



# INSTITUTE OF CHINESE STUDIES

## ‘The Boao Forum: A Revisit and A Rethink’

**Chair:** Amb. Ashok K. Kantha

**Speaker:** Prof. Sreemati Chakrabarti

**Date:** 8 May 2019

**Venue:** Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi

The Boao Forum for Asia (BFA) was held from March 26-29, 2019 with the motto "Shared Future, Concerned Action, Common Development."

The chair gave a historical background about the BOAO forum. BOAO forum was set up in 2001, and the first forum was held in 2002. From that time, BOAO forum is held annually in Hainan. Over the last 18 years, this forum has established an image not only in Asia but all over the world. It has become an influential platform where leaders, business people, and scholars from different areas of interest and business come together and deliberate on issues which are not only significant to Asia – China but also the global space. He began the discussion by posing a question to the speaker; whether BOAO has become a forum for Asia, or is it still China-centric?

The speaker started her presentation by telling about the origin of the BOAO forum. She informed that in 1998 three retired leaders who were former politicians, Fidel V. Ramos, former President of the Philippines, Bob Hawke, former Prime Minister of Australia, and Morihiro Hosokawa, former Prime Minister of Japan, met in Hainan. They decided that it was essential to have some initiative so that discussion on Asian socio-economic issues can happen where all Asian countries would participate. Since these people were in China, the speaker argued that there might be some Chinese hand also involved in the origin of the forum which wasn't mentioned in literature. It was February 2001 when the forum was officially set up.

The funding for the forum came from 26 Asian and Australasian countries, and the first meeting was organized on 12th and 13th April 2002. During that time it used to be a two-day forum, but now it has become a four-day forum. Speaker emphasized that this increase signifies that there has been increased participation. BFA also conducts "Theme-based" forums in different countries. Some of the instances are

the "Global health forum" held in Tokyo and "Climate change forum" which will be held in August in the Philippines.

This year the BOAO forum was attended by 2000 delegates from 60 countries. The forum is famously known as "Asian Davos". The topics and discussion mainly are based on non-political topics. The speaker also attended the 2011 Boao forum and while comparing both the forums she informed that during that time there was less number of sessions held. Also, the inaugural session marked the presence of all the BRICS countries leaders.

During the 2011 forum, she observed that there were hoardings of TATA and presence of Indian businesses was prominent. But in this year's forum, there was no such presence. There was very less Indian participation. This time the forum had a total 50 sessions including roundtable conferences and closed-door meetings.

In one of the session, a Korean professor informed that currently, the university system is undergoing a crisis due to three major reasons. The first one is the digital revolution, under which due to more internet penetration and upcoming resources on the web to study is creating a problem for universities. People gain information by seeing videos on YouTube and through web searches. Second reason mentioned was longevity revolution, under which the greater life span of people makes them almost illiterate when they reach their eighties-nineties. The third reason mentioned was automation and artificial intelligence. Universities have the main motive of generating gainful employment which is hampered due to the introduction of new technologies.

One striking observation made by the speaker was that there was presence of too many media people and journalists, but all these media people were Chinese. In spite of the presence of so many non-Chinese delegates, no foreign journalist was allowed. There was wide coverage and extensive propaganda on all Chinese news channels and other places. There were also many businessmen from Italy, Russia, etc. People from Japan were also present in the forum in good numbers. Businesses from Italy were very supportive and optimistic about the BRI initiative as according to them this would lead to flourishing tourism in Italy.

On concluding remarks, the speaker said that although the idea of the forum was to encourage more and more Asian participation but now equal participation by non-Asian countries is also seen. She said that these forums are very important as they can help to understand the effect of China's influence all over the world. This also helps to know about the perceptions of non-political actors on China.

*This report was prepared by Bhavana Giri, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi.*

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