

Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Multiculturality and
the Paradox of
Multiculturalism in
21st Century Japan*

REPORT

Speaker:

**Dharitri Narzary
Chakravartty**

25 March 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker: Dr. Dharitri Narzary Chakravartty, Associate Professor and Director, Centre for Research Methods, Dr B.R. Ambedkar University, New Delhi.

Chair: Prof. Srabani Roy Choudhury, Professor, Japanese Studies, Centre for East Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

Venue: Zoom Webinar

- The seminar examined the historical foundations and contemporary manifestations of multiculturalism and multiculturalism in Japan. Dr. Chakravartty situated the discussion within the broader context of Japan's demographic transition, characterised by a declining birth rate and ageing population, which has necessitated increased engagement with the question of immigration. Approaching the subject as a historian, she argued that the contemporary challenges faced by Japanese society and the state are inherently rooted in historical policy decisions, particularly those of the Meiji era (1868-1912).
- Dr. Chakravartty identified the year 1869 as a critical turning point in the making of a homogeneous society in Japan, when the Meiji government implemented an assimilation policy targeting the indigenous Ainu people of Hokkaido. This policy, which she characterised as the 'Japanisation' of the Ainu, mandated Japanese-style education, the compulsory adoption of the Japanese language, the imposition of Japanese agricultural methods at the expense of traditional hunting and foraging practices, and the encouragement of intermarriage to eliminate a distinct Ainu identity. The official Ainu count today stands at fewer than 20,000, which Dr. Chakravartty cited as indicative of the policy's long-term consequences.
- The assimilation policy gave rise to a cultural discourse that projected the Yamato Japanese as a superior race and foregrounded the concept of the single ethnic nation-state as an antithesis to multiculturalism. Scholars such as Oguma Eiji, Harumi Befu, and Michael Weiner have critiqued this monocultural narrative, and have highlighted

Japan's inherent multiculturalism, pointing to the historical presence of the Ainu, the Ryukyuan or Okinawans, the Zainichi Koreans, and the Burakumin. Dr. Chakravartty noted, however, that the distinction between a multicultural Japan and a Japan that practises multiculturalism remains a subject of ongoing scholarly debate.

- Dr. Chakravartty traced Japan's three phases of internationalisation, from Meiji-era Westernisation inspired by Fukuzawa Yukichi's *Datsu-A Ron* or 'Leave Asia' discourse, through post-war reconstruction under American occupation focused on demilitarisation and democratisation, to a third phase of global cultural outreach, marked by the establishment of the Japan Foundation in 1972. She noted that rapid economic growth from the 1970s to the early 1990s attracted increasing numbers of foreign workers, predominantly from developing Asian countries. Since the 1990s, writings on multicultural Japan have become increasingly visible in academic scholarship.
- Turning to contemporary policy, Dr. Chakravartty analysed Japan's January 2026 'Comprehensive Measures for Accepting Foreign Nationals and Orderly Coexistence', which replaces the 2018 Specified Skills Programme. She argued that while this framework aims to integrate foreign nationals through Japanese-language training and educational and vocational support for their children, it does not advance multiculturalism in any substantive sense.
- The Japanese concept of *kyosei*, or harmonious co-existence, the speaker observed, focuses on teaching foreigners to conform to Japanese norms rather than fostering mutual recognition. This tendency towards conformity and uniformity leads to the insularisation of non-Japanese cultures, making cultural boundaries more, rather than less, distinct. She illustrated this point by noting Japan's recent outreach to migrants from Northeast India, premised on perceived ethnic and cultural similarity, as evidence of the continuing selectivity of Japan's approach.
- In her closing remarks, the Chair, Prof. Roy Choudhury observed that the seminar had illuminated multiple dimensions of a subject that is simultaneously societal, policy-related, and shaped by bilateral agreements. She suggested expanding the scope of the

research to include bilateral relations and their role in shaping immigration policies. She noted that the speaker had precisely identified the tensions at the heart of Japan's approach to multiculturalism.

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