

The global market knows no borders

Ethan Woodfill, News Editor

Technical difficulties and a rainy night were not enough to prevent members of the community from attending Associate Professor Ishita Sinha Roy's lecture, the second installment of the Karl W. Weiss '87 Faculty Lecture Series.

She gave her lecture, titled "Nation Branding and 'Manufacturing' Indianness," at 7 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 2, in room 301/302 of the Henderson Campus Center.

Sinha Roy is an associate professor of communication arts and theatre. Sinha Roy received her bachelor's and master's degrees in English literature from the University of Bombay in India. She went on to receive a master's and Ph.D. at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California.

Sinha Roy joined Allegheny in 2001, and went on to be a recipient of the Thoburn Award for Excellence in Teaching at Allegheny College in 2008.

Monali Chowdhury, assistant professor of psychology, introduced Sinha Roy as a colleague and friend.

"Her recent book, 'Manufacturing Indianness,' is an exploration that covers a decade of research and interviews in attempting to capture the complexity of neoliberal nationalism and the strategic branding of a corporate prize, India Inc, as a Hindutva nation," Chowdhury said. "Today's talk is a snapshot from that text and hopefully provokes a discussion of some of the similar tendencies that we are witnessing in countries around the world, including the United States."

Sinha Roy's lecture began with the 17th century East India Company. She pointed out that the East India Company was the first and largest transnational company in the world. In 1858, the company had all the attributes of a sovereign state. It controlled half of the world's international trade, ran armies, governed territories, built industries and had its own currency, according to Sinha Roy.

"Think about that, doesn't that remind you of Google (and) Amazon?" Sinha Roy said. "What we consider to be phenomena that are associated with today's globalization actually goes back a long way."

Sinha Roy added that Walt Disney Co. established schools in China to explain how corporations try to inject their values into the culture.

"When Disney opens a school in China, its purported purpose is to help the Chinese middle class join more democratically in globalism," Sinha Roy said. "But, how is it teaching English to children from the middle class? Through Disney products (as well as) Disney values. So, now you're having entire cultures being transformed according to corporate ideologies. That blueprint comes from the first company and the first empire."

In 2010, a London-based Indian businessman, Sanjiv Mehta, was offered to buy the naming rights to the modern East India Company by a group of London businessmen, according to Sinha Roy. He accepted and took over the company.

"I took one person at a time," Sinha Roy said, quoting Mehta. "I did to them what they did to us: divide and rule. In 18 months, I mopped up all the shares.' So, today, the East India Company is in London. Once again, they're selling products from all across the world. Tied to this fantasy of an orientalist revival of history being rewritten, Mehta said: 'I wanted to show the British that they no longer have power over us.'"

A popular British tea is now owned by an Indian conglomerate, as well as the car brand Jaguar. Sinha Roy noted that other countries are also involved in this globalization. For example, the red double-decker buses in England are owned by Saudi Arabians. These examples indicate that the global market infiltrates borders.

“What is authentic culture, then, in today’s idea of multinational companies and this idea of a borderless world, where we think that thanks to technology, borders don’t matter?” Sinha Roy asked. “Who gets frisked? Who’s denied and gets put in a border camp? That’s when you realize that borders matter more than ever.”

Sinha Roy then discussed the concept of nation branding, when nations strategically hire companies to market them competitively to the world economy. The nation brand is a value based on the citizens’ purchasing power.

“What is the fantasy that I’m selling to you that will make you believe that we’re still one people?” Sinha Roy asked. “Right now, it’s the rage against foreigners: an ‘us (versus) them.’ This is happening worldwide. If I can define who we are, and I can say, therefore, ‘Make America Great Again’ is about remembering who we are as a people, but by making us again an economic superpower so we can call the shots.”

She explained the difference between the two brandings of India. Incredible India is the national campaign targeting tourists. India Inc. is the formal sector of the nation. It is marketed to economic entities such as the World Economic Forum.

“(India Inc.’s) strongest message is ‘India is here. We are here to stay. We are the second-largest emerging market,’” Sinha Roy said. “The median age of our citizens is 29 years (old). Think of the youngest workforce, most of them highly overqualified, not enough jobs for them in India, so they travel abroad. Guess what, sitting next to you might be someone who is powering your economy. Watch out, India is here to stay.”

Sinha Roy also explained the definition of “India.” It used to be “Mother India,” a source of strength. Now, it is focusing more on a type of Hindu nationalism called Hindutva.

“Hindutva means ‘if you are not my religion, if you can’t claim rights to a particular origin, you don’t deserve to be here,’” Sinha Roy said. “Most of this is directed toward Muslims and Christians who suddenly find themselves becoming foreigners overnight.”

In her book, Sinha Roy explains how national identity is composed of fetish signs — seemingly insignificant national symbols — and how they contribute to national identity.

“Just as if I’d encourage you to think about the American flag — it’s a piece of cloth,” Sinha Roy said. “But it’s because we call it a symbol and we’ve invested so much value in it, that today, we will destroy people who kneel before it rather than stand, and we’re willing to die for it. I look at the power of these fetish signs in terms of how they construct national identities but also how they are isolating us, alienating us from one another, and how, in the end, they’re being appropriated and used economically to support this idea of economic nations and nationalism.”