

# The Imagining of Asia Through Asian Lenses



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Asia is a continent as old as the hills. Home to some of the world's most ancient civilisations, Asia has made an immense contribution to global thought, culture and religion, helping shape life as we know it.

While Asia remained the dominant force in world history until the early 1700s, accounting for the bulk of its population and wealth, the tide began to turn after the dawn of the industrial revolution. The balance of power then shifted to the West, which became the cradle for political, intellectual and business discourse.

Between the 18th and 20th centuries in particular, many Asian countries were colonised or otherwise subjugated by the West. The Asian mosaic of civilisation was severely damaged, if not completely overwhelmed by western imperialism. This dominance extended to every arena of economic, social and cultural life in a way that the Asian view of the world and, indeed, of itself, was distorted by what one may call the western lens. It would not be an overstatement to suggest that much of what Asians know of themselves is from the prism of western writers, historians and thinkers.

But since the turn of this century, one is witnessing the emergence of a new global reality: the resurgence of Asia. Over the last few decades, the wheel seems to have turned full circle. Asia is once again in the news, dominating the headlines and positioning itself to assume leadership status, before the middle of the 21st

century. The rise of Asia is expected to create a paradigm shift within the global economy, based on its burgeoning markets, innovation and consistent, rapid economic ascent.

Despite these economic upheavals and the emergence of the East on the horizon yet again, the world is still viewing life through the omnipresent western lens. The western view of how things are and ought to be, still rules. So dominant is the western lens that even Asians are using it to study their individual societies and develop an understanding of a broader Asian regional context. The proliferation of Asian Studies centres, departments and institutes throughout America, Australia and Europe (trained to think and research by the use of the Western lens) are, if anything, accentuating the distorting effect and preventing truer contextual understanding of Asian realities. They are, simply, reiterating the generally accepted western world-view.

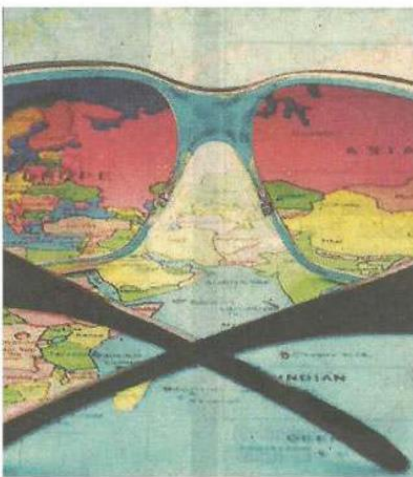
So, the need of the hour is to set up comparable entities in Asia that study the region through Asian eyes. The rise of the Asian juggernaut requires this. Asians and citizens from

other geographies must, in future, have the opportunity to know about Asians from fresh and alternative lenses, as they reflect and think about what kind of future they would like to build for themselves and for the global community.

For this, they need to prepare themselves and their future generations, to build lasting solutions to existing problems that will, in turn, take Asia towards success and pre-eminence. Asian lenses will help young Asians better understand themselves, their societies and those of peer nations and find answers to their own needs.

Asia and India could have been in an advantageous position had it been able to build on its rich heritage of learning. Global shifts, however — both economic and cultural — have prevented India, as well as Asia itself to lose knowledge power, especially in higher education, to the West. Indian universities in particular, have remained low-key on many counts, especially in the crucial area of research, a prerequisite for innovation. Clearly, there is a need to revisit the Indian higher-education sphere.

The creation of Asian lenses will help Asia attain the position that prevailed prior to western imperialist dominance. It will regenerate the concept of an Asian space that promotes the exchange of ideas and learning, laying the foundation for a platform that provides cultural, intellectual and scientific pickings for future generations of Asians and one from which even non-Asians can profit. This exploratory exercise will hopefully lead to the creation of many more Asian lenses, enabling people of this continent to play their rightful role in building a just and successful 21st century society.



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