

The Asian Social Issues Program (ASIP) Initiative at the Asia Society

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About the Initiative

American public perceptions of Asia over the past two decades have been largely shaped by two phenomena affecting the region—economic expansion and economic crisis. These developments have obscured a number of global challenges of increasing significance, such as those concerning poverty, civil and ethnic conflict, religious extremism, environmental degradation, and violation of human rights, among many others. The Asia Society recognizes that these issues are fundamental to human security; the strategies used to address them will play a vital role in international relations in the twenty-first century.

The Asian Social Issues Program (ASIP) initiative focuses on the following kinds of issues: communities and conflict resolution, transitional justice in post-conflict societies, women's issues, environmental governance, HIV/AIDS and public health, human and sex trafficking, migrations across and within national boundaries, globalization and its impact, and human rights. Looking beneath the more visible economic and political events, the ASIP initiative examines the underlying causes and consequences of these core human security issues. The program aims to deepen American awareness and educate multiple constituencies about these issues, and draw attention to the innovative work and solutions implemented from the grassroots to government levels, as well as the necessary global partnership and leadership to meet these challenges.

Over the last six years, ASIP has organized a series of creative multidisciplinary public education programs – lectures, symposia, panel discussions, films, photo displays. The initiative has brought together human rights activists, representatives from US and international NGOs, leading policymakers, members of the UN, business leaders, experts and scholars, members of the media, and the Asian-American community. The Asia Society's aim is to convey how Asia's efforts to solve its social problems offer Americans new perspectives on pressing social issues in the United States.

To complement public programs at Asia Society, the initiative has dedicated a social issues component to the institution's website Asia Source (www.asiasource.org/asip/). The resource has been developed to serve as a gateway for information on Asian social challenges and their solutions, and to facilitate the formation of new networks with Asia and the U.S. Features include reports from the field; commissioned articles from experts and academics; a database of NGOs, activists and scholars; transcripts of on-going events; and daily updated news, among others.

Along with Asia Society staff, the ASIP initiative is guided by a Program Advisory Committee that includes specialists on Asia and representatives of ASIP's target audiences: Asia Society members and non-member audiences; U.S. media; NGOs and community-based organizations in Asia and the United States; business; Asian and non-Asian minority communities in the United States.

The Asian Social Issues Program is made possible by a significant grant from the Ford Foundation to the Asia Society that forms the basis of a \$6 million endowment, enabling the Asia Society to address Asian social issues in a sustained and systematic fashion in perpetuity. According to the terms of the 2-for-1 matching grant, the Asia Society received \$2 million from the Ford Foundation while raising an additional \$4 million to form the total program endowment. The resulting income helps to support the annual activities of the Asian Social Issues Program. The Asia Society has recently completed the terms of the match.

Other support for the ASIP initiative has come from Citigroup, the Nicholas Platt Endowment for Public Policy, the Open Society Institute, United States Institute of Peace,

Sasakawa Foundation, Himalaya Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, and private individuals.

About the Asia Society

The Asia Society is an international organization dedicated to strengthening relationships and deepening understanding among the peoples of Asia and the United States. Founded in 1956 by John D. Rockefeller 3rd, the Society reaches audiences around the world through its headquarters in New York and regional centers in Houston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington, DC, Hong Kong, Manila, Melbourne, Mumbai and Shanghai.

A nonprofit, nonpartisan educational organization, the Society provides a forum for building awareness of the more than thirty countries broadly defined as the Asia-Pacific region - the area from Japan to Iran, and from Central Asia to New Zealand and the Pacific Islands.

Through art exhibitions and performances, films, lectures, seminars and conferences, publications and assistance to the media, and materials and programs for students and teachers, the Asia Society presents the uniqueness and diversity of Asia.

Asia Society's Mumbai Centre

The Asia Society officially launched its India Centre at the 16 th Asian Corporate Conference, held in Mumbai in March, 2006. The India Centre serves as a multi-dimensional resource, a forum for intra-Asian connections and exchange, and a high-profile platform for U.S.-South Asia dialogue. The Centre provides year-round programming in the areas of business, policy, social issues, arts and culture.

Shyama Venkateswar is the Director of the Asian Social Issues Program at the Asia Society, and has played an instrumental role in the launch and growth of one of the most high profile, multidisciplinary areas of programming at the Society. In her current capacity, she conceptualizes and coordinates the Society's public programs related to social issues and human rights in Asia. She has organized conferences and led policy briefings on a human

rights security regime in Northeast Asia, reconstruction in Afghanistan, decentralization in Indonesia, peace building in Sri Lanka, the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, the Muslim independence movement in southern Philippines, among others.

She has helped to establish an annual signature event at the Asia Society on micro finance as a poverty alleviation tool in Asia. Now in its 7th year, this highly acclaimed series which is co-organized with the Women's World Banking, explores public-private partnerships to combat poverty and has drawn attention from the corporate community in New York, media, NGO groups, scholars and policy analysts. She has also helped launch a new initiative on HIV/AIDS in Asia, which has included high-level dialogues in Asia and in the U.S. Other well-received public educational programs include an annual film series on Human Rights in South Asia, a series on trafficking in Asia, as well as a series on Transitional Justice in cooperation with the International Center for Transitional Justice. She commissions papers, serves as an editor, and oversees publications.

Under her leadership, the Asia Society has secured major endowment and program funding from Citigroup, the Gates Foundation, Open Society Institute, United States Institute of Peace, Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Himalaya Foundation, among others.

She has delivered numerous talks and moderated panel discussions on South Asian politics, human rights, peace and conflict at political science meetings, the Women's Foreign Policy Group, the Population Council, NYC public school teachers' professional development workshops and to NYC high school students.

Her recent publications include a co-authored op-ed on humanitarian issues entitled, "The Other North Korean Crisis," which appeared in *The San Francisco Chronicle* (reprint in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*) and one on Nepal's transition to democracy entitled, "Lest We Forget Nepal," which appeared in the *Asia Times* (reprint in *The Indian Express*). Dr. Venkateswar is also an Associate Editor for *India Review*, a refereed journal dedicated to contemporary political, social and economic developments in India. She acts as a consultant for a major New Delhi based policy think-tank, the Observer Research Foundation, which is seeking to set up an entity in the United States. For the last three years, she has been an external reviewer for Transparency International's South Asia reports. She is currently on the

Advisory Committee of Breakthrough, an organization that uses popular culture to raise awareness about human rights. She has previously served on the Allocations Committee for New York Women's Foundation, a cross-cultural alliance of women helping low-income women and girls in the five boroughs of New York City to achieve sustained economic security through expanded opportunities. She has also served on a grants review committee for the United States Institute of Peace.

Prior to this, Dr. Venkateswar was a Program Officer at the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs. She has been an Adjunct Professor at Brooklyn College.

Her media appearances include NDTV Profit, Reuters Television, ITV; she has also been interviewed by Voice of America, Indian Express (International), ABC News.com, among others.

Dr. Venkateswar was awarded the Harry Frank Guggenheim Fellowship for her research and dissertation work on religious nationalism in India. She received her Ph.D. in Political Science at Columbia University. She is a graduate of Smith College.

For further information about the initiative, contact Dr. Shyama Venkateswar, Director of the Asian Social Issues Program at 212-288-6400 or by email: shyamav@asiasoc.org, or visit us at www.asiasource.org/asip.