

SARC 2020 Conference: New Directions in Economy, Health & Education During the Pandemic



Author Mukesh Williams

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Introduction

The first South Asia Research Center (SARC) International Conference on Japan-South Asia Connections on Economy, Health & Education, organized by Soka University, was held online on Oct. 30-31, 2020. It was an ambitious project involving 50 specialists and covering three diverse disciplines – economics, medicine, and education. It brought together scholars, medical doctors, architects, economists, educational designers, social workers, book publishers, and university teachers from 11 countries – Japan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Malaysia, Turkey, Mongolia, Mexico, Canada, Senegal, and the United States. Deliberations opened up new paths and discovered methods to design a post-Covid world. The conference highlighted the need to “create a single human family”, a “fraternity” of humankind on earth which is our “common home”. It focused on human cooperation and the need to create value in life. Prof. Arvind Lodaya said the conference opened a discussion on “design education” and created “a model for a sustainable community”. The conference reiterated the concept of humanistic education, which Prof. Ryohei Tanaka said created “value” for oneself and society. Dr. Ui Teramoto said the conference brought together not only academics who saw emerging pedagogic problems, but also architects, designers, economists, NGO professionals, doctors, writers and publishers who were applying theory to practice.

Interdisciplinary Approach Adopted

International conferences usually attempt to narrow down their themes to attract highly specialized papers within specific areas to give them greater punch and scientific credibility. But such conferences usually lose out on their connection with society and the

application of their findings to social improvement. Given the nature of the pandemic affecting our institutions, health, and economies, a more interdisciplinary approach was required both in the plenary and group sessions. We asked the presenters to make their abstracts relevant to Covid-19 and its aftermath. The idea of bringing three diverse disciplines together into an intersecting web under the shadow of a raging pandemic was to find a technology of survival for both the individual and society and turn poison into medicine. As Prof. Kaoru Kinoshita of Soka University pointed out, the tripartite themes were “urgent”, “interdisciplinary”, and “global” in nature, as seen in the global representation of scholars at the conference. Prof. Tanaka added that the online character of the meeting allowed people from around the world “to attend freely” and gave Japanese students an opportunity to “exchange opinions” with a global audience. Prof. Emeritus David Traboulay commented that he “enjoyed the wonderful spirit and the themes of the conference”. The thematic journey of the conference led us through many by-lanes and alleys but brought us back to the crossroads of life where we must pool our resources to create a healthy and joyful society.

Poison into Medicine

The pandemic has poisoned institutions, society, and life. It has threatened our very existence on this planet. But we have to change its deleterious effect into a beneficial one. The concept of changing poison into medicine implies that any adversity can be transformed into an advantage if we acquire the perspicacity and develop the right techniques. President of Soka University Prof. Yoshihisa Baba said in his introductory remarks that in the wake of the pandemic, “We will use our Soka philosophy to change poison into medicine”, train students “to become responsible global citizens” and “make Soka University a Global Hub for Humanistic Education”. The conference delved deep into economic, health, and educational issues to discover ways and means to change poison into medicine, and in so doing contributed to strengthening the South Asia-Japan partnership and promoting SARC as a “Global Hub for Humanistic Education” (Photo 1).

Organization of Conference

A conference normally has one plenary session where a distinguished speaker delivers an overarching lecture that includes the concerns of the conference and around which the specialists present their research findings. However, as there were three major concerns at the conference involving different disciplines, it had three



Welcome address by Soka University President Yoshihisa Baba

plenary sessions on each of the aforementioned topics. The shift from production to service, progress to purpose, and technology to trust were the key thrusts at the sessions. The shift reiterated the urgency to find an altruistic goal for both individuals and society.

Indian Ambassador's Keynote Address

The keynote address was delivered by Indian Ambassador to Japan H.E. Sanjay Kumar Verma, who spoke about the long relationship between India and Japan which has become the foundation of the South Asia-Japan partnership (*Photo 2*). He added that the “disruptions in global and regional supply chains” caused by the pandemic had forced us to find ways and means to strengthen South Asia-Japan cooperation. He emphasized that the post-Covid era would be an era of global “innovation” that would require “co-creation, co-innovation and co-production” amongst nations and usher in a “new normal”.

He stated: “South Asia provides Japan not only with a large market, but also with skilled and talented human and material resources. However, India and Japan have together developed a remarkable relationship that is the cornerstone of Japan-South Asia engagement. India and Japan today share a strong bond and linkages that go back to the 8th century AD.” The win-win relationship between the two countries has stood the test of time and can be used to develop strategies of survival both in Asia and the rest of the world.

SARC was set up on July 16, 2019, and since then it has been conducting academic events ranging from symposia to webinars. But an international conference was a first for the center. As an adviser to SARC, I could see that organizing an international conference produced excitement but also tested endurance and grit. But to find “solutions” to the tripartite issues of economy, health, and education required deep insights and analyses. In my introduction to the conference, I explained the issues involved as follows:

“Covid-19 has changed our immediate future. We will not do things the way we were doing since World War I. Travel will become more sophisticated. The automobile industry is shifting to electric and high-tech interiors. The restaurant industry will do more take-outs and delivery – appetizers and desserts need to be repackaged to make a profit. Private healthcare is doing well on the unhappiness of citizens; it will have to come under an expanded welfare state. The B2B pharma business is growing online. Small and medium-sized

businesses are reorganizing but need government support. Stock markets are growing in the midst of the worst recession since WWII. The mortality rate of Asian minorities is greatly affected by the pandemic. Gender inequality threatens the economy. Where are women in the workplace? We are developing a new work practice, lifestyle, and social behavior. The magic vaccine is not going to be so magical. We need to develop a stronger immune system – a return to grandmother’s recipes. Asia must be rebooted and reset from global supply chains to equitable education. To prevent a pandemic resurgence, we must know what a mask can do and the purpose of hygiene and social distancing. Both in India and Japan, we believe in the oneness of life and the environment. The global problems we face today reflect our mind. We need wisdom, courage, and compassion to change the poison of the pandemic into the medicine of growth.”

Economy Section

The parameters set in the ambassador’s primary keynote address were followed in the “Economy Plenary Session”. Prof. Prem Chandavarkar, the speaker for this session, spoke about “Six Memos for a Post-Covid19 World” where he emphasized that we cannot “return to a normal life” after the pandemic is over as “life before the pandemic” was part of the problem (*Photo 3*). Instead, he proposed a six-point program to live a better post-Covid life. First, he talked about the social foundation of life or the “limitation of the market” and leadership of state and citizen engagement. Second, he spoke about the belief in the development paradigm which refuses to recognize those who do not fall into this category. This he called the “politics of recognition”. Third, he introduced the “principle of subsidiarity” where the highest autonomy is granted to local bodies. Fourth, he said that the zoonotic nature of the virus has forced us to see the harmony between “political economy and nature”. Fifth, he pointed out that our Enlightenment model of seeking rational truth must give way to finding a “personal purpose”. And sixth, he said that our “social and political” models must be based on “inner wisdom”. He pointed out that we need to rethink our conceptions of modernity and redesign our institutions to include all these.

In a panel on “New Global Trade and Digital Technology”, the editor-in-chief of *Japan SPOTLIGHT* and executive managing director of the Japan Economic Foundation, Naoyuki Haraoka, spoke about the

Photo 2: Author



Keynote speech by H.E. Sanjay Kumar Verma

Photo 3: Author



Economy Plenary Session by Prof. Prem Chandavarkar

Fourth Industrial Revolution where artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things are “replacing human labor”. He said the spread of globalization will force manufacturing systems to be organized along the lines of an international division of labor, which he called the “global product value chain”. Meanwhile, as digital technology becomes the driving force of the international division of labor, software services are now connecting production sites globally. We can call it a “global service value chain” instead of “global product value chain”. As the US and other nations are unwilling to take a leading role in global governance, Asia is expected to play this role. As the WTO malfunctions, Asian regional FTAs such as the CPTPP or RCEP would play a pivotal role in achieving rules-based trade. New rules on IT and its related services must be addressed as well in this context of trade and FDI, in particular, against the background of growing concerns about national security over IT. Trade and security will be crucial elements of the future trade policy agenda.

Kensuke Yanagida expanded upon the idea of the RCEP and Priyadarshi Dash analyzed financial technologies and e-commerce platforms which are “changing the landscape” of global trade and finance. Juita Mohamad explained how the pandemic has accelerated the use of digital trade in “connecting businesses to consumers, but also serving as a lifeline for Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and informal workers”.

The corporate world rules the world economy and holds great promise in a post-Covid revival. In the economy panel on “Indian Market Importance for Japanese Corporations”, Daigaku Murata predicted that Japanese corporations will continue to find India an attractive market, looking at the success of Suzuki Motor Corporation. Takanobu Ihara elaborated on that thesis. S. K. Karki talked about a promising future for the automobile industry in Nepal. Prof. Iwayuki Suzuki focused on “core personnel development” by Japanese multinational enterprises in Asia to maintain quality and “business ability performance”.

Health Section

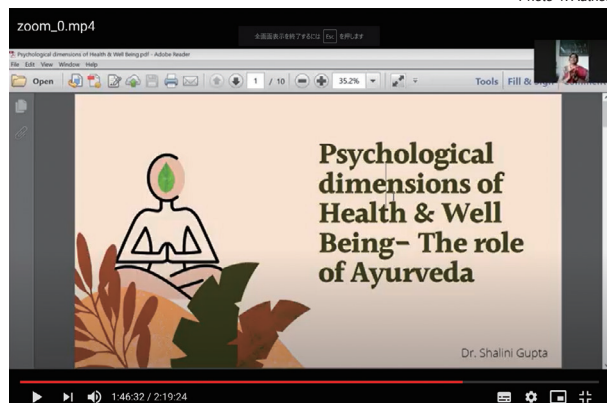
The pandemic has compromised the health of humankind. We are seeking vaccines to recover our health, but health also means developing immunity to diseases. The section on health provided in-depth knowledge about Ayurveda, homeopathy, and yoga, giving

practical information and providing techniques to heal the body and mind. The plenary keynote on health was delivered by Prof. Shalini Gupta, vice chancellor of Desh Bhagat University (*Photo 4*). She explained that Ayurveda is a holistic system of medicine and focuses on “personalized health” and “community” well-being. It aims to restore physical, emotional, and spiritual health creating a good “quality of life”. She pointed out that “physical well-being” implies good nutrition, exercise and a daily routine including proper sleep. Emotional well-being deals with stress management practices as well as emotional regulation training based on the principles of mindfulness. Spiritual well-being is a sense of peace and contentment from an individual relationship with the spiritual aspects of life, such as purpose and connection to something bigger than the individual self. Spiritual well-being is addressed through the practices of breathing, yoga, meditation, resilience and inculcating a perspective that consciousness is the basis of existence within the physical form and mental thoughts.

In the health panel, Prof. S. C. Sharma, formerly of Delhi University’s Department of Chemistry, spoke eloquently on how to cure the body through homeopathy. It was a relevant topic in the wake of the pandemic and was the most-watched presentation on the Internet. He pointed out that the human body is a “complex machinery” comprised of “minerals, vitamins, and nutrients”. But unless fired by a “soul”, it has no use. Each of the body parts has a specific function to perform. “If any component is displaced or missing, the body starts to malfunction and we develop various diseases. So, to rectify or cure the disease, we should try to put the components in place. The body sends signals in the form of symptoms which indicate what is missing. Therefore, homeopathy is a constitutional and symptomatic remedy. A large number of salts, elements, and components are derived from natural sources. The founder Heinemann gave the homeopathic principle in the phrase: like cures like.”

Prof. Sharma explained how the system works. “When medicine is administered, the particles are in the molecular form and thus the medicine has a great adsorption capacity. So, as soon as it is given, it is transported throughout the body and starts the curing process.” Today there are millions of viruses, he pointed out. Homeopathy supplements the effort of the body to cure diseases. We need to strengthen our immune system. He said that “Eupatorium Perfoliatum 200 potency cures viral fever, malaria, dengue, and other fevers without any side effects. Ignatia and Gelsimium can cure anxiety and neurosis. Arnica helps to heal injuries. Kali Phos is a tonic for the heart and the mind. Cocculus 200 and Kalmia 200 can cure cervical migraine. Spigelia and Angunaria can remove kidney stone. If there is kidney stone on the right side, only one dose of Lycopodium 1M can cure the disease. If there is kidney stone on the left side, Berberis vulgaris 30 helps. Asafoetida 30 is for gas while Chelidonium is for jaundice and Lactic Acid for acidity.” He concluded that homeopathic medicines are mostly meant for “day-to-day diseases”. They are cheap, reliable, and easy to use without any inherent side-effects.

Photo 4: Author



Health Plenary Session by Prof. Shalini Gupta of Desh Bhagat University



Education Plenary Session by Prof. Emeritus David Traboulay of the College of Staten Island, the City University of New York

Education Section

The section on education was introduced by Prof. Emeritus Traboulay of the College of Staten Island, the City University of New York, who talked about hope in difficult times (*Photo 5*). He said that cultures and peoples were migrating and mixing, carrying with them different histories, and yet there was violence in the world. He also said that in today's world of pandemic, people needed hope and that people must make efforts to create a future of happiness. "Though we have created a human family, we suffer from a growing loss of the sense of history," he said. He added that our political and economic life did not encourage the advancement of common good and that we must develop a more humane modernity where others could speak and write their own histories as equals.

According to him, the pandemic has opened up "cultural sores" like racism and discrimination in America. Martin Luther King employed non-violent methods to fight for justice in America, while Rabindranath Tagore was critical of the rise of rabid nationalism in Japan. Tagore was more for the "smaller world of communities, schools, villages and associations" than the larger world of "national and international politics". Tagore's emphasis on the small world of civil society was an endorsement of both democracy and universalism. Prof. Traboulay also pointed out that America has a dark mood today as its political institutions have lost their credibility. Today we need dialogue; we need to go beyond ideology. We need "fraternity and justice" for all.

Pursuing Prof. Traboulay's line of thinking, Prof. Anita Patterson explained about the "irreplaceable nourishment" in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson which was also reflected in the works of Daisaku Ikeda, Mahatma Gandhi, and King. She said intercultural dialogue can become a hallmark of character building and "bridging racial and cultural divides". We also realized that the linguistic and transactional processes of dialogue remain unequal more so today in a world of conflict. Emerson's emphasis on self-reliance and individualism could be used with the Buddhist principle of inner human revolution to create a more humane society. Two participants, Namrata Sharma and Wendy Tien, talked about teaching the concept of planetary citizenship connected to a symbiotic relationship between humans and nature through independent and remote learning. The concept of a hybrid classroom and the use of digital learning were explored by many teachers from India and Bangladesh during their presentations.

Exploring the unwritten histories of nations through fiction was also a new theme that was explored by writers like Moupia Bose, the author of the novel *Khoka*. She pointed out that exploring "hand-me-

down family stories and folklore" can "bring alive history" and create a more humane world. Learning need not be part of dominant history. We need creativity and ingenuity to learn from our past. We need to break free from rigid traditional forms of knowledge.

Silky Arora talked about "dynamic, non-rigid, and adaptive learning methodologies instead of fixated curriculums". She campaigned for non-rigid structures of learning where curiosity and dynamism about finding new methods to understand the world acquired importance. She said, "We must correct our first steps in understanding the flow of learning. We must allow our native intelligence to reveal itself and heal our planet. The pursuit of material wealth is not a sign of progress; we need to train our inner life and create value."

Both post-industrial consumerism and media culture reveal the inequality between the haves and the have-nots. Prof. Lodaya talked about industrial design where advanced civilizations were studying about the meaning of material artifacts. However, according to him, poor countries were still catching up with industrial modernity. He said, "It is possible to use design to develop blueprints for human progress and quality of life premised on universal dignity, sustainability, and non-exploitative materiality."

Sanjeev Botha talked about designing schools in India, New Zealand, Switzerland, and the US. Lakshmi Murthy spoke about how to make "reusable cloth masks and scrub caps". Prof. Lodaya held education responsible for the state of our planet. He concluded by saying that it was time for a "social turn in design". Kuntal De talked about how to maintain livelihood and sustenance for local communities during the pandemic. He proposed that communities must be able to produce food at a subsistence level, develop a local system to maintain building infrastructure, and maintain local essential services – primary health care, cleanliness, nutrition, and well-being for the elderly.

Conclusion

The conference generated an awareness of zoonotic diseases like Covid-19 and provided new and old remedies to combat the pandemic. It identified changes in global trade routes, questioned the concept of exclusionary progress, suggested changes in the psychological and intellectual paradigms of education and diet, and offered remedies for the individual and society. Through the conference many participants realized that humankind has reached a critical juncture that is transforming the world order. Many scholars questioned the very idea of Western enlightenment and the responsibility of the individual to find rational truth. They suggested that individuals must be empowered through education to access an inner purpose of life, include the other in creating histories, and give up the idea of rampant economic greed. They talked of smaller regional empowerment: not just national and international development. The conference discussed ways to heal the planet through a holistic worldview.

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Mukesh Williams is a professor at Soka University, visiting faculty at Keio University, consultant/news analyst for the BBC World Service, and St. Stephen's College Alumni representative and Academic Exchange Programs coordinator in Japan.