



**Session on**  
**“China and India: New Global Players, New Leadership Models?”**  
**With Dr. Vishakha N. Desai, President, The Asia Society**  
**3:30 pm, Monday, July 27, 2009**  
**WWF Auditorium, 172 B Lodi Estate, New Delhi 110003**

The interactive session with Dr. Vishakha N. Desai, President of Asia Society was moderated by Mr. Ravi Bhoothalingam, Chairman and CEO of Manas Advisory who began by introducing Aii’s focus on leadership development. Mr. Bhoothalingam said that no one was better placed than Dr. Desai to talk about the comparative leadership styles of India and China.

Dr. Desai began by introducing the mandate and mission of Asia Society. She pointed out that the topic under discussion was relevant because of the inevitability of the rise of India and China on the global stage. Already there are signs of geopolitical and geo-economic shifts in the world order, and the leadership models of India and China will inform this shift to a large extent. The fact that the global economic crisis is not being felt as acutely in India or China as it is in the US is further indicative of the coming changes.

Dr. Desai pointed out that Chris Patton’s statement that everyone had become accustomed to the world shaped by the trans-Atlantic community, and whether we will be able to adjust to the shift is an important question today. In 50 years, the world will be a different place from what it is today—what kind of leadership will India and China bring to the table? Dr. Desai said that her effort was also to examine the social, cultural and historical underpinnings of the leadership models. Also given the inter-dependent nature of the world today, the relative advantages and disadvantages of the different leadership styles would also be important factors.

Tracing the traditional sources of leadership models, Dr. Desai pointed out that one of the biggest difference between western countries and India and China us the notion of the ‘self’. In western countries, the Enlightenment and developments in the 19<sup>th</sup> century helped create a sense of self that is individualistic, and a unit in itself. In India and China on the other hand, the sense of self is relational, that is, the self is defined in relationship to others. This notion of self also comes up in early Indian and Chinese texts and mythology. In China, a leader leads by example, embodied in the concept of Wu Wei. This means that a leader does not have to do anything, but simply lead by example. Dr. Desai quoted that a ruler who rules by virtue is comparable to a pole star to which other stars pay homage. The Confucian ruler can hence transform people through his moral command. The ruler’s activities are expressions of his moral value systems. She pointed out that the ruler in both India and China is interestingly enough, always defined as a ‘he’.

In India, leadership is seen as a duty or ‘*dharma*’ or obligation towards the people. This was manifest in the battle between the Kauravas and the Pandavas when Krishna advised Arjuna to fight even his cousins and other family members since it was his dharma to fight.

While in China the leader is apart from the people, in India the leader is part of the people but leading because of duty. In each model though, the leadership is defined on the basis of the leader’s relation to people around him. The Chinese model of a leader who cannot be seen may be seen by some as a more passive, as against the western model which is engaged and interactive. However, it is possible that much strength lies in that passive style of leadership also.

Mao Tse Tung may however be considered an exception to the Confucian model of leadership as he looked to break away from the past. The one thing in China many people talk about is the need to not have a charismatic leader. Hu Jintao tried to bring back the earlier Chinese model of staying grounded with the people, not flying too high, not showing off etc.

Both Mao as well as Gandhi can however be seen to have adapted to the given context and circumstances.

Because of India's colonial past, our tendency is to stand up for ourselves and defend ourselves. China's revolutionary history on the contrary has shaped reactions in a more counter-intuitive way. The reactions are practical, with the idea that what needs to be done must be done.

The corporate leadership styles in both countries also are very different. Studying the speeches delivered by Indian business leaders, it becomes clear that there are traces of nationalism as the leaders often project themselves as speaking for and about the nation, along with a sense of community responsibility (at least in rhetoric). This is not reflected in the leadership styles of American business leaders. For example, Jack Welch talks of the 4 e's: energy, the ability to energize others, the capacity to have an edge and take risks, and the capacity to execute. He also talks about passion, integrity etc., but there is no mention of a sense of responsibility towards the nation or the community.

In China on the other hand, corporate leaders follow the same example of leading by example. While more information will be available about Indian business leaders, relatively little information is generally made available about Chinese business leaders—again perhaps following the model of not being seen.

Thus, even though the leadership models of India and China are different from each other, the models are more so different from western models.

Dr. Desai stressed that both countries need to focus on the youth, although she pointed out that Indian youth have the facilities to move in any different worlds because of the varied skill sets they possess.

It seems likely that the enlightenment project of the western world may get replaced. The question of what will be the new world order, or the new belief system that would replace it becomes particularly important.

Dr. Desai pointed out that as notions of inter-dependency and the drive for sustainability become important, leadership models would require a more relational framework. Thus, there is much in Asian values as embodied in Indian and Chinese leadership styles that will be important in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In the Q&A that followed, many questions were raised about the ways in which the varied leadership style of the US, India and China would play out in tackling common issues of climate change. Dr. Desai responded that if the debate boils down to who has the right and who does not, it is unlikely to proceed very far. In India, there is tremendous innovation in green technology, and perhaps India needs to leapfrog in this realm as it did with the cellphone revolution. Thus, a third way is required for tackling the problem of climate change. There is a need for leadership models to come together, as different skills sets are needed in different circumstances. In this context India has an advantage. In the US however, the self-criticize leadership model that was effective 50 years ago is not nearly so. This debate is however not taking place in the US.

While she admitted that the Chinese model was hierarchical, there is concern how it will play out in relation to the outside world. In a sense, the Chinese model is less about the relationships inside, than those with the outside. As China becomes a powerful entity on the world stage, this question will become increasingly important.

One participant questioned the idea of cultural underpinnings defining leadership styles given the rapid change happening in each country. Dr. Desai however disagreed by saying that if one sees value in culture, even if there is cataclysmic change in a country, people will react in certain ways which in turn will inform leadership.

Responding to a question about the impediments likely to be posed by the varying leadership models, Dr. Desai said that leadership styles 'just are'; they can be advantageous or disadvantageous depending on the application. There is hence need for flexibility in leadership styles.

Answering a question about the Buddhism connection that binds India and China, Dr. Desai highlighted that Buddhism has not had a very great impact on the leadership in China. She quoted Nayan Chanda who has contended that once western powers entered into Asia, the Asian connection between countries was broken. Although the connection has been broken for about 200 years, it can be revived, although it will take much conscious effort and engagement. Dr. Desai pointed out that there is a lack of trust between India and China. Trust comes from different levels of engagement. In the US-India-China triangle, it has been found again and

again that while the US-India and US-China connection is quite strong, the India-China angle needs to be strengthened.

On a question raised about 'Asian values' Dr. Desai said she was a bit wary of the phrase herself since it has been mis-used in countries such as Singapore to justify lack of democracy. There is hence need to exercise caution in advocating an essentialist point of view.

On the question of the different personalities of the three countries, and whether this is likely to lead to conflict, Dr. Desai observed that it remains to be seen which country will be most responsive to the aspirations and sovereignty of its people. Some see the US as an adolescent which can however adapt to changing circumstances, while others perceive the US as not able to adjust to change. In other words, the external perception of a country's action can also become as important as the actions itself.

Dr. Desai said that while India focuses on the leadership styles of a select few such as Gandhi, other modalities too need to be looked at. At the same time, other factors such as the influence of Islamic culture need to be looked at also, for example that secularism as a tenet was brought to the fore by Akbar. These factors however are not mentioned during leadership debates.

Answering a question on what the three countries can learn from each other in terms of leadership styles, Dr. Desai said that even on the global stage, India tends to take moral obligation in an active way on issues. The Chinese on the other hand are generally reluctant to come out more forcefully. Dr. Desai suggested that perhaps Indians need to start listening more and reacting less. American decisiveness and assumption of implementable action are important. She hence stressed that there are different aspects of each country's leadership that are equally important.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century era of multi-culturalism, leadership entails imbibing a diversity of approaches with oneself.

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