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Book Review

**ASIA AFTER EUROPE: IMAGINING A CONTINENT IN THE LONG
TWENTIETH CENTURY**

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Sugata Bose. *Asia after Europe: Imagining a Continent in the Long Twentieth Century.* Harvard University Press, 2024, pp. 288.

For one to get the gist of Sugata Bose's book, one should go to page one where the second line of the second paragraph features the memorable phrase: 'Asia is one'. Twice again throughout the book the Author's heroes repeat the same phrase on pages 71 and 116, which 'throughlines' the whole book by crafting the eternal leitmotif of the unified Asia. Sugata Bose's book is a carefully crafted and eloquently woven historical account of the hardships endured and opportunities taken and lost by the region of Asia over the 'long twentieth century.' The Author's choice of writing style is a conscious step aside from the typical academic prose with its dry fact-checking-oriented language towards a more reader-friendly literary style.

The book is a history of conversations - both political and cultural - between the representatives of the Asian society, 'some well-known, others rescued from undeserved oblivion'. The cast of Sugata Bose's book, which featured the Japanese art critic Okakura Tenshin, the Bengali poet, artist, and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian political ethicist and an ardent anti-colonialist Mahatma Gandhi, Chinese intellectual and political figures exemplified by Sun Yat-Sen, Chiang Kai-Shek, Mao Zedong, and many others, spent years traversing the 'oriental' lands in search of the 'Asian soul.' The 'Asia after Europe,' however, does not offer a typical 'oriental vs occidental' type of narrative, but an attempt to take a look at Asia from the perspectives of Asians, hence the focus on connections rather than comparisons.

The first chapter unfolds the historical context of Asia's rapid decline following the commencement of the colonial era in the nineteenth century. The author explores how European-led imperialist aspirations not only manipulated both intra- and inter-Asian connectivity but also replaced pre-colonial layered sovereignty and a shared unity with the rigid structures of unitary sovereignty and borders. The psychological and intellectual fallout from this decline sent a series

of shockwaves throughout the whole region as the Opium Wars casted a ‘long shadow on the connected destiny of Asia’.

The second chapter examines the emergence of a multitude of various forms of Asian universalism, especially in the intellectual discourses of the early twentieth century. The chapter features the travels of Japanese art and critic Okakura Tenshin to India where he sought to invite Indian Swami Vivekananda, and later his disciple Sister Nivedita, to visit Japan in an attempt to promote the shared cultural unity. Okakura’s pioneering success was in uniting the different forms of artistic techniques and approaches across Asia, and by that, showing Asia as a united living organism devoid of rigid boundaries established by ‘Eur-American’ colonial propaganda.

The third chapter focuses on the brief interwar years and the role of Asian youth movements in promoting revolutionary change. The Author explores how prominent intellectual figures like Benoy Kumar Sarkar formulated the vision of the concept of ‘young Asia,’ which inspired a whole new generation of Asians to stand up against Western imperial domination. The youth movements in India, China, and Japan exemplified a broader search for a modern ‘free’ Asia that could harness both its cultural heritage and the tools of modernity to challenge the European hegemony over Asia by demanding a ‘justice that is to be interpreted by itself on the achievement of its own heroes’.

Chapter 4 delves into the history of intellectual debates and diverse visions of Asian unity that emerged during the early twentieth century. The Author deliberates on the tenets of the clash between cultural universalism, political activism, and spiritual idealism that shaped the broader discourse on what grounds Asia should oppose Western imperial colonial dominance in the region. The chapter puts a great emphasis on the fluid complexity of the intellectual landscape where several ideologies clashed, exemplified by Mahatma Gandhi who championed non-violent resistance and a more cosmopolitan-oriented spiritual form of solidarity, while Japan advocated for a more aggressive and militarized form of Asian unity. Here, the poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore expressed his disturbance with Japan adopting the way of the ‘Western civilization of the rule of the might’, while ‘retaining characteristics of the Oriental civilization of the rule of the right’.

Chapter 5 explains how the implication of the Great Depression of the 1930s exacerbated the economic conditions of the colonized and semi-colonized nations of Asia and ultimately intensified the political unrest that gave rise to radical political ideologies. In short, the collapse of the international markets resulted in a withdrawal of Western investments from Asia, which severely impacted export-reliant nations, including Japan, China, and India. Eventually, the worsened economic conditions elevated the level of discontent with the colonial rule and sharpened anti-colonial sentiment across the whole region. The majority of political leaders started viewing the capitalist system as inefficient, which catalyzed the rise of communism in China, the spread of fascist ideology in Japan, and the socialist movement in India, which however, led to a heightened sense of intra-Asian solidarity.

Chapter 6 focuses on the World War II and its aftermath. It underscores the dev-

astating impact the War brought to Asia reflected by the large-scale famines and loss of life. The Author goes at length in depicting the Bengal famine of 1943, which vividly exposed the failures of both the colonial system and national government in preventing mass starvation. Sugata Bose also shows how the impact of the War galvanized anti-colonial sentiment across Asia with figures like Mahatma Gandhi doubling their efforts in challenging colonial dominance. Nevertheless, despite the success in opposing colonial rule, the Author also reveals how the conflicting interests of China, India, and Japan fractured the prospects for Pan-Asian solidarity.

Chapter 7 is a pursuit to depict the tensions and contradictions that emerged in post-colonial Asia. The rise of nationalism and the state-building efforts of several new countries challenged the ideas of Pan-Asianism. Although the Bandung Conference was successful in bringing the Asian and African countries together to battle the remaining instances of imperialist rule and promote cooperation in the global south, the nature of the cooperation was not devoid of fragility with the Sino-India border conflict as an example. The rise of authoritarian tendencies and military rule in several countries also hindered the advance of Pan-Asianism and complicated efforts to build common solidarity in the era of Cold War geopolitics.

In the concluding chapter, the Author reflects on the current challenges faced by the Asian countries as the region continues to navigate its post-colonial discourse. Sugata Bose addresses the economic, political, and cultural transformations that took place in the mid-twentieth century and highlights the prospect of future cooperation between Asian countries. The Author believes that Asian countries are still capable of reconnecting and fostering meaningful solidarity between each other by addressing the issues of internal inequalities both economic and cultural and promoting democratic governance.

Overall, Sugata Bose's book might be a 'grail' for both general readers and academics interested in understanding the nature of the intra- and inter-Asian relations during the twentieth century. The book offers a detailed account of the reasons behind the choices made by the prominent figure of the Asian world, and what's the most important – the account taken from the Asian perceptive.