

# The Standard

China's Business Newspaper

---

## Crossing the cultural divide

**A new institute in New York is devoted to helping China and India learn as much as possible from each other, writes Margot Cohen**

*Saturday, March 18, 2006*

A new institute in New York is devoted to helping China and India learn as much as possible from each other, writes Margot Cohen

In one unorthodox corner of New York, the remarkable rise of India and China has inspired more than just talk about geopolitical maneuvers or comparative recitals of investment statistics.

At the India-China Institute - a new academic initiative heralding a vibrant mix of anthropology, urban planning, economics and cultural studies - what matters most is collaboration. Scholars want to see the world's two largest nations share ideas on tackling development challenges such as massive urban migration, while striving to understand the social and cultural changes triggered by globalization.

Mindful that new wealth should not mask the continuing struggles of the poor, the Institute will also bring together experts on the least advantaged communities in these countries. According to the World Bank, India and China have a combined total of 500 million people living below the poverty line. Hundreds of millions more live precariously just above the line.

Such priorities seem distant from the United States' White House, where the Washington hawks appear to be preoccupied with "building up" India to contain China. Far, too, from Wall Street, where a phalanx of financial analysts are busy parsing the "race" between India and China in terms of foreign direct investment, manufacturing, information technology and other services. There is even a small contingent of doomsayers who forecast an India- China trade bloc that could leave Europe and the US in the dust.

It's not surprising that the India- China Institute would take a different approach. It was launched last year under the wing of The New School, an American university historically known for its concerns with social justice and freedom of speech. Its offbeat style, evidenced by an eclectic mix of lecturers and students, fit right into its surroundings in Greenwich Village, a funky, progressive downtown district of Manhattan. In the 1930s and 40s, the university offered refuge to European scholars in flight from fascism, including German- born philosophers Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss, and French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss.

Now, those European roots are nourishing contemporary curiosity about Asia, along with some pronounced idealism in advancing the credo that China and India have much to learn from each other.

"There are huge shared interests," says Arjun Appadurai, an Indian anthropologist who serves as provost of The New School. "No one gains by having India and China at each other's throats."

More specifically, he says, both nations must find strategies to help the hundreds of millions of citizens who are slated to move from rural areas to cities over the next 50 years. Scarcities of water, energy, and clean air loom large. Another challenge lies in giving poor people a greater voice in planned

development projects that threaten to displace them from their traditional homes and livelihoods.

Next month will mark one of the first steps in the India-China collaboration. The Institute will bring 10 newly chosen Fellows (five from China, five from India) to New York on April 27 to launch joint research projects and take part in an inaugural conference on urbanization. "It's the beginning of a two-year conversation," explains Ashok Gurung, the Nepal-born director of the India-China Institute.

Unlike other fellowships, which tend to pluck the best and the brightest out of their native environments and seclude them in an academic bubble, these participants will keep their day jobs at home while interacting with each other periodically in China, India, New York, and via cyberspace. "We have an old-fashioned premise: personal trust and friendships matter," adds Appadurai

The Chinese fellows include Guo Yukuan, a journalist known for probing sensitive issues such as corruption and minority rights; Beijing University economist Yao Yang, who has studied trends in labor migration; Zhejiang University professor Wu Xiaobo, an expert on Chinese manufacturing and management, Beijing urban planner Wen Zongyong and Hangzhou urban planner Yang Zoujun.

"The question of culture, community, and identity is going to be central to this dialogue. That drives a lot of change. It's not only technology and economics that drives it," argues Aromar Revi, one of the five Fellows from India, who works as a New Delhi-based consultant on issues of infrastructure planning and public policy.

However, economics has played a key role in creating a receptive environment for dialogue between India and China. "It's only within the last three years that the terms of engagement have become possible. Only when India began to have rapid economic growth, Chinese intellectuals began to pay attention," notes Benjamin Lee, dean of the graduate faculty at the New School and another prime mover behind the India-China Institute.

Lee, who was raised in New York, has sharp memories of the days when India failed to register positively on Chinese radar screens. In 1989, when he served as director of the Center for Transcultural Studies in Chicago, Lee invited activists emerging from the tumultuous events at Tiananmen Square to come to America and hold discussions with young activists and scholars from Hong Kong, India and Russia. The Chinese interaction with the Indians "was a real struggle," he recalls. "The Chinese always looked down on India. They didn't see Indian democracy as a model for Chinese democracy in general."

Back then, Lee explains, the Chinese shared a broadly held view that Indian democracy was noisy, messy, marred by ethnic strife and ineffective in boosting the incomes of the masses. Intellectually, too, Chinese activists were more intrigued by the work of Western political theorists and philosophers than by the democratic experiments in South Asia. But Lee, who was first impressed with the verbal dexterity of Indian students when he studied alongside them (including Appadurai) at the University of Chicago in the 1970s, held out hope that a productive Chinese- Indian dialogue could one day take root.

That hope has also been expressed by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen. In his 2005 collection of essays, *The Argumentative Indian*, Sen documents the potent exchanges between China and India in the first millennium. That dialogue extended beyond Buddhism to encompass science, mathematics, literature, linguistics, architecture, medicine and music.

Such contacts "broadened, in a general way, the intellectual horizons of people in the two countries, and even helped to make each of them less insular," Sen writes, calling for an appreciation of "the continuing relevance of these connections, linked as they are with contemporary political and social

concerns."

At the state level, warming bilateral relations between India and China have set the stage for greater interaction in the third millennium. Last year's landmark visit to India by Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao resulted in a flurry of agreements in the economic and cultural spheres.

On the ground, however, many bottlenecks remain. For example, on the sidelines of a Bangalore function on March 5 celebrating "India China Friendship Day," a Chinese diplomat bemoaned India's glacial pace in issuing tourist and business visas. And while more Indians are starting to learn Chinese and attend medical schools in China, bilateral links between universities remain weak and funding is limited.

In this context, leaders of The New School see themselves offering a neutral platform for dialogue. "We are creating an environment where we can have a conversation, without the conversation being seen as 'preaching,'" says Bob Kerrey, president of The New School.

Aware of the sensitivity in India and China over perceived US "bullying" on the global stage, Kerrey stresses that his university is not an agent of American foreign policy. But Kerrey, a former US Senator, does acknowledge that the US has a stake in learning more about the goals set by emerging leaders in China and India. "We are serving our own best interests by assuming that the immense power of the West is not at odds with the growing strengths and aspirations of our Asian neighbors," Kerrey wrote in *World Policy Journal* last year.

It helps to have some money to flesh out these lofty ideas. In this case, the India-China Institute secured a US\$10 million (HK\$78 million) grant from the New York-based Starr Foundation. The foundation's benefactor, CV Starr, was no stranger to China; in 1919, the entrepreneur started his business in Shanghai, which eventually grew into the insurance-financial services powerhouse American International Group (AIG). Florence Davis, president of the Starr Foundation, says that the "India- China relationship is an important one," and expects the Institute to help disseminate knowledge about the relationship as it evolves.

Philanthropic groups "all look for ways in which private dollars can enhance or leverage public dollars," Davis says.

Last June, Kerrey led a New School delegation to China to pitch the idea of the India-China Institute to top officials, including the country's education minister. In October, he will head to India to spread the word. With branches in Mumbai and Beijing, the Institute seeks to broaden its reach with film series and lectures, building a constituency among local universities in both countries.

However, it remains unclear whether the Institute will succeed at fostering closer ties between the large diaspora communities of Indians and Chinese in New York. Each tends to be fiercely nationalistic and have had little contact, so far, says Lee.

It's also uncertain how many take-home lessons lie in store for the Indian and Chinese Fellows after interacting with urban planners and slum dwellers in New York. The idea is that they might glean some insight into solutions for solid waste disposal and low-cost housing, among other urban challenges. But with tighter budgets and vast overcrowding in their metropolises, India and China might have trouble applying those insights at home.

"The engagement with poor people in New York is not going to be very important for us," says Revi of New Delhi. "In the US, most cities are already built up. The challenges, in India and China, lie in moving hundreds of millions of people from rural to urban areas."

Revi visited Shanghai last year for a joint project on urban planning. He is not the only Institute Fellow from India with prior China experience. Also on the list is Hiren Doshi, who is based in Beijing as business development manager for Infosys Technologies.

As one of India's most successful IT firms, Infosys is plunging into China in a big way, having acquired large office space in Shanghai and Hangzhou and drawn up plans to recruit 6,000 Chinese in addition to the 450 employees already on board.

While some industry veterans worry that India could lose its competitive edge over China in IT if it trains too many Chinese software engineers, Doshi says that he does not subscribe to this fear.

"Our China strategy is two-fold. We see China as a next best place for an Indian company to expand its offshore pool to service the global market and we also see China as a market in itself," he says.

"I am one of the staunch believers that there is enormous wealth of knowledge in both India and China, and if shared, can truly benefit each other."

More cooperative overtures are in the air. Among other institutions, Harvard University and Columbia University are discussing ways to stimulate more India-China dialogue. The New York-based Asia Society is also getting on board, moving beyond its longstanding separate programs on India and China to a more integrated approach. On March 19, a corporate conference organized by the Asia Society in Mumbai will feature an address by Bo Xilai, China's Minister of Commerce, on bilateral economic cooperation between China and India.

Will The New School's initiative eventually drown in a sea of similar programs? Kerrey does not seem too worried.

"The more the merrier," he says.