force. The total earnings of these seasonal wanderers, India's internal migrant workers, are around \$170 billion per annum, i.e. around 6% of India's GDP. Sadly, this wilderness, comprising the residents hidden away in industrial complexes, in soot-ridden kitchens of hotels and in dusty construction sites, is invisible to the naked eye.

Shambhu Ghatak, from the Inclusive Media for Change Project, says the migrant population in India is riddled with the issues of inadequate housing; low-paid, insecure or hazardous work; extreme vulnerability of women and children to trafficking and sex exploitation; exclusion from state services such as health and education; and discrimination based on ethnicity. Furthermore, there are mental health issues, not to mention the darkness of debt-ridden, bonded labour. But, herein lies an irony: a treasure-trove of close to \$3 billion, levied as cess on builders under two migrant workers acts, lies grossly underutilised. Access to the money eludes migrant workers as they need to provide proof of address, which is difficult due to the fluidity of their lives. Further, ration cards, Voter IDs and Aadhaar cards are also not easy to obtain.

Trade unions are the best way for the workers to benefit from government welfare schemes but employers often prefer hiring unregistered migrants over their registered counterparts, further distancing the migrants' access. There is also the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act (1979), enacted to prevent migrant workers from being exploited, but it is rarely invoked and the penalty is minimal.

However, there are rays of hope, stemming from civil society organisations like the Aajeevika Bureau, Hunnarshala Foundation and G3; some Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives; forward-thinking government schemes like that for affordable, migrant housing in Bhuj; and from these resolute workers themselves (the women toilet-masons of Assam are a story of positive irony, for a change).

We need something more than the promise of 'Housing for All by 2022', which fails to address the needs of accommodation for such workers. There need to be multi-level reforms, with an emphasis on sustainable, inclusive construction practices; affordable temporary housing schemes; and inclusive urbanisation at the top. These should be peppered with legally binding implementation protocols. We need to accommodate the wilderness within, so as to help morph this open cage, in which migrant workers live, into a sanctuary of inclusive hope.

The writer is based in Chennai



DATA POINT

Mortality malady

In 1997, out of every 1,000 live births in India, 71 infants died before turning one. In 1997-2008, the figure reduced to 53 (-18), and between 2008 and 2017, it dropped to 33 (-20). The rate of reduction in Infant Mortality Rate (IMR)* has not improved much and the rural-urban gap too remains high across these two time periods in some States. By Siddarth Rao T and Vignesh Radhakrishnan

• The first three columns show IMR in 2017 and the reduction of IMR across two time periods. For instance, Odisha's 2017 IMR is relatively high compared to others and the change across the two periods has remained similar

• The next three columns show the urban-rural gap across time spans. States like Assam and Madhya Pradesh have a higher divide

• Shades of red indicate lower levels of improvement, while green shades indicate progress

Union territories were not considered. Some States did not have sufficient data

* Number of infant deaths per 1,000 live births

Source: Sample Registration System

State	IMR 2017	IMR '97 - IMR '08	IMR '08 - IMR '17	IMR urban-rural ('97)	IMR urban-rural ('08)	IMR urban-rural ('17)
Goa	9	-9	-1	-	-	-
Kerala	10	0	-2	4	-2	1
Manipur	12	-16	-2	7	-8	-4
Sikkim	12	-18	-21	-10	-16	-4
Mizoram	15	18	-22	-7	-21	-13
Delhi	16	0	-19	-	-	-
T.N.	16	-22	-15	-18	-6	-5
Maharashtra	19	-14	-14	-25	-17	-9
Punjab	21	-10	-20	-16	-12	-3
Himachal	22	-19	-22	-26	-18	-8
W.B.	24	-20	-11	-15	-8	-2
Karnataka	25	-8	-20	-39	-17	-5
Tripura	29	-17	-5	-14	-10	4
Gujarat	30	-12	-20	-23	-23	-14
Haryana	30	-14	-24	-11	-15	-7
A.P.	32	-11	-20	-33	-22	-13
Bihar	35	-15	-21	-20	-15	-5
Rajasthan	38	-22	-25	-28	-31	-14
Meghalaya	39	4	-19	-4	-17	-16
Odisha	41	-27	-28	-35	-22	-10
U.P.	41	-18	-26	-23	-21	-11
Arunachal	42	-15	10	-32	-15	-10
Assam	44	-12	-20	-42	-27	-25
M.P.	47	-24	-23	-42	-27	-19
India	33	-18	-20	-32	-22	-14

FROM The Hindu ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JUNE 24, 1969

RBI help sought to serve State Bank clients

The assistance of the Reserve Bank of India has been sought for the provision of funds to the hardpressed clients of the State Bank of India, badly hit by the indefinite strike by the bank's supervisory staff, it is learnt. The Reserve Bank is understood to be considering the possibility of providing funds to the Government departments, public sector corporations and the private sector firms which are in need of cash. Telegrams are reported to be pouring in from the clients of the State Bank all over the country desperately seeking such assistance from the Reserve Bank. There is yet no indication of the Centre intervening in the dispute between the management and the striking staff of the State Bank of India. It is learnt that the Deputy Prime Minister, Mr. Morarji Desai, is very firm about not intervening in the dispute unless the supervisory staff called off the strike.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JUNE 24, 1919

Relief Scheme. Bombay Corporation's Proposal.

Some time back the Bombay Municipal Corporation instructed its medical relief committee to prepare a scheme for the future working of volunteers and voluntary organisations in conjunction with the health department on occasions of outbreaks of epidemic in the city. The following is the outline of the scheme proposed after a prolonged and careful deliberation. The city should be divided into 50 units, each unit consisting of about 20,000 population. Each unit should have a committee consisting of a chairman and not more than two members. Each committee should have an organisation consisting of a doctor, two nurses and not less than 10 volunteers. As far as possible one of the members of the committee should be a member of the Corporation. The committee should be organised with the assistance of such voluntary bodies as may be willing to co-operate.

CONCEPTUAL

Continental axis hypothesis

GEOGRAPHY

Also known as the 'continental orientation hypothesis', this refers to a hypothesis on why certain regions of the world throughout history experienced more economic development than others. It states that regions of the earth that are spread across a large latitudinal area, that is east-west, are more likely to witness greater development than regions that extend longitudinally, that is north-south. This is because temperatures are largely similar across latitudes, which helps technology and ideas to spread among a larger population. It was first proposed by American geographer Jared Diamond in his popular 1997 book *Guns, Germs, and Steel*.

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