



RETHINKING HARMONY IN ASIA



Balancing tradition and modernity:

How Asia is navigating the Challenges in areas like Governance, Geopolitics, and Digital Innovation ?

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Founder of The Asian Network, Ravindra built a community of over 550 members across +25 countries in Asia who share a common vision of creating positive change and advancing the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

For the past 3 years, [The Asian Network](#) hosted and organized high-level hybrid conferences, leadership workshops, and private roundtable discussions on topics such as climate action, gender equality, and peacebuilding.

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THE ASIAN NETWORK

The Asian Network includes +550 members across +25 countries in Asia, and plays as an active and inspirational network of the region's most promising leaders from diverse cultures, countries, and work environments, including government, civil society, academia, and social enterprise representatives.

ERIA

The Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia or ERIA is an international organization established in Jakarta, Indonesia in 2008 by a formal agreement among Leaders of 16 countries in the East Asian region to conduct research activities and make policy recommendations for further economic integration in the East Asia.

ADB SEADS

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) Southeast Asia Development Solutions (SEADS) provides a steady stream of knowledge and insights on new technologies, innovations, and best practices that can help countries in the region address climate change, economic and social disparities, and other pressing development challenges.

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FOREWORD BY RAJMOHAN GANDHI



“I will make three short points before telling you of what Mahatma Gandhi said about Asia nine months before his death in 1948.

My first short point is that a great many people in many lands now see the world as their home. Their home is no longer restricted by national boundaries. The world is becoming one not just because of the internet revolution, WhatsApp, or AI. It is becoming one because of physical migration. There is probably no country in the world where a large number of Indians cannot be found making a living and also making a contribution. Something similar is also true for Cambodians, and for many other communities.

My second short point, confirmed by a lifetime of research into conflicts between communities within a nation, by a lifetime of research into conflicts between nations, and also by a lifetime of travels, is this: About other communities and other nations, most of us have opinions, we don't have knowledge. We don't meet these others, we don't read what they have written, but we have opinions. No knowledge, strong opinions.

My third short point is that just as we cannot obtain a different set of relatives, different from the relatives we have got, we cannot obtain different neighbors. We have to deal with, and live with, the communities and the countries that are right next to us !

Now about my grandfather, Mahatma Gandhi. I am the eldest son of Gandhi's youngest son. He had four sons but no daughters. Of the 15 grandchildren he had, only five now survive, but numerous great-grandchildren and their progeny may be found in India and in other parts of the world.

On January 30, 1948, more than 76 years ago, Gandhi was killed at the age of 78. Why was he killed? He was killed for being friendly to a community different from his own. In April 1947, nine months before he was assassinated -- four months before India's independence from British rule --, a number of Asian leaders gathered in Delhi. At their conference, someone recited a verse about Gandhi.

Translated from its Arabic original, the poem began with the spindle with which, every day, Gandhi used to make cotton thread.

The spindle in Gandhi's hand (said the poem) became sharper than the sword;
The simple white sheet wrapping Gandhi's thin body (the poet continued) was an armour-plate, which imperial guns could not pierce; and Gandhi's goat (the poet concluded) became stronger than the British Lion.

Led by Gandhi, India's nonviolent fight for freedom astonished the world.

“...Conquer, he said “Conquer with Love and truth”

“Do not kill,” Gandhi would insist. And he would add another key instruction: “Do not hate.” That call was almost impossible to implement. Could an Indian fight the British without hating them?

Yet Gandhi warned that if hating the British became normal, Indians wouldn’t stop there. They would quickly hate fellow-Indians. Killing fellow-Indians would be the next step.

Gandhi was very human. He reacted with rage when India’s British rulers were arrogant or harsh. An unjust law or an unfair action often enraged him.

When the rage was alive, Gandhi expressed it frankly to a British Viceroy or a British Governor. But Gandhi did not allow his rage to turn into hatred against any individual.

His rage turned instead into electricity – electric energy for those struggling for freedom and justice.

When Asia’s leaders gathered in Delhi in April 1947, here’s what Gandhi told them:

“All the Asian representatives have come together. Is it in order to wage a war against Europe, against America or against non-Asians? I say most emphatically ‘No’.”

Referring to Zoroaster, the Buddha, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, Gandhi called them “Asia’s wise men”, adding, “I do not know of a single person in the world to match these men of Asia.” Gandhi went on to say,

“I [am] an inheritor of the message of love that these great unconquerable teachers left for us. “I want you to go away with the thought that Asia has to conquer the West through love and truth.

“In this age of democracy [added Gandhi], in this age of awakening of the poorest of the poor, you can redeliver this message with the greatest emphasis.”

Concluded Gandhi:

“You will complete the conquest of the West not through vengeance because you have been exploited, but with real understanding...This conquest will be loved by the West itself.”

Gandhi’s core message is simple, tough, and relevant.

“Hate not,” said Gandhi.

“Fear not,” he added.

“Conquer,” he said. “Conquer with love and truth.”

Isn’t that the road to harmony?”

Remarks by **Prof. Rajmohan Gandhi**, historian, former Member of the Rajya Sabha (upper house of the Indian Parliament), and grandson of Mahatma Gandhi during the high level conference “Rethinking Harmony in Asia “

September 27th, 2024 in Phnom Penh, CAMBODIA

INTRO- DUCTION

Asia, a wide region encompassing multicultural diversity, is an exquisite demonstration of the power of harmony, a notion that is fundamental to its philosophy and culture. For centuries, harmony has been more than just a goal; it has served as a guiding principle that shapes society, ethics, and relationships among communities. This philosophy seeks to promote balance and effectiveness of Asian civilizations to foster social stability amid their abundant cultural complexity. Like the case of the Silk Road, widely known for an ancient trade route, it was not only considered a trading purpose but the diversity of ideas, cultures, and religions that arose from it resulted in hybrid cultures built on the foundations of mutual respect and understanding (STOŠIĆ, 2023). Moreover, many philosophies that originated in the region such as Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, all recognize that harmony is necessary for individual development, community wellness, and the reduction of suffering. Respect and social order are important in Confucianism, inner peace is emphasized in Buddhism and one's Dharma, or moral duty, is promoted in Hinduism (Mustafa, 2022).

Yet today, Asia's age-old legacy of peace and harmony – embedded in its philosophical and cultural traditions – is challenged from many quarters. That despite the internal factor one sees the external characteristics including colonialism, regional conflicts, power competition, and globalization; all have also complicated the area's capacity to maintain its renown for concord to tackle cutting-edge circumstances.

“It has served as a guiding principle that shapes society, ethics, and relationships among communities.”

The situation brings us to the ideas of Kenneth Waltz, a key figure in neorealism, who analyzed the anarchic structure of world politics. Waltz argued that because there is no central authority overseeing global affairs, states must prioritize their own security and act independently (a concept known as self-help) to protect themselves from external threats. In this system, concepts like dependency or trust between states become difficult to establish, as states focus primarily on their own survival rather than cooperative relationships. This dynamic disrupts the potential for collaboration and multilateralism among states. Today, we are witnessing a shift away from multilateralism, with states increasingly acting in their own interests, often at the expense of broader cooperation. According to the 2024 Global Peace Index - Institute for Economics & Peace, the conflicts have surged from 8 in 2008 to 56 in recent years, which means that tensions have become strained among states. More frequently does conflict arise, the global economic impact of violence was \$19.1 trillion while just 0.6% of military spending went to peacemaking and peacebuilding as of 2023. This shows that there is not enough attention to making the world peaceful. Therefore, considering the current circumstances, we need to redefine our understanding of harmony in shifting Asia to be just, resilient, and inclusive alongside mere agreement.

The paper is going to look at harmony anew in light of its etymology and subsequent evolution. The goal will be to see how we can modify our notion of harmony so that we are better equipped to cope with today's problems. The report aims to show, by connecting harmony with different subjects, how old ways of thinking can help in bringing about just and resilient societies.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON HARMONY ?

A Traditional Asian philosophies and religions that emphasize harmony.

B Ideas of harmony have shaped societies and cultures throughout history.

I. Historical Perspectives on Harmony

In Asia, cultural and religious pluralism is a concrete reality, and social interaction among people of different beliefs occurs daily, their cultural and spiritual traditions are deeply connected to the concepts of peace and harmony. One can be seen in the upholding principles of faith that contribute ideals and concepts fostering a cohesive community in the ways to eliminate distinctions and encourage a "dialogue of life" to create a peaceful future. In Kubontubuh's (2024) studies on harmony in Southeast Asia, she pointed out that some groups have a good relationship with nature that back then often depended on traditional wisdom to prepare for natural disasters and mitigate climate change impacts. This idea stresses living in balance with nature, which they call "Peace with nature". This is not just a spiritual ideal but a practical framework for preserving the natural world while fostering human well-being, showing how Asian cultures blend respect for nature with proactive measures to safeguard it. Even so, Faith found in Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, and Hinduism plays a large role in promoting a dialogue of life for people to their well-being (Mustafa 2022).

Similarly, Asian philosophy brings a strong emphasis on leading a morally upright life, finding inner serenity, and preserving balance with the natural world to offer guidance in dealing with the challenges in today's life for genuine fulfillment. The 4 philosophies are outlined to dive deeper into how those concepts influence and foster harmony in Asia.

Hinduism significantly exerted its historical roots within Asian nations owing to its conceptual framework based on the successful integration of cosmic, social, and human levels. At its core, the concept of "RTA" refers to the universal ethical principle that governs the functioning of the universe, ensuring balance and harmony for the benefit of all living beings. In the context of society, *Satya* represents truth, which is nurtured by *dharma*—the moral and ethical framework that provides the structure for a just society. Together, *RTA*, *Satya*, and *dharma* form an interconnected system. This system creates a holistic worldview where *dharma* is understood as justice, righteousness, and order, and these three principles work together to uphold harmony and fairness in both the universe and society (Furtado, 2021). In earlier civilizations, there was a belief that maintaining discipline in following *dharma*—a set of moral and ethical principles—was crucial for ensuring environmental sustainability.

Dharma was seen as a guiding force for harmony in the world, and violating these principles was thought to bring about negative consequences. When *dharma* was disregarded, it was believed to lead to chaos, calamities, and the onset of *Kali Yuga*—a period of moral decline and destruction in Hindu cosmology.

Since rulers derived their legitimacy from *dharma*, this concept pervaded all political and social frameworks in Asia to the moral leadership and governance that looked after the wellbeing of the people (Nemec, 2023). Hinduism, as evidenced in Southeast Asia has inspired cultural exchange and syncretism (Furtado, 2021).

“Asian philosophy brings a strong emphasis on leading a morally upright life, finding inner serenity, and preserving balance with the natural world.”

Taoism offers a different perspective on harmony focusing on the idea of “effortless action,” or *Wu Wei* (无为), which means going with the flow of nature instead of trying to control it. This philosophy suggests that true harmony happens when people find inner balance and build a close connection with the natural world, which is influenced by sustainable practices in Asia, promoting ethical farming and environmental preservation by encouraging people to work with nature rather than against it (Lee et al., 2009). While Taoism’s approach of “letting things be” is valuable for promoting respect for nature, it can sometimes seem too passive (Kirill, 2020).

In today’s world, where environmental issues are urgent, some argue that we need a mix of both passive and active harmony to protect the planet. In this way, Taoism’s idea of harmony through balance and respect can work alongside proactive efforts to address modern environmental challenges.

Confucianism, which describes a hierarchical and relationally oriented organized society, had a significant effect on East Asian culture. Confucianism's core idea of Ren (仁), which means "humaneness" or "kindness," entails the importance of moral behavior and ethical conduct in interpersonal relationships (Song, 2021).

According to Rozi (2020), Confucian encourages a sense of duty and responsibility for the family and community ensuring that there is social stability among them. Confucianism has always had an impact on how society is organized, usually putting the needs of the group ahead of those of the individual. However, some believe that sometimes it creates a hierarchical approach to social divisions especially for women and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Schwarzman Scholars, 2020).

Confucianism encompasses harmony on three levels: personal, social, and natural. On a personal level, individuals are encouraged to find inner balance by cultivating good values and aligning their energies. While social harmony in Confucian philosophy is achieved through respectful customs and traditions for unifying with understanding. Lastly, natural harmony means living in alignment with nature. Yet, until today, the concept is closely linked to the modern idea of sustainable development, which aims to meet human needs while preserving the environment for future generations (Liu & Wu, 2024).

“Confucianism encompasses harmony on three levels: personal, social, and natural. “

Buddhism has deeply influenced Asian cultures, shaping various aspects of life and promoting the pursuit of harmony. One key teaching is to believe that all living beings are interconnected, similar to a large family and that the connection encourages people to care for each other and work collectively to foster strong communities (Bodh, 2013).

Another one is compassion, the approach aimed to inspire people to understand and help those suffering or in need. Additionally, mindfulness—being aware of our thoughts and actions—helps to interact with tolerance and understanding, making it easier to resolve conflicts peacefully (Buswell & Lopez, 2013). Despite this Buddhism also teaches about the respect for diversity among different cultures to ensure the peaceful coexistence among diversity.

What's more, the knowledge of balancing to pursue material success and focusing on personal growth is essential, similar to balancing on a seesaw; too much weight on one side can tip things over. Apart from this is the principles of non-violence and open dialogue throughout the time, this guide has inspired many societies to resolve conflicts through non-violent rather than aggression which is similar to having a friendly discussion instead of an argument. Furthermore, Buddhism promotes respect for nature giving practical ideas that help to protect the environment for future generations. This notion reminds us that caring for the planet is like nurturing a garden (Silverman, 2021).





HARMONY IN GLOBAL CONTEXT

- A** How Asian countries contribute to global efforts towards peace, sustainability, and cooperation.
- B** Challenges and opportunities for promoting harmony in an interconnected world.

II. Harmony in Global Context

Asia is the largest continent among all the continents in the world, covering approximately 30 percent of the Earth's land area. Therefore, it is also the world's most populous continent, with roughly 60 percent of the global population. It encompasses a vast array of societies that have been shaped by its unique geography, history, and belief systems. The continent is home to a wide range of religions, each playing a vital role in the cultural diversity and identity of the region. Asia's economy has achieved significant growth over decades; some Asian countries are developed, and some are now moving forward with significant growth in the age of globalization. As a hub of both ancient civilizations and rapidly growing economies, Asia is a vibrant blend of tradition and modernity, offering a fascinating landscape of human diversity and cultural exchange.

Asian countries play a significant role in global efforts toward peace, sustainability, and cooperation through diplomacy, multilateral initiatives, and regional partnerships. For instance, Japan has been a key advocate for disarmament and non-proliferation, supporting United Nations peacekeeping missions and conflict resolution. China, as a major global power, engages in multilateral organizations like the UN and the G20, contributing to climate action through investments in renewable energy and green technologies. South Korea emphasizes international development aid and humanitarian efforts, especially in post-conflict regions, while also promoting green growth initiatives.

Southeast Asian nations, through ASEAN, foster regional stability by promoting dialogue and cooperation on political, economic, and security issues. However, ongoing challenges such as territorial disputes in the South China Sea, tensions over Myanmar's political crisis, and rising nationalism in member states complicate efforts to achieve lasting peace. The South China Sea remains a critical issue, with competing claims by China and several ASEAN members, creating friction that threatens regional stability and global trade routes.

“Asia is a vibrant blend of tradition and modernity, offering a fascinating landscape of human diversity and cultural exchange.”



ASEAN has attempted to manage these tensions by emphasizing its core principles of non-interference, consensus, and peaceful dispute resolution. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN-China dialogue have been key platforms for addressing security concerns, but progress has been slow due to diverging national interests. The ASEAN Charter, particularly Article 1, underscores the fundamental goal of ASEAN to “promote regional peace, security, and stability” through mutual respect, cooperation, and adherence to international law. Despite challenges, ASEAN continues to play a pivotal role in encouraging peaceful solutions to regional conflicts, though its effectiveness is often limited by the need for consensus among diverse member states.

This regional bloc serves as a bridge between Asian countries and global powers, advocating for peaceful resolutions in territorial disputes and fostering economic integration. For example, Cambodia was plunged into conflict after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979, which was overthrown by Vietnam, sparking a prolonged civil war that lasted for a decade. During this tumultuous period, ASEAN played a crucial role in mediating the conflict and facilitating a peaceful resolution, despite the complex Cold War dynamics involving major external powers such as the Soviet Union, the United States, and China.

OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES TO HARMONY IN MODERN ASIA

- A** Rapid modernization, globalization, and technological advancements.
- B** Social, economic, and political factors that disrupt harmony in contemporary Asian societies.

III. Opportunities & Challenges to Harmony in Modern Asia

Promoting harmony in an interconnected world presents both challenges and opportunities. On one hand, globalization and digital connectivity offer unprecedented opportunities for cross-cultural understanding, economic cooperation, and collaborative problem solving. Platforms for dialogue, trade partnerships, and international organizations enable countries and communities to work together on global issues such as climate change, poverty reduction, and conflict resolution. Social media and technological advances make it easier to spread messages of tolerance and shared values across borders.

Asia's economic growth is driven by industrialization, technological advancements, globalization, and infrastructure investment. Export-driven economies, foreign direct investment (FDI), and a growing skilled workforce have also played key roles in the region's development.

However, the same interconnectedness can exacerbate challenges. Cultural differences, political ideologies, and economic disparities can lead to misunderstandings, mistrust, and conflict. The rapid spread of misinformation and extremist ideologies online can fuel division and polarization, undermining efforts to build harmony. Nationalism and protectionism may arise in response to the perceived loss of sovereignty or economic disadvantages brought by globalization. Additionally, the digital divide means that not all communities benefit equally from these opportunities, leaving some marginalized.

In the 21st century, Asia faces several new challenges that threaten regional peace and stability, including war crimes, climate change, and rising geopolitical tensions. These issues result in instability, mass migration, inequality, and environmental vulnerabilities, all of which challenge the historical Asian focus on stability. Economic interdependence, which once served as a pillar of regional harmony, now poses new risks. While Asia has grown significantly through industrialization and global integration, it has also become more vulnerable. The region's interconnectedness has made it susceptible to trade disputes and global market instability, such as during the U.S.-China trade war or the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Asia faces several new challenges that threaten regional peace and stability, including war crimes, climate change, and rising geopolitical tensions.”

Economic changes have also shaped the region's evolving understanding of harmony. As Asian countries have developed economically, largely through Western-inspired modernization, the concept of harmony has expanded to include not just social well-being but also economic growth and sustainability. Economic development has brought prosperity but has also raised questions about social responsibility, equity, and environmental sustainability.

The rapid economic development in Asia is evident in its growing GDP, which increased from \$157.15 billion in 1960 to \$30.78 trillion in 2023 (World Bank Open Data). Intra-Asian trade accounted for 58.2% of regional commerce in 2021 (Asian Economic Integration Report 2023), with China being a major trading partner. This integration fosters common interests but also increases the risk of internal inequalities and external shocks, which destabilize regional peace.

For instance, China's Gini coefficient—a measure of income inequality—stood at a high level of 46.5 in 2023 (Statista, 2024), illustrating that not all sectors of society have equally benefited from economic expansion.

The geopolitical conflict is another critical factor influencing regional harmony. The rise of nationalism and military spending, driven by historical territorial disputes and the influence of external powers, has added a layer of complexity to the security landscape. China's military budget reached \$296 billion in 2023, a 6% increase from 2022 (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2024). Territorial disputes, such as those in the South China Sea, exacerbate regional tensions.

A recent study by the ASEAN Studies Centre found that 73.5% of respondents were uneasy about China's growing regional power and 67.4% worried about its destabilizing activities (Seah et al., 2024). The ASEAN stability framework, which promotes peaceful discourse through consensus and non-interference, is increasingly questioned for its effectiveness in addressing high-stakes geopolitical conflicts. Nationalism, fuelled by political elites to consolidate power, often results in exclusionary policies that marginalize ethnic and religious minorities, further deepening tensions in countries like China and India.

In North Korea, nationalism is used to justify the regime's military build-up and provocations, framing external powers as threats and exacerbating tensions on the Korean Peninsula. In Japan, rising nationalism has pushed for a more assertive military posture, straining relations with China and South Korea over territorial disputes. In all cases, nationalism fuels exclusionary policies, internal divisions, and regional instability, making diplomatic cooperation and regional harmony more challenging. It prioritizes national identity and security, often at the expense of broader peace efforts.

“Asia’s concept of harmony is being reshaped by a complex array of internal and external forces. “

Environmental challenges, particularly climate change, add another dimension to these regional tensions. Asia accounts for 52.2% of global carbon emissions in 2023 (Statista, 2024) and is home to countries like Bangladesh, the Philippines, and Vietnam, which are especially vulnerable to its effects. These environmental challenges undermine Asia's ability to maintain harmony, as they overlap with social and economic stability concerns. The digital divide is another area where inequality persists. While countries like Japan have nearly universal internet access, nations like Myanmar lag behind, with a 44.02% internet penetration rate in 2024 (Internet Penetration by Country 2024). This digital divide hampers inclusive growth and undermines one of the fundamental principles of harmony—the equitable sharing of prosperity in a digital economy.

In conclusion, Asia's concept of harmony is being reshaped by a complex array of internal and external forces. While economic growth and cultural exchange have led to new interpretations of harmony, regional challenges like inequality, geopolitical conflicts, and environmental crises continue to threaten stability. As Asia continues to evolve, the pursuit of harmony will require a nuanced understanding that balances tradition with modernity, community values with individual rights, and economic growth with sustainability.



HARMONY IN GOVERNANCE

- A** Policies and initiatives aimed at fostering social cohesion and inclusivity.
- B** The role of governments and institutions in promoting harmony within societies.

IV. Harmony in Governance

The role of governments in promoting harmony is often complex and can be contradictory, especially under authoritarian regimes. These governments may claim to promote harmony by emphasizing national unity and stability, yet in practice, they often achieve this at the cost of suppressing true social dialogue, dissent, and diversity of thought. Rather than addressing the root causes of social grievances, authoritarian regimes may impose a superficial sense of harmony through strict control over political expression, limiting freedoms, and silencing opposition. This approach stifles meaningful discussion and the healthy exchange of ideas that are essential for resolving societal issues. While authoritarian leaders may present themselves as champions of peace and unity, their methods often deepen underlying divisions by excluding dissenting voices and marginalizing minority viewpoints, ultimately hindering the development of a truly harmonious society.

In contrast, democratic institutions often promote a more sustainable form of harmony by encouraging inclusive governance, participation, and the peaceful resolution of conflicts through legal and political means.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of governments and institutions in promoting harmony depends on their ability to balance the needs and rights of diverse groups while addressing the root causes of social tension, such as poverty, discrimination, and inequality. Successful promotion of harmony involves creating spaces for dialogue, ensuring justice, and promoting policies that allow for peaceful coexistence and the flourishing of all societal members.

Policies and initiatives aimed at fostering social cohesion and inclusivity focus on creating equitable, just, and supportive environments where all individuals, regardless of background, can participate fully in society. These efforts often involve addressing systemic inequalities and promoting diversity through various means. One common policy that has been practiced in many countries is the implementation of anti-discrimination laws, which protect individuals from prejudice based on race, gender, religion, or socioeconomic status, ensuring equal access to employment, education, and public services. One best example is Japan in providing The Equal Opportunity Act which contains a general prohibition on employers directly discriminating against workers on the basis of gender in relation to the allocation of duties, training, benefits, occupational functioning and status, and dismissal (L&E Global).

Governments also launch initiatives that promote intercultural dialogue, such as community-building programs, multicultural education, and public campaigns that highlight the value of diversity and encourage tolerance.

Social housing projects, universal healthcare, and access to affordable education are key to reducing inequality and promoting cohesion across different social groups. For instance, Vietnam's Đổi Mới (Renovation Policy) included significant land reforms aimed at promoting small-scale farming and reducing rural poverty. These reforms facilitated land redistribution, giving farmers more control over their land and encouraging agricultural productivity. In addition to the focus on land, the government expanded access to education and healthcare in rural areas, further improving the quality of life for many citizens and contributing to the overall development of the countryside.

This comprehensive approach helped foster economic growth and social progress in rural Vietnam (Ayushi, 2024).

Another best practice, which is the New Economic Policy (NEP) in Malaysia, implemented in 1971, aimed to address the socioeconomic imbalances between the Bumiputera (indigenous Malays) and non-Bumiputera communities, particularly the Chinese and Indian populations. This policy was introduced following the racial riots of 1969, which underscored the urgent need for equitable wealth distribution and national unity. The NEP focused on two key objectives:

1. **Eradicating Poverty:** The policy sought to improve the living standards of all Malaysians, with a particular emphasis on rural Bumiputera populations. Programs included rural development, agricultural modernization, and access to education.
2. **Economic Restructuring:** Aimed at reducing the economic dominance of the Chinese community and increasing Bumiputera equity in the corporate sector to at least 30%. Affirmative action initiatives provided preferential access for Bumiputera to education, government jobs, business opportunities, and ownership in public companies (History Manic, 2024).

“Creating spaces for dialogue, ensuring justice, and promoting policies that allow for peaceful coexistence.”

While Malaysia’s New Economic Policy (NEP) has been a significant attempt to address socioeconomic disparities and foster national unity, the broader global landscape of similar initiatives reveals mixed results or setbacks in their efforts to promote harmony. In India, efforts to promote social cohesion have faced both successes and significant setbacks, particularly concerning caste-based discrimination. India’s affirmative action policies, including reservations for Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC), aim to improve the socio-economic status of historically marginalized communities. While these policies have opened doors for educational and employment opportunities, they have also led to new tensions and criticisms. Critics argue that affirmative action, while well-intentioned, has sometimes led to the entrenchment of caste-based identities rather than their transcendence. Furthermore, reservations have led to fierce political battles over the allocation of resources and opportunities, with some groups demanding increased quotas while others decry the policy as divisive. The challenge for India lies in ensuring that affirmative action policies do not perpetuate a cycle of identity politics but instead create an environment where all citizens can achieve equality and social mobility.

“Harmony requires a delicate balance between protecting human rights, addressing underlying social tensions, and encouraging participation.”

The role of governments and institutions in fostering social harmony is crucial in shaping inclusive, equitable, and peaceful societies. By implementing policies that address systemic inequalities, promote education, and ensure equal access to resources, governments can create environments where diverse groups coexist and thrive. However, achieving lasting harmony requires a delicate balance between protecting human rights, addressing underlying social tensions, and encouraging participation. Whether through land reforms, anti-discrimination laws, or social welfare programs, these efforts contribute to reducing poverty, promoting social justice, and building cohesive communities.



COMMUNITY BUILDING AND HARMONY

- A** Examples of community-led initiatives that promote harmony and social cohesion.
- B** Significance of grassroots movements in fostering a culture of harmony.

V. Community Building and Harmony

Community-led initiatives, ranging from neighbourhood training programs to community gardens and cultural events, are powerful tools for fostering social connections, strengthening bonds, and promoting collective goals. These initiatives provide opportunities for individuals to engage with one another, build a sense of belonging, and work together to improve their communities. By encouraging active participation, they create shared responsibility for the well-being of the community and the environment. For example, community gardens bring people from diverse backgrounds together, offering spaces for the exchange of knowledge, skills, and cultural practices. These gardens also support environmental sustainability by promoting awareness of ecological issues and encouraging eco-friendly practices.

A strong example of how community-led initiatives align with broader policy frameworks can be seen in Nepal's community forestry program. This initiative empowers local communities to manage forest resources through sustainable practices, ensuring both conservation and improved livelihoods. Communities participate in reforestation efforts, sustainable harvesting, and biodiversity protection. By aligning with Nepal's national environmental policies and international sustainable development goals (SDGs), this program supports the dual objectives of environmental preservation and community development, providing a model for balancing ecological health and economic growth.

Cultural events and festivals are also crucial community-driven initiatives that support social cohesion. These events allow individuals to share their heritage, engage with others, and bridge cultural divides. Such initiatives are often supported by national policies that encourage cultural preservation and intercultural dialogue. For instance, many governments fund local cultural programs and festivals to strengthen social bonds and promote inclusivity. When integrated into national cultural frameworks, these initiatives can further contribute to the development of harmonious, multicultural societies.

However, true social equality and harmony cannot be achieved without ensuring the active involvement of marginalized groups. Excluding these groups contradicts the very essence of social harmony. While providing access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities is essential, the active participation of marginalized individuals in community life is equally important. Efforts should be made to engage these populations directly in community development and decision-making processes. Policies aimed at empowering marginalized groups through training, mentorship, and leadership opportunities are critical to promoting inclusivity. This approach creates a society where everyone has an equal opportunity to contribute and thrive, ultimately enhancing social trust and solidarity.

“Harmony cannot be achieved without ensuring the active involvement of marginalized groups.”

Community-based organizations and social enterprises also play a key role in empowering marginalized communities. By offering targeted programs that provide skills development, mentorship, and support, these organizations enable individuals to build sustainable livelihoods and fully participate in society. In many instances, local governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) collaborate to implement grassroots initiatives, such as neighbourhood revitalization, youth empowerment programs, and platforms for minority voices in policymaking. These efforts not only foster inclusivity but also build social capital, which is crucial for maintaining trust and cooperation across diverse populations.

Indonesia provides another valuable example of the impact of community-driven initiatives. The country's diverse mix of ethnic and religious groups has led to the development of community-based education programs that focus on conflict resolution and intercultural communication. Local NGOs and youth organizations run workshops that teach conflict management skills, encouraging young people to become peace advocates in their communities. These programs align with Indonesia's national policies on peacebuilding, tolerance, and social cohesion, contributing to the reduction of conflict and the promotion of mutual understanding.

Community-led initiatives are essential in building stronger, more inclusive societies. When supported by effective policies, they foster trust, cooperation, and a sense of belonging, ultimately promoting a harmonious and just society where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.



GENDER IN HARMONY

- A** The role of gender dynamics in shaping perceptions and practices of harmony in Asia.
- B** Address issues related to gender equality and empowerment in the context of harmony.

VI. Gender and Harmony

Gender roles are shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts, dictating what is considered appropriate behaviour and responsibility for individuals based on their gender. These roles are not static and have evolved over time, particularly as societies have become more inclusive and began to recognize a broader spectrum of gender experiences. Promoting gender harmony means ensuring that every individual, regardless of gender, has equal access to opportunities, resources, and the right to fully participate in social, economic, and political spheres.

This traditional view of gender roles within the framework of harmony often casts women as subservient to men, and their voices are frequently silenced in decision-making processes. Men, on the other hand, are expected to be the protectors and providers, which perpetuates a gendered hierarchy where the roles of women are limited in scope and power. However, this dynamic has been challenged by powerful female figures in both religious and cultural traditions. Female deities, saints, and leaders in Asia have redefined the traditional understanding of harmony and gender roles, suggesting that the path to true harmony requires a more complex and inclusive view of gender relations. Notable examples include Mother Teresa in India, who dedicated her life to helping the poor and sick, emphasizing selflessness and compassion; Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar, who became an icon of peaceful resistance and democracy, advocating for human rights in the face of oppressive military rule; and Maria Ressa in the Philippines, who has fearlessly fought for press freedom, despite facing legal challenges and threats to her life.

These women have played significant roles in challenging gender norms and advocating for equality, showing that the path to true harmony involves empowering all voices, regardless of gender.

“Promoting gender harmony means ensuring that every individual, regardless of gender, has equal access to opportunities, resources, and the right to fully participate in social, economic, and political spheres.”

In the modern era, gender dynamics are undergoing significant transformation across many Asian societies. Women's movements, as well as greater participation of women in political, economic, and social spheres, are reshaping traditional views on harmony. In many countries, there is a growing recognition that gender equality is essential for creating harmonious societies. In Philippines, the Gender and Development (GAD) budget policy was established in 1995 through the General Appropriations Act (GAA) as "The Women's Budget" to provide actual funding for the implementation of gender-focused programs and projects aimed at promoting women's empowerment and advocacy. This policy mandates that all government departments and agencies allocate at least five percent (5%) of their total annual budgets to gender-related programs, projects, and activities. In China, China's National People's Congress Standing Committee approved a revision of the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests, which came into effect on January 1, 2023. The revised law expanded from 61 articles in nine chapters to 86 articles in ten chapters. Its goal is to promote gender equality across various aspects, such as women's political, personality, cultural, educational, employment, property, and family rights. Additionally, it introduces measures to support women whose rights have been violated.

Women's empowerment and their increased visibility in leadership positions challenge long-standing norms that have perpetuated gender-based inequality. The push for gender equality, therefore, is reshaping the notion of harmony to include more inclusive practices and perspectives.



The concept of gender harmony also intersects with broader discussions on equality and the protection of individual rights. In societies where traditional values prioritize conformity and collective harmony, individual rights may be overlooked or even suppressed. One area where this is particularly evident is in the digital divide. The government of Cambodia, for example, has made significant investments in education, yet challenges remain in ensuring that women, particularly those in rural areas, have equal access to digital tools and technologies.

The Minister of Communications and Digital Economy of Cambodia emphasized the need for governments, communities, and the private sector to work together in addressing gender inequality, especially in areas such as decision-making positions. Gender inequality in leadership roles affects policy efficiency, content development, and economic competitiveness, and thus, it is essential to ensure that women be equally represented at all levels of decision-making.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has also taken steps to foster gender equality across Asia. Through programs such as the Asia Women Leaders Program, the ADB has trained over 200 women leaders from 27 countries. These initiatives aim to strengthen women's leadership and influence across the region. The ADB has also collaborated with the Cambodian Ministry of Women's Empowerment to provide support in addressing gender-based violence. Such collaborations between governments, international organizations, and the private sector are crucial for advancing gender equality and creating environments where women can thrive.

“Gender equality is not only a matter of fairness but also a cornerstone for building truly harmonious communities.”

As societies across Asia continue to evolve, achieving gender harmony remains both a critical challenge and a significant opportunity. Gender equality is not only a matter of fairness but also a cornerstone for building truly harmonious communities. By breaking down traditional gender hierarchies and recognizing the diverse roles and contributions of all individuals, societies can foster more inclusive, equitable, and peaceful environments. In doing so, they create spaces where everyone, regardless of gender, can thrive and fulfil their full potential.



“Empowering women and girls is equally vital, gender equality thrive development and strengthen social cohesion and when women and girls are empowered they become agents for change”

Gabriela Ramos, UNESCO

Assistant Director-General for the Social and Human Sciences of UNESCO

EDUCATION AND HARMONY

- A** The importance of education in cultivating values of harmony from a young age.
- B** Approaches to integrating harmony education into formal and informal learning environments.

VII. Education and Harmony

Education plays a central role in shaping individuals' perceptions and actions, making it a key tool for fostering harmony in societies. In Asia, where cultural diversity, historical legacies, and socio-political complexities often intersect, education holds the potential to bridge divides, promote understanding, and contribute to peaceful coexistence.

This article explores how both formal and informal educational systems across Asia are working toward promoting social harmony, addressing challenges, and creating pathways for peaceful, inclusive societies.

In Asia, formal education is seen as a cornerstone for shaping future generations' values and perspectives on social harmony. The Asian Development Bank (2023) emphasizes that education systems across the region have significant potential to influence attitudes toward diversity, tolerance, and cooperation.

Countries like Japan, South Korea, and Singapore are implementing innovative educational practices aimed at promoting mutual respect, conflict resolution, and intercultural understanding.

In countries such as Japan, early childhood education has been recognized as a key platform for instilling values of empathy, respect, and cooperation. Japan's educational philosophy emphasizes the importance of group activities and cooperative learning, which foster a sense of belonging and mutual respect among young children. Programs like "Moral Education" in Japanese primary schools promote understanding of the importance of cooperation and interpersonal relationships, aiming to prevent bullying and foster a harmonious classroom environment (Japan Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2023). Similarly, South Korea has made significant strides in incorporating values of social harmony into early education. The Korean Foundation for the Advancement of Science & Creativity (2023) highlights how South Korean schools encourage critical thinking and cooperative projects that require students to navigate and resolve conflicts through dialogue. This approach not only helps young learners develop social skills but also teaches them to appreciate diverse perspectives, essential for fostering societal harmony. As students' progress through primary and secondary education, more structured lessons on diversity, human rights, and conflict resolution are integrated into the curriculum.

“Education holds the potential to bridge divides, promote understanding, and contribute to peaceful coexistence.”

In Singapore, a highly diverse society with multiple ethnic and religious groups, the government has developed a curriculum that emphasizes multicultural education, peacebuilding, and national cohesion. The National Education Policy (2023) in Singapore includes initiatives such as the "Values in Action" program, which encourages students to engage in community service projects that promote social inclusion and mutual respect. This program focuses on students' active participation in addressing social issues like racial prejudice and inequality, which are fundamental to maintaining social harmony in a pluralistic society. Moreover, the Philippines has been actively integrating peace education into its school system, particularly in the conflict-prone regions of Mindanao. Peace Education Programs (2022), supported by organizations such as UNESCO, work to promote nonviolent communication, conflict resolution, and understanding of cultural diversity. These programs aim to historical grievances and build a future generation that values dialogue over conflict.

In universities across Asia, higher education institutions have increasingly become arenas for promoting harmony through global citizenship education. China, for instance, has expanded programs that focus on developing a global perspective, with an emphasis on understanding international issues such as climate change, migration, and human rights. The China Education Association for International Exchange (2023) has facilitated partnerships with universities around the world to promote intercultural exchange and understanding. Through study-abroad programs, international conferences, and cross-cultural collaborations, students in China are encouraged to engage with peers from diverse backgrounds, thus cultivating a more globally aware and tolerant future generation.

Similarly, India has seen a rise in universities and research institutions integrating peace and conflict studies into their curricula. The Tata Institute of Social Sciences (2023) offers specialized courses in peacebuilding, focusing on conflict resolution, the promotion of social justice, and understanding the dynamics of multicultural societies. Through these programs, students are equipped with the tools to address issues like communalism, caste-based discrimination, and regional conflicts, all of which are pressing challenges for social harmony in the country.

The role of informal education in fostering harmony is particularly significant in Southeast Asia, where the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has supported several educational and cultural initiatives aimed at promoting regional stability and mutual understanding. ASEAN's Intercultural Dialogue Program (2023) brings together youth from different member countries to discuss issues of social justice, human rights, and cultural exchange. These programs encourage participants to appreciate diversity while recognizing shared goals, such as peace and regional cooperation.

Myanmar's Peacebuilding Initiatives (2022) in post-conflict regions exemplify how informal education initiatives can promote reconciliation. These community-based initiatives focus on intercultural dialogue, restorative justice, and the building of social trust between ethnic communities. Through collaborative workshops and conflict resolution programs, these initiatives play an integral role in bridging ethnic and religious divides that have historically led to social unrest.

Informal education also thrives in settings where people engage in cultural and religious exchanges. Programs such as the Asian Youth Network for Peace and Development (2022) encourage young people across Asia to participate in interfaith dialogue, where they can discuss the role of religion in promoting peace and resolving conflicts.

“In both formal and informal settings, educators play a critical role in promoting harmony.”

These programs help dismantle stereotypes and foster a sense of shared humanity, which is fundamental for peaceful coexistence. In both formal and informal settings, educators play a critical role in promoting harmony. In Japan, for example, teachers are trained in the principles of social-emotional learning and conflict resolution, ensuring that they can guide students in developing healthy, respectful relationships (Japan Ministry of Education, 2023). In India, educators are increasingly trained in culturally responsive teaching to ensure they understand and respect the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students, promoting inclusion and tolerance in the classroom (Indian National Council of Educational Research and Training, 2023).

Moreover, educators in Singapore and South Korea are at the forefront of fostering citizenship education, which includes teaching young people about their rights and responsibilities as global citizens. These educators focus not only on academic excellence but also on shaping students who are ethical, empathetic, and ready to contribute to peaceful societies.



HARMONIZING TRADITION AND MODERNITY

- A** Strategies for reconciling traditional values of harmony with the demands of modern life.
- B** Examples of successful integration of traditional and modern practices in Asian countries.

VIII. Harmonizing Tradition and Modernity

Harmonizing tradition and modernity in Asia, is a theoretical and practical problem that produces such essential questions as identity, cultural preservation, and the side effects of globalization. While one could say that this sounds fine to merge these two into one, reality is full of conflicts and discrepancies that really pinpoint how complex modernization is in an area with strong historical customs. So, the integration of ancient values with contemporary political, economic, and social structures is very much about negotiation, contestation, and change rather than simple coexistence. In the context of traditional Asian values, "harmony" refers to a state of balance, unity, and peaceful coexistence, both within society and between individuals and their environment.

Asia's journey from its colonial past to the modern day has been marked by profound external influences, which have shaped the concept of harmony in the region. This idea of harmony, however, is complex and continuously evolving, as it is shaped by values and perspectives that are constantly shifting (H. Lee & Cho, 2012).

A significant influence on the evolution of harmony in Asia is the influx of Western ideas. One of the most notable changes has been the rise of individualism. Western thought emphasizes personal freedom and self-expression, often in contrast to the traditional Asian focus on collective well-being. This shift has created tension between maintaining social harmony and recognizing individual rights. Scholars suggest that this evolution requires new interpretations of harmony, ones that balance community values with individual needs, and influence how harmony is understood in political contexts (Khong, 1997). In this new context, harmony must consider the voices and rights of various groups within society.

“In the context of traditional Asian values, “harmony” refers to a state of balance, unity, and peaceful coexistence, both within society and between individuals and their environment.”

The individualistic and liberalizing impacts of modernity on social interactions often clash with any traditional values: those touching family structures, collective identities, or the respect for power. For example, the Confucian principles of filial piety in South Korea and the emphasis on “WA”, or harmony, in Japan, while contributing to social cohesion, according to Song (2020), can also suppress individual freedoms and reinforce hierarchical systems that are increasingly in conflict with contemporary notions of equality and social mobility.

Accordingly, balancing tradition with modernity may involve more than just keeping ancient traditions alive; it may also entail the selective reinterpreting of them in ways that frequently weaken or change their original meanings.

The goal of maintaining tradition can occasionally even stand in the way of societal advancement, especially when it is employed to defend injustice, oppression, or the exclusion of underprivileged people. Economically speaking, the swift industrialization that marked a large portion of Asia's ascent in the 20th and 21st centuries has resulted in several advantages, such as higher living standards and more global interconnectedness (Seong et al., 2023).



However, these developments have also contributed, in particular in rural areas where modernization has often resulted in the marginalization of indigenous systems of knowledge and labor, as well as in local economic systems. While countries such as Vietnam and Thailand have managed to combine new technologies with traditional farming practices, the long-term sustainability of such projects remains uncertain. The drive for modernization often favors short-term gains over long-term ecological sustainability and exacerbates social injustices and degrades the environment (See et al., 2023). Thus, balancing tradition with modernity in the economic sphere involves more than just integrating technology; it also includes resolving the ingrained inequality these changes often cause.

Perhaps the most overtly divisive aspect of modernization in Asia from a political perspective is the tension between systems of governance and the imperatives of democratic change. The conflict between tradition and modernity frequently takes the form of a political fight for legitimacy, authority, and national identity in nations with long-standing authoritarian governments, like Myanmar. In these situations, political leaders have curtailed democratic freedoms and human rights by using traditional cultural and religious values as justifications for authoritarian governments (International Crisis Group, 2017). A political system that is both resistant to reform and unable to fully embrace democratic values is frequently the outcome of combining tradition with contemporary political systems, as is the case with Thailand's constitutional monarchy (Singeng, 2021). This makes the reconciliation of tradition and modernity even more difficult because it exposes the shortcomings of political institutions firmly rooted in historical and cultural norms opposing the changes brought about by globalization.

“This cultural hybridization reflects a more dynamic and diverse understanding of harmony, as it incorporates a variety of values and experiences.”

The integration of ancient arts with modern media has presented possibilities and problems from a cultural standpoint, as evidenced by the global success of K-pop or Hip-hop. These cultural exports provide a forum for the worldwide expression of traditional values, but they also frequently commodify and simplify intricate cultural stories for general public consumption (The Korean in Me, 2024). Consequently, traditional cultural expressions become subject to a paradoxical process of preservation and change, often devoid of their authentic social contexts. While their popularity may widen awareness of Asian traditions worldwide, these artistic forms risk distorting the very traditions they set out to preserve. Noorawhita in her study (2021), further indicated the spread of Western culture leading to the erosion of indigenous traditions and values; this causes a loss in cultural distinctiveness and identity.

The exchange of cultures between the East and West has also resulted in new forms of artistic expression and social practices, blending the traditional with the modern. This cultural hybridization reflects a more dynamic and diverse understanding of harmony, as it incorporates a variety of values and experiences.





CON- CLUSION

By understanding, valuing, and embracing the cultural diversity in the region, we can dispel stereotypes and minimize misunderstandings, paving the way for mutual respect and cooperation, and ultimately fostering a more harmonious relationship. However, in the context of globalization, where people-to-people relations are moving closer through multilateralism and digitalization, and where people and ideas are increasingly able to move freely across borders, cultural sensitivity becomes essential in promoting inclusivity and equitable opportunities for all.

"Harmony in Asia" is one of several themes that acknowledges the interdependence and connectivity of the dynamic, complex socio-cultural and economic landscapes, including issues like inequity, unfair treatment, and unfavourable opportunities. Consequently, focusing on the key concepts of "justice," "fairness," "equality," and "inclusion" is crucial to define, highlight, and address, especially with regard to urgent issues and significant solutions that have practical implications in all aspects of society.

To promote harmony, there is a need for inclusive policies that respect cultural diversity, address economic inequalities, and foster genuine dialogue. Global education, responsible media, and equitable development can help transform the challenges of interconnectedness into opportunities for lasting peace and cooperation.

Throughout the diverse discussions in this paper on the concept of harmony in Asian cultures, we have examined its historical roots, modern challenges, and potential for the future. By analyzing the interplay between tradition and modernity, we gain crucial insights into how Asian societies can navigate the complexities of the 21st century while preserving their unique cultural identities.

"Harmony in Asia" is one of several themes that acknowledges the interdependence and connectivity of the dynamic, complex socio-cultural and economic landscapes."

“If we want to build a world of Peace and Harmony , we need to listen to our heart which is the truly authentic part of our soul and have this idea of mercy , compassion and kindness from inside of us and overcome the greed”

Sister Denise Coghlan

Peace Nobel Prize Winner

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 1 Harmony is a dynamic concept that has evolved over time, adapting to changing social, economic, and political contexts.
- 2 Modernization and globalization have presented new challenges to traditional notions of harmony in Asia, requiring innovative approaches to reconcile tradition and modernity.
- 3 Cultural diversity is a source of strength and resilience, and respecting and valuing differences is essential for achieving harmony in Asia and the world.
- 4 Gender equality and empowerment are crucial for creating harmonious societies where all individuals can thrive.
- 5 Governments, institutions, and communities all have a role to play in promoting harmony through policies, initiatives, and grassroots movements.
- 6 Education is essential for cultivating values of harmony from a young age and empowering future generations to become agents of peace and understanding.

APPENDIX

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Appendix A : Summary of the Conference: "Rethinking Harmony in Asia 2024"

The "Rethinking Harmony in Asia 2024 Leadership Conference," held on September 27, 2024, in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, was a significant event organized by the Asian Network in collaboration with major institutions like the Asian Development Bank SEADS and the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia. The hybrid conference drew over 350 online participants and 120 in person attendees from more than 22 countries, featuring 36 distinguished speakers from across the region, including Japan, Malaysia, India, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Nepal, and Australia. Among them Professor Rajmohan Gandhi, Historian and Grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, Minister Sandiaga S. Uno, Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy of the Republic of Indonesia, Mrs. Gabriela Ramos, Assistant Director-General for the Social and Human Sciences of UNESCO, H.E Dr. Kao Kim Hourn, Secretary General of ASEAN, Professor Akiko Yamanaka, Former Japanese Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Honorable Ek Nath Dhakal, Chair for International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace Asia Pacific from Nepal and Sister Denise Coghlan, Nobel Peace Prize Winner from Australia. This conference aimed to address the pressing challenges facing Asia, such as food security, digital inclusivity, geopolitical tensions, and the path towards a just and inclusive society.

One of the primary issues discussed at the conference was food security, a topic that has become increasingly urgent due to the growing impacts of climate change and environmental degradation. Participants agreed that food security is not merely about ensuring the availability of food but is also deeply linked to sustainable agricultural practices and technological advancements. The conference highlighted the critical role of technological transformation in addressing these challenges, with strategies like crop adaptation and the adoption of agricultural technologies at the forefront of the discussion. China and Bangladesh were cited as examples of successful implementation of such strategies, highlighting how innovation can drive sustainable food production. The participants underscored that tackling food security requires a multifaceted approach, combining effective government policies, collaboration between stakeholders, and local agricultural innovations. Understanding the complex relationship between food security and climate change was emphasized as essential to shaping impactful policies. A consensus emerged on the importance of incorporating scientific research, local knowledge, and community involvement to promote resilient and sustainable agricultural systems.

The conference also explored the geopolitical landscape in Asia, which is currently marked by fragmentation and shifting power dynamics. The participants stressed the importance of diplomacy, particularly preventive diplomacy and constructive dialogue, as essential tools for addressing both traditional and non-traditional security threats. Rebuilding trust, especially in North-South relations and among developing countries, was seen as crucial for fostering regional cooperation and understanding. The conference participants emphasized the need for partnerships that include not only major powers but also a wide range of stakeholders. The idea of establishing a code of conduct that prioritizes non-violence and creating safe spaces for dialogue was highlighted as a necessary step towards ensuring regional stability. Additionally, the evolving nature of power structures and dynamics in Asia was recognized as a critical factor that requires adaptable leadership and strategic foresight to maintain stability and peace.

Digital inclusivity was another important theme addressed at the conference, particularly in relation to marginalized communities. Participants discussed various strategies to improve access to digital technologies, such as promoting English language education in rural areas, as proficiency in English is considered essential for leveraging new technologies like generative AI. The need for high quality, locally relevant online content and addressing the issue of hardware accessibility, particularly in regions reliant on mobile devices, were also emphasized. The incorporation of AI into public policy was suggested as a means of improving public services, including healthcare and education. However, participants stressed the need for governments to invest in AI infrastructure while working with technology companies to ensure that AI tools are accessible to all segments of society. Balancing the opportunities offered by AI with concerns around privacy and equitable access was seen as a key challenge.

major focus of the conference was on justice, equality, and inclusion, which were recognized as essential for creating a harmonious and sustainable future in Asia. The discussions revolved around the need to address inequalities, unjust opportunities, and unfair treatment across various sectors. Financial inclusion, minority rights, and gender equality were identified as areas where significant gaps remain, and participants called for more concerted efforts to address these disparities. The importance of collective action, involving public-private partnerships, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international organizations (IOs), and other relevant actors, was underscored as crucial to advancing justice and equality. In a panel discussion specifically focused on Cambodia, the participants examined the country's historical struggles and its current geopolitical challenges. Trust building was identified as a central theme, with the recognition that overcoming historical mistrust is essential for fostering lasting peace. The role of social justice and inclusive development was also emphasized as foundational to sustaining peace in Cambodia.

The conference highlighted the potential of ASEAN as a platform to help Cambodia navigate its relationships with larger powers like China and the United States, while promoting regional cooperation and stability. The discussion reinforced the importance of adopting inclusive and holistic approaches to peace, ensuring that the diverse realities of people across the region are considered. Ending the conference with a keynote presentation by Steve Killelea, founder of the Institute of Economics and Peace who discussed the organization's research on the intersection of business, peace, and economics, and the increasing number of conflicts worldwide. The presentation also covered the concept of positive peace, the importance of peace in the 21st century, and the challenges of achieving peace in various conflict zones.

In conclusion, the "Rethinking Harmony in Asia 2024 Leadership Conference" provided a critical platform for dialogue on some of the most pressing issues facing Asia today. Through its discussions on food security, geopolitical tensions, digital inclusivity, social justice and peacebuilding, the conference highlighted the interconnected nature of these challenges and the need for collaborative, inclusive solutions. The insights and recommendations shared during the event will serve as a roadmap for fostering greater harmony, stability, and sustainability across the region, with a focus on building a more just and inclusive society.

Featured in: ASEAN SECRETARIAT WEBSITE: [Secretary-General of ASEAN delivers opening remarks at the Asian Network Signature Conference: "Rethinking Harmony in Asia"](#)

[ERIA Calls for Recognition of 'Asian Democracy' and Preventive Diplomacy to Promote Harmony and Peace](#)

ADB SEADS: [Expert talk solution](#)

CHINA DAILY: [ASEAN urged to protect economic gains](#)

KIRIPOST: [Rethinking-harmony-in-asia-tackles-food-security-geopolitics-and-digital-inclusivity](#)

KHMER TIMES: [Regional issues likely to take a backseat at ASEAN Summit in Laos](#)

YOUTUBE CHANNEL: [Rethinking harmony in Asia Leadership Conference 2024 Full HD Video](#)

Appendix B : Speakers List

- **Professor Rajmohan Gandhi**, Historian and Grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, India
- **Minister Sandiaga S. Uno**, Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy of the Republic of Indonesia
- **H.E Dr. Kao Kim Hourn**, Secretary-General of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations ,ASEAN
- **Hon.Yadamini Gunawardena**, Former Member of Parliament, Sri Lanka
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- **Gabriela Ramos**, Assistant Director-General for the Social and Human Sciences of UNESCO
- **Mr.Yukihisa Fujita**, Former Japanese Vice-Minister of Finance
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- **Ravindra Ngo**, The Asian Network Founder, Singapore
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- **Father will Conquer**, Spiritual Leader
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QUESTIONS?
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