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THE FUTURE IS NOW

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Address on

Global Power Shift to Asia in the 21st century

by

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(India)

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President and Office bearers of PATA, distinguished delegates to this first PATA Conference in the 21st century a.d., representatives from the trade and travel industry, friends –

1. The main theme of this Conference – The Future is Now – dramatically encapsulates the present human condition. Over the last century, science and technology have so accelerated the speed of time that the future is upon us even before we realise that the past has disappeared. Indeed the old saying that ‘you cannot step into the same river twice’ has now to be changed. In the new millennium we cannot even step into the same river once, because in the very act of stepping in, the river has already changed. The speed with which the information technology revolution is transforming our lives is quite astounding. In this context our thinking also has to undergo a paradigm shift. It is not as if we can give up planning for the future; it simply means that our responses and reflexes have to be much swifter than before, and our approach to the many social and economic problems that we face much more flexible than in the past. As an eminent contemporary philosopher, Pir Vilayat Khan, has said “the future is not just waiting to happen; instead it is taking shape right here and now in the attitudes we hold, the choices we make and the values we cherish. Humanity holds in

its hands an extraordinary precious opportunity to shape the future tomorrows on this planet’.

2. This is indeed an exciting moment to be alive, when human beings have broken the gravity barrier, landed on the moon, are approaching the planets and are reaching out to the stars beyond. What is needed is the wisdom to apply our technological expertise to improve the quality of life, specially in the developing world. This is where Tourism becomes particularly significant. It has now clearly emerged as the world’s largest industry, surpassing even the oil and arms trade. It is an undertaking that is full of promise and positivity in a world still torn by outmoded approaches and obsolete fundamentalisms. It is truly the harbinger of the emerging global society, because it carries tens of millions of people every year across international frontiers so that they can interact with other cultures. The ancient Hindu concept of *Vasudhaiva kutumbakam* – the world is a family – is finally becoming a reality, thanks largely to the phenomenon of global tourism powered by the jet airliner. Having been Minister of Tourism in India for several years way back in the 70’s, I have been personally witness to the extraordinary manner in which tourism has expanded and established itself as one of the major artefacts of modern human civilisation. I would, therefore, at the outset congratulate PATA and its affiliates for all that they are doing to encourage travel, to make it safer and more enjoyable, and to increase the multiplier effect that it has vis-à-vis economic growth, employment generation, human development and cultural cohesion.

3. Turning to the specific theme of this session, *Global Power Shift to Asia in the 21st Century*, I must admit that ever since I accepted the PATA invitation to address this important Conference, I have been wondering what exactly its implications are? Are we assuming that there will be a global shift to Asia in the 21st century, or are we hoping that there will be such a shift? There is a significant difference between the two approaches. Quite frankly, the former appears to me prima facie to be somewhat over optimistic. If we look at the figures of economic growth in the broader context of the Human Development Index, it will be seen that, with a few distinguished exceptions, the countries of Asia still lag far behind Europe and North America. Among several other factors, this is the result of centuries of colonial domination and ruthless exploitation by Western powers. One of the five dreams of the great savant Sri Aurobindo, on the occasion of India's Independence in 1947, was "for the resurgence and liberation of the peoples of Asia and her return to her great role in the progress of human civilisation". It is worth recalling that it was very recently with the handing back of Macao by the Portuguese that, after five centuries, every inch of Asia is ruled by Asian themselves. This magnificent city of Hong Kong has also at last reverted to China where it always belonged, and it is a pleasure to be here for the first time thereafter.
4. Historically Asia, stretching from the Mediterranean to the Pacific, has been the birthplace of most of the world's great cultures and, without exception, of all the world's great religions. The four Indic religions – Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhist and Sikhism, the four West Asian religions – Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and

Islam, and the three East Asian religions – Confucianism, Taoism and Shintoism – were all born in Asia, although subsequently some of them travelled to the West. Not only has Asia been the birthplace of the most sublime philosophies in human civilisation, it has also produced some of the greatest architectural marvels in the world – the Great Wall of China and the Angkor Vat Temples in Cambodia; the Borobudur in Indonesia and the Taj Mahal in India; the great Hindu temples of South Asia and the rock cut caves of Ajanta and Ellora; these and numerous other architectural wonders are part of Asia's gift to the world. Nor should we fall into the common error of thinking that Asia has produced only philosophies and temples. Many of the great inventions of science also came from Asia – paper, ceramics and calligraphy from China, and the zero from India, to give only some examples – without which all the marvels of modern science and technology would not have been possible. While discussing copyright and intellectual property rights with my Western friends, I point out that if they were to give India one cent for every time they use the zero, we would need neither Western trade nor Western aid, and the same is true for China with every sheet of writing paper! Centuries ago Asia achieved high levels of expertise in medicine, astronomy, phonetics, linguistics, metallurgy, architecture and other fields too numerous to catalogue, and though many of these achievements may have been attenuated in the long and tortuous corridors of time, they must be given their due place in the history of the human race.

5. I am recounting this simply to counteract the curious misconception that Asia was always undeveloped. In fact it was our riches, not our poverty, that attracted the

unwelcome attention of Western colonialists. Also, I have always strongly protested against the use of what I consider to be an obnoxious expression, describing us as the “Third World”. The Western powers arrogate to themselves the first category, the Communist countries of the now defunct Soviet Union were placed in the second, and the rest are lumped into a sort of third class category. If we talk of a power shift to Asia in the 21st century, the first thing that will need to be done is to overcome this mindset and to realise that in the modern world, although countries may be on different levels of development, there is no scope for condescension. Also, Eurocentric terminology such as “Middle East” and “Far East” need to be replaced by the more appropriate terms of West Asia and East Asia. This is not merely semantics, but part of a deeper shift in consciousness the necessity for which Asian themselves often fail to recognise. So long and effective have been colonial attitudes that very often we ourselves are unwittingly prisoners of that mindset. I am by no means propagating some kind of reactive Asia chauvinism, as in fact we are now all global citizens, but simply highlighting the fact that a ‘power shift’ will necessarily imply an emancipation from long standing negative thought processes and terminology.

6. How will the global power shift to Asia actually take place? Are we talking in terms of military power? Certainly there are at least three declared nuclear weapon powers in Asia now – China, India and Pakistan. However, the members of the original nuclear club still possess overwhelming superiority in these terrible weapons of destruction, which one can only hope and pray will never again be actually used. Are we talking in terms of economic power? There is no doubt that with our tremendous

manpower resources, high level of technological skills and a dedicated work ethos, Asia can emerge in the next two decades as a major centre of economic power. Our burgeoning middle classes represent not only a massive market for Western controlled multi-nationals but also a steadily increasing source of employment and productive economic growth. Indeed it is poverty eradication that is the main challenge before Asia, and until that is achieved *Global Power Shift to Asia in the 21st century* will simply remain rhetoric. What it can realistically mean is that the era of Western domination is finally coming to an end, and with the rise of major Asian powers including China, Japan and India, we expect a more balanced and multi-polar situation to develop in the 21st century. It would not be acceptable for the old colonial domination to be replaced by Western economic hegemony, what is needed is a more equitable distribution of wealth in which Asia, which represents one half of the present world population, gets a fair deal.

7. To achieve this, the Asian countries will need to get their own act together, strengthen democracy and peoples participation, move towards empowerment of women, overcome deep rooted internal animosities and adopt a much more co-operative attitude inter se within this great continent. Asia includes at least 6 clearly identifiable regions – China, which is a world unto itself; Japan, which has beaten the West at its own game of technological achievement; ASEAN, which covers a number of developing nations; SAARC which is the organisation of South Asian States; Australasia and finally West Asia. Each of these regions have their special problems, but it is my belief that these regional groupings are the key to Asian development.

The European Union is an astounding example of the manner in which centuries old animosities – for example between Germany, France and Britain – have been overcome, thus heralding a new era of peace and rapid economic development in Europe. That is the path that we need to follow if we are really to expect a global power shift to Asia in the 21st century. Unless we are able to eradicate illiteracy, malnutrition and unemployment in Asia, simply talking of a power-shift will sound like a cruel joke to millions in this continent who still live below the poverty line.

8. An area that needs special attention is the Environment which, in Asia as elsewhere, has suffered grievously in the century that has just ended. The degradation caused by thoughtless destruction of our biosphere has reached a deeply disturbing level. Even as I speak, there are vast areas in Asia that have been in the grip of floods, while in others drought and famine – along with the remaining horses of the Apocalypse – are beginning to cast their ominous shadow over the land. In our developmental programmes we have on the one hand to work for lowering the rate of population growth and on the other to further ecological imperatives. Indeed a power shift to Asia will necessarily involve the resolution of the present dichotomy between development and the environment, and the movement towards a paradigm of economic growth that is both socially equitable and environmentally sustainable. This will involve the developed nations putting some limits to their own growth, otherwise the stark capitalists creed, described in a recent ‘Economist Survey of the 20th Century’ as “from each according to their ambitions, to each well beyond their needs” can spell nothing but global disaster. Let Asia never forget Mahatma

Gandhi's wise dictum – “There is enough for everyone's need, but not enough for one person's greed.”

9. This brings me to the whole phenomenon of globalization, which is now an irreversible process. The very nature of the technological revolution, specially in the sphere of Information Technology, assures that. However, while globalization marks an important step forward in human evolution and carries many benefits in terms of market liberalisation, freer movement of goods and services, and a world-wide expansion of knowledge, it also has its darker side. Illegal trafficking in drugs, arms and human beings is becoming global, as are lethal pandemics, terrorism and fundamentalism. We will need all our wisdom to deal creatively with the globalization phenomenon, so that the positive aspects are strengthened and the negative kept under control. This is the real challenge of the 21st century, specially for Asia whose history and culture stretch far back into the remote dawns of human civilisation which, incidentally, is why the much hyped 21st century is really no big deal as far as Asia is concerned!

10. In the emerging global society, while economic growth is certainly a necessity, do we really have to accept the hyper-consumerism and ultra-promiscuity with which our electronic media is constantly bombarding us, along with lethal doses of horror and violence on cinema and television which surely are wrecking havoc with our collective consciousness, specially of younger, more impressionable generations? Do we not need to temper technology with wisdom, corporate profits with compassion

and military might with humanistic values. I would urge the distinguished delegates assembled here to ponder deeply on these matters. What we need is a sane and harmonious global society in the 21st century, not one in which the gap between rich and poor nations and societies continues to widen. Those of us who are more fortunately placed must never forget that one third of the human race – two billion human beings, most of them in Asia and Africa – eke out a precarious existence in the twilight zone between poverty and survival. The real challenge for humanity in the 21st century will be to ensure that abject poverty and deprivation around the globe are banished once and for all. And I repeat that in my view Tourism can play a significant role in this process by providing a pleasant and painless methodology of transferring wealth from the developed to the developing world.

11. Let me end on a philosophical note. There is much talk of power-shifts and development paradigms, but the parameters whereby these are measured are essentially outward, material ones. What about the richness of the inner spirit, the fragrance of the spiritual quest? What about the ideal of enlightenment which has been the basis of most Asian cultures? Yoga and Zen are two of the several methodologies developed in Asia from the dawn of history to help human beings move deeper into their consciousness. The concepts of the Tao and Dharma are basic to Asian cultures. In our obsession, with tourist arrivals and airline fares, hotel accommodation and package tours, gross national products and rates of economic growth, let us never forget that the ultimate purpose of human life lies in the quest for enlightenment and higher consciousness. Life has not a mechanical journey from the

womb to the tomb, but a unique opportunity for spiritual growth and an exciting adventure in consciousness across what the Upanishads call the razor-edged path leading to the Great Being who shines in glory with the light of a thousand suns. This is the deeper message of Asia to world civilisation. Despite all the tumult and turmoil that surround us, it is this deeper dimension that will remain Asia's abiding contribution to human civilisation and to the emerging global society as we hurtle into the future astride the irreversible arrow of time. In the words of the great Sufi mystic Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi:

Wherever I look there are torches and candles,
Wherever I turn there is tumult and shouting,
For the world today is heavy and in travail
Striving to give birth to the eternal world.