

Interview with Prof. Pema Gyalpo, Takushoku University

R

ole of India Enhanced in the 21st Century

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

Tibet-born Pema Gyalpo combines media commentary and writing books with a teaching job at Gifu Women's University as professor emeritus and as visiting professor at Takushoku University. He has been a representative of the Dalai Lama in Japan for 15 years. In an interview with Naoyuki Haraoka, editor-in-chief of *Japan SPOTLIGHT*, he talks about the Global South, India-ASEAN relations, India's future foreign policy, ASEAN, the Ukraine-Russia war, and a free and open Indo-Pacific region.

(Interviewed on Aug. 30, 2024)

Personal Background

JS: First of all, please shed some light on your personal background, especially your academic background.

Pema: I came to Japan in 1965, and I was 13 years old. I went to Japanese Middle School because in India I had already finished my seventh grade. After that, I went to Hanno High School, and then I went to Asia University, where I studied law. After finishing there, I went to night school at Sophia University. Meanwhile, I was asked by the Tibetan government-in-exile to try to set up a liaison office for His Holiness the Dalai Lama. And there I served as a liaison officer for five years. In 1980, I became a representative of the Dalai Lama, and while doing that I continued studying at Sophia University's night school. Subsequently I was accepted as a research student at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, or rather the Research Institute for Asia Africa Language and Culture Studies. So I was a student and representative for 15 years. The Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, and I left service the following year. Since then, I've been teaching at various universities.

I had a full-time job at Gifu Women's University. At the same time, I also did a bit of teaching at Gakushuin Women's College, Asia University and Takushoku University. And at Gifu University where I taught in the English department and then in the International Relations department – mostly international relations. But I wanted to go to a co-educational university. So I went to Toin University in Yokohama because I wanted to do more work and research in my own field in law. Also, I completed my doctorate thesis. Initially, I was supposed to be tutored by a professor at Aoyama Gakuin University who later became a president of Asia University. But somehow I had to



Prof. Pema Gyalpo

do my thesis finally at the National University of Mongolia. And then I joined Toin University and taught law at undergraduate level and international relations at the graduate school.

At that time, the retirement age at universities was 63. So then I moved back to Takushoku University and also continue to serve as a Professor Emeritus & Director of the Center for South Asian Studies of the Gifu Women's University.

Relations with India

JS: That's an impressive background. I want to know a bit about your relations with India, because you were partly brought up in India. You also know China very well. Also, you are interested in international relations. I guess, you started from China in the early days.

Pema: Yes. I went to India at the age of seven and studied there till 1963. I was fortunate that some missionaries helped me to get into that international school called the Mount Hermon School. And from there, I came to Japan and I was then brought up in Japan. I was interested in the affairs of India and China because they were very important for my own life and for Tibet's future. I don't think that I am an expert on Indian affairs. But that's how I got interested in these two countries.

The Global South

JS: What do you think about the Global South? Is it a too general grouping? There are many developing nations that cannot be put into one simple category.

However, India considers itself as a champion of the Global South.

Pema: After World War II in 1945, the United Nations came into being. We all had much hope that the UN would provide us with peace, stability, and prosperity in the world. However, the so-called rich countries slowly began to do things outside of the UN – the G7, for example. They decided many things. And then there was the Cold War in the 1960s and 1970s. So, naturally, countries had to decide whether to be with the US-centered group or the Soviet bloc. And many countries decided not to become part of these two groups. So they thought that maybe they should have their own voices heard, and so the Non-Aligned Movement came into being. Leaders like Nehru, Zhou Enlai, Tito, and leaders of other countries felt that they should have a common voice. Initially, they were referred to as the Third World, not belonging to any of these two blocs.

Based on economic development, the world was divided into the South and the North. The North consisted of prosperous countries, and the South consisted of countries that were left behind. Also, the UN grew from 51 countries, in those days, to about 100. Currently, it is made up of 193 member states. The South worked hard to catch up with the West. They also became more vocal. Their presence is quite visible in today's world. They are now economically strong – especially after 1972, when the US decided to help China in order to isolate or fight with the Soviets. The West started helping China to grow. But as China grew, the United States realized – in 1989 – after the Tiananmen massacre that China was not going to be exactly what it thought it might become. Meanwhile, Japan, South Korea, and even Taiwan started pouring technology and money into China. So, India came to feel that it had to catch up with China. Some countries in Africa and Latin America also developed. As a result, these countries became more aggressive and ambitious. Then, I think, they had to categorize the world again. So instead of calling themselves the Third World, they decided to call themselves the Global South.

JS: India considers itself as a champion of the Global South. Would this mean that the merits of this categorization are beneficial only for India?

Pema: I think for both India and China, they are not only very old countries with old civilizations, but also new countries. India became independent in 1947, and the People's Republic of China came into

being in 1949. The new China, by nature, has been more aggressive. I think it has been trying to become a leader through hard power. India, on the other hand, having a very peaceful constitution and being a republic based on the rule of law, has been rather slow in development in some ways compared to China. But India has always been steady, and though maybe poor for many years, it has always tried to help countries which are even poorer. It has also provided education to many developing countries because education in India is much cheaper and English has been widely used there. So naturally, many leaders of the Global South have a close relationship with India. India also stood up by itself on many international issues. And that's why it is not identified as not second to somebody. So naturally, the less-powerful countries find India a natural leader.

India's Foreign Policy

JS: What do you think would be the most relevant foreign policy for India on recent rising geopolitical risks such as the Ukraine war and US-China confrontation over high technology?

Pema: I think India made a wise decision in the beginning – not to take sides very firmly. India is probably the most suitable country for bringing peace to Ukraine. I read in some newspapers that Ukraine is not against India playing a big role in bringing an end to the ongoing war. However, in Japan, some people feel that India is too close to Russia. I think India and Russia's relationship is quite mature in the sense that it's not that India is kind of a litigant to the Russians. From the beginning, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been telling Russia that it's "not time for war". In addition, after Modi's recent visit to Ukraine, he had a telephone conversation with US President Joe Biden who complimented Modi on his stand. So I think India could play a significant role in bringing peace in Ukraine. As you know, in the past, India played a significant role in the Korean War, acting as the co-chair during the ceasefire.

JS: India's foreign policy has sometimes been referred to as a non-alliance policy. Does that mean that India doesn't want to be involved or engaged in any serious geopolitical issue?

Pema: I think it's quite natural for any country to look after its own

national interests first. And in the case of India, being non-aligned means always having a free hand. And I think that's important because if you become too committed either ideologically or only for geopolitical reasons, sometimes you enslave yourself. Some Japanese say that India is ambiguous. Some people also say that India is indecisive. But I think India is always stable and always looks at the issue, not only at what is happening, but also at the roots of the issue. So not being part of any group doesn't mean that it is not interested in solving international issues. India is basically for democracy, for freedom. It has shown that in the past, and I think that it will show that in the future as well.

ASEAN & India Relations

JS: I see you said India could be a good representative of the Global South. Many countries in the Global South consider India as a good mentor or a good leader for them. In particular, what do you think about ASEAN and India relations?

Pema: The relations are always good. They don't have any conflict. They don't have any history of being occupied or being dictated to. India would never dictate to any country. So that's why many countries trust India. And of course, India wouldn't like any other country to dictate to it. India is very independent-minded, and values the independence and sovereignty it has achieved. And so India also respects the sovereignty and independence of other nations.

JS: In India's future foreign policy, how would ASEAN be considered or treated?

Pema: I think none of the Asian countries, especially those in ASEAN, would voluntarily like to be close to China. But in the last two decades, China's economy has grown a lot. I went to China in 1980. I thought it would take maybe half a century to catch up with Japan. But they did it in only two decades. Also, many countries became dependent on China, especially economically. Meanwhile, the US started seeing that it was no more the policeman of the world. Especially during Barack Obama's time as president, the US concentrated more on Africa and the Middle East. As a result, it created a vacuum for China to come in to the Indo-Pacific. China took that opportunity, and so many countries were compelled to look

towards China. They initially thought that they would be left out if they didn't invest in China, because Japan, the US, Taiwan, and South Korea were investing so much in China. But I think psychologically and mentally, all of these Asian countries in the 1960s, except for Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia, were struggling to maintain their independence from Communism. These countries are more democratic-minded, and their cultures are also quite different from that of China and closer to that of India.

Promoting Consumption

JS: India and ASEAN have something in common as far as economic policy goals are concerned. Many countries in this region are very interested in high economic growth, so they must be interested in promoting consumption, as consumption is a leading factor in economic growth. What are your thoughts on this subject?

Pema: Consumption also means having a market, but to have a market and to be strong in consumption, stability must prevail. India is a stable country. It is, by nature, a peaceful country as well. India has fought five wars since its independence, but none of these wars were started by India. I think, to maintain stability in the region, India and the countries in Asia always needs to be alert from hegemonic and aggressive neighboring countries, and Asian countries also try to solve problems through dialogue, if avoidable, not war and they know it serves them better. Therefore, India is a natural and reliable partner for ASEAN.

JS: Stability can be achieved through economic development, and economic development can be stimulated by trade liberalization. In this regard, perhaps, ASEAN and India can be a locomotive for trade liberalization, and that would be good news for this region.

Pema: Yes, I think it is happening and will continue to happen. You see, at this moment, none of the countries would like to wage a war because that would cause a lot of damage. Diplomacy with patience and creativeness is required, and I think India has always been a champion in this area.

The Ukraine-Russia War

JS: How can India work to help end the Ukraine-Russia war?

Pema: There are many ways to end this war. For example, as Donald Trump says, this war can be ended by not giving help to Ukraine. But that's not good for Ukraine. We need to see that Ukraine doesn't turn out to be a complete loser in the end. India's involvement will ensure that both sides act sensibly. During Modi's recent visit to Russia, he said that he "felt sad to see children being killed". Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that the next meeting could be in India. I think both sides need a comfortable place to talk. So in that way, India can play a major role in ending the war. India might also want the UN to play a key role. If the UN plays a key role, India could be a perfect supplement. At present, we don't see the UN playing a significant role in ending the war.

JS: How do you think India should support the UN?

Pema: I think the UN should come out more aggressively to play a vital role in ending the war. Unfortunately, the UN hasn't had a very strong leader since Boutros Boutros-Ghali in recent years. Of course, the UN is still very much needed in today's world, but it has become almost dysfunctional in peace making. It has been sidelined, especially by strong countries.

JS: I see. So should India provide more human resources, because, as I have noticed, many people in India today are very active in international relations?

Pema: Yes. India has the human resources and so it should provide more of them.

Think Tank

JS: Your Think Tank has just started. What are your plans for it?

Pema: As of now, it is only a chicken, or emerging from the egg. I have talked briefly about the initiatives being taken to keep the Indo-

Pacific region free and open. The first and most important initiative was taken by the late prime minister Shinzo Abe of Japan, which was accepted by the world at large, for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). But unfortunately, the general public seem not to know about the importance of the meeting of the two oceans to keep peace for the world. So basically my aim is to try to make the public more aware of the necessity of keeping the Indo-Pacific region open and free – not just, as I said, for the economy and trade but also for peace. So much trade goes through the Indo-Pacific region. And in this region, you can't have hijackers. You have to have free transit. So this is still important for all the countries involved in trade and economic development. But maybe the bureaucrats know what they are doing in this field, and maybe some politicians know about the importance of it. But the public has not been educated about it. So my humble contribution would be to try to make the public aware of its importance, especially during the next half century.

So we may focus on study, innovation, publishing, and some research. But as of now, I don't have the financial resources. I only have human resources. I already have 25 experts as visiting researchers in different fields, including some former diplomats, former defense officers, and of course scholars. But as of now, I'm thinking of making the think tank stronger either by increasing membership or by seeking help from institutions or foundations and individuals. Right now, I only have the blueprints and human resources for that.

JS: Your human resources are mostly from Japan, aren't they?

Pema: Yes, mostly from Japan. I have human resources from India, Bangladesh, Mongolia and Australia as well. I'm trying to get more people from other countries who can contribute articles and attend seminars. And then, maybe, we can have some real study groups in Japan. And if we have enough funds, we may organize some quality symposiums.

JS

Written with the cooperation of Rajesh Williams who is a professional editor and a writer with a background in instructional design, technical writing, technical editing, and teaching.