



INDIA-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS: CULTURAL AND CIVILISATIONAL DYNAMICS

Dr. Balraj Singh

Assistant Professor, Department of History & Punjab Historical Studies, Punjabi University, Patiala

Email: balrajbrar@pbi.ac.in

ABSTRACT

India-ASEAN Partnership has gained momentum over the last two and a half decades. Even though economic and strategic cooperation holds the key to this robust strategic partnership, it is cultural diplomacy that lays the cornerstone by building trust and understanding. The historical relations between India and its South East Asian neighbourhood go as far back as 2000 years mainly being anchored by maritime trade and commerce, expansion of areas like Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, architectural similarity, archaeological remains such as Buddhist stupas, monuments, temples, and sculptures, etc. Therefore, the diverse nature of the age-old maritime connection provides the foundation of this strong partnership. The primary agent of this relationship in the early years were the small groups of heterogeneous fishing and sailing communities with distinct languages, cultures, norms, and histories. This paper has sought to examine the role of cultural and civilizational dynamics in the development of India's relations with Southeast Asian nations.

Keywords: ASEAN, Civilization, Buddhism, Hinduism and Strategic Partnership

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INTRODUCTION

India and South-East Asian Countries share long, close historical and civilizational linkages. India's cultural connectivity is fostered by the presence of an Indian diasporic community. This partnership shaped by economic and commercial relations garnered an impetus following the "Look East Policy" initiated by India in 1991, which later came to be known as the "Act East Policy" in 2015. The major thrust of India's cultural relations with the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations aims mainly at continuing the existing strong historical links on one hand and creating further scope for the government to facilitate economic and political relations on the edifice of culture and people-to-people contacts. The year 2022 was a landmark year as India and ASEAN commemorated 30 years of their fruitful partnership.

India-ASEAN Partnership has gained momentum over the last two and a half decades. Even though economic and strategic cooperation holds the key to this robust strategic partnership, it is cultural diplomacy that has laid the cornerstone by building trust and understanding. The historical relations between India and South East Asian neighbourhood

have been strengthening for more than 2000 years. These relations are multifaceted and have many dimensions. One aspect is based on common religious pillars. Interestingly all the three religions Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam have strongly spread their roots and branches in all of these countries including India. The idols of Hindu Gods along with those of Buddha are common feature everywhere. The worship of Lord Shiva and Rama and ideology of Lord Buddha have struck deep roots and impacted the psyche and belief systems of the inhabitants of these areas. Sharing thus common religious ideologies they have been extending hands of friendship towards one other and this blossomed forth in the form of maritime trade and commerce. The temples of a country exhibit the architecture of a particular time period so it is a matter of no surprise that the temples and stupas as well as mosques in these various regions bear marvellous similarity. It is interesting to review how gradually but surely these partnerships struck roots and gained strength to spread widely. Therefore, the diverse nature of the age-old maritime connection has invariably provided the foundation of this strong partnership. The primary agents of this relationship in the early years were the small groups of heterogeneous fishing and sailing communities with distinct languages, cultures, norms, and histories. They travelled unhampered across the

maritime lanes and created settlements at different locations through bonds of kinship. This has further been seconded and corroborated through archaeological evidence and artefacts that hint at the strong historical presence of Indian trading and merchant communities in the Southeast Asian region. Further, the presence of imperial powers in the 16th and 17th centuries renewed commercial relations in the Bay of Bengal region. But they had ulterior and self oriented motives and was done by them to benefit the colonizers to extract commercial dividends. However, the mercantile class played an important agent in cultural exchanges. The trade route to the land which the people of South East Asia often referred to as Swarnabhumi, Tokola, or Narikeldeep was connected by both lands and by water. The land route was via Bengal, Assam, Manipur, and Burma, and the sea route was connected to the Coromandel Coast, Bay of Bengal to Cape Comorin via the Malacca strait to the Malay Peninsula. It is a well established fact that the victories of a nation make that nation spread its arena of power. With that spread on the one hand trade and commerce flourished and on the other hand spreading of culture and values also took place. Every nation has its mythology, religious beliefs and architecture. The manifestation of these fables and myths is found in paintings, sculptures, temples, that are deeply imbued (coloured) in the cultural heritage of that nation. Besides trade, Indian culture, thought mythology, artistic motifs, and style also reached the coast of Southeast Asia. The acculturation process is still evident in many Southeast Asian societies even today as the Indonesian Airlines is named Garuda (In Hindu mythology it is the vehicle of lord Vishnu) and the idol and monument of Hindu gods and goddesses are prominent in many places in Indonesia, Laos, and Cambodia.

To understand cultural diplomacy in the context of the present-day India, it is essential to acknowledge the relevance of India's understanding of the philosophy "*VasudhaivaKutumbakam*" i.e. the whole world is a family that broadly captures the understanding of composite culture that is inclusive. And it is this pluralist understanding that is also enshrined in our Constitution. This philosophy cordially extends a warm hand and heart to embrace one and all as one's kith and kin.

CULTURAL AND CIVILIZATIONAL CONNECT

The Government of India's 'Act East Policy' aims at improving economic and political relations with the Southeast Asian region which has had close contacts with India for centuries and is linked culturally and geographically with it. India has been able to make inroads in trade and investments with members of the ASEAN by signing a Free Trade Agreement in 2009 which aims at increasing business between the two and renewing the partnership and contact with member countries with similar culture, artistic tradition, family values and customs.

Even today, in Cambodia, Thailand and Indonesia or Burma today, many symbolic remnants of India's influence are clearly visible in their art, culture and civilisation. Through the centuries, India has been a source of inspiration for art and architecture in countries belonging to the present day ASEAN— Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Brunei, the Philippines and recently added Timor Leste. These are the countries where Buddhism that originated from India has struck deep roots.

It must be said that Southeast Asia did not accept all foreign influences in an indiscriminate manner. Two notably important external influences came from China and India, but Southeast Asia accepted only those influences and practices that were suitable to their local cultures. Almost every country accepted Ramayana because it is easy to retell, understand, modify and apply to contemporary culture. 'Ramayna' our religious epic is worshipped here and its piety, reverence, values, music, and mass appeal is very catchy so all these countries have been influenced by this beautiful religious tale and the highest ethical goal is to emulate Ram – the Godman.

Southeast Asia was in the cultural influence of Indian sphere from 290BCE to the 15th century CE, when Hindu-Buddhist influence was incorporated into local political systems. The kingdoms in the southeast coast of Indian subcontinent had established trade, cultural and political relations with Southeast Asian kingdoms in Burma (the present-day Myanmar), Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, the Sunda Islands, Malay Peninsula, Philippines, Cambodia, Laos and Champa. This led to the Indianization and Sanskritization of Southeast Asia within the Indosphere.

An important reason for the acceptance of Indian culture and religious traditions in Southeast Asia was because Indian culture already had similarities to indigenous cultures of Southeast Asia. Several scholars, such as Prof. Przulski, Jules Bloch and Levi, among others have concluded that there is a significant cultural, linguistic and political Mon-Khmer influence on early Indian culture and traditions. India is seen as a melting pot of western, eastern and indigenous traditions. This distinctly Indian cultural system was later adopted and assimilated into indigenous social construct and statehood of Southeast Asian regional polity. Today Indian words like 'karma', 'yoga' and 'guru' have been easily incorporated in everyday popular speech in Southeast Asia and across the globe. These three words take care of integrated all-round personality of an individual, 'Karma' at the level of body 'yoga' at body and mind level and 'guru' at the intellectual and spiritual level – thus it implies overall growth and evolution of an individual.

Southeast Asia was particularly attractive to Indian mercantile class and they named the faraway lands Swarnabhumi or land of gold, Tokola or land of cardamoms or Narikeldeep, land of coconuts. They followed two routes—one through land via Bengal, Assam, Manipur and Burma to reach different parts of Southeast Asia. The other route was the maritime route from Coromandel Coast or the coast of Bay of Bengal to Cape Comorin and via Malacca strait to reach the Malay Peninsula.

Hindu priests and Buddhist monks accompanied mercantile class and assumed a leading role in spreading the message of Indian thought and culture to the entire Southeast Asian region. Since they had no political ambitions and were living in hermitages and ashrams, they were readily trusted by the local people because they did not harbour any ulterior motive or lofty ambitions consequently the local people welcomed them with open arms.

Thus merchants, monks and Hindu Brahmin priests travelled to faraway kingdoms like Cambodia and Indonesia in large numbers and India's culture, religion and civilisation spread to different parts of Southeast Asia. The kings of the region wore Indian made silk and brocade textiles during ceremonious occasions and donned jewels imported from India. Moreover, printed and woven textiles were eagerly sought after by the common people. Hence the

commodities brought from India served the purpose of both the elites and the common folks.

Indian religion, political thought, literature, mythology, artistic motifs and style, were absorbed deeply into local culture as greater interaction with Indians who settled in the courts of South East Asia took place. Buddhism came to Southeast Asia from India in 3rd century BCE when Buddhist monks were sent by king Ashok, so as mentioned earlier religion especially Buddhism was instrumental in strengthening the bond.

In medieval times, from sixth to fourteenth century, there existed a great maritime empire based in the Indonesian islands of Java and Sumatra. Many Indian artisans came to work temporarily in the courts and were from Kalinga (modern day Orissa). They helped in building great temples and monuments. Many of the motifs on the walls of Borobudur and Angkor Wats resemble carvings of Konarak and other medieval temples of eastern India. This has clearly corroborated the fact that art and architecture were the popular areas for building and reinforcing this bond.

Sanskrit scripts are the first form of writing known to have reached Southeast Asia. Similar alphabets were adopted for local languages as well. The alphabets used today for Burmese, Thai, Laos and Cambodia derive originally from the Indian prototype. A large number of ancient inscriptions which have been discovered are in Sanskrit. Sanskrit was the mother language and other local languages originated from Sanskrit and were enriched by it. Sanskrit was not used for cultural heritage alone, its usage spread to courts as well, its usage spread to courts also.

Sanskrit terminology was used in all the legal aspects of court procedures and only the factual aspects were described in vernacular. The use of Indian framework of code of law was mentioned by these inscriptions. Codes of law and public administration especially the concept of "God King" was adopted by many kings of Southeast Asia. They considered themselves to be incarnation or a descendant of one of the Hindu deities. Later when Buddhism came, this view was modified. The kings of Cambodia, Jayavarman VII (the founder of Angkor) and his successors were addressed by the people as king of the mountain and they built their palaces and temples on hill peaks (Bayon temples).

The rise of India's influence took place when the Khmer kings spread it to other regions and its decline began with the coming of Islam. Even though it was a long time ago that India's influence on Southeast Asia's culture and civilization more or less halted, the impact can be seen even today on its customs, culture, architectural designs, in fact it is, evidently visible.

The syncretic culture of Southeast Asia which is formed by combination of different beliefs or practices is evident in Buddhism being practiced in Hindu temples in Cambodia, Muslim wedding rituals and dresses in Malaysia which are based on Hindu rituals and attire, Garuda –the vehicle of Hindu God Vishnu, is the name of Indonesian Airlines, and Naga and Kuber which are prevalent in both Hindu and Buddhist cultures can be seen carved in many places. A Mahabharata Monument depicting Krishna and Arjun riding a chariot pulled by eleven horses is placed prominently in a park in central Jakarta. Southeast Asia has absorbed and retained its past Indian influence in a very distinctive manner over the centuries and today it has moulded into the Southeast Asian culture.

In Indonesia shadow play involving leather puppets with moveable arms and legs on a screen narrating scenes from Ramayana is very popular even today. This popular art form is reminiscent of Orissa, where this sort of play is adroitly performed. There was reverse exchange of ideas and artistic techniques in the last century when Rabindranath Tagore travelled to Southeast Asia and brought the art of Batik from Indonesia to India and taught it to the students of Santiniketan.

ASEAN remains the main focus for India's cultural diplomacy as the civilizational cultural linkages continue to thrive with a major thrust on people-to-people relations. The success story is based on the existence of pluralistic ethos in all the member states and the recognition that it is mutually beneficial for everyone. The shared culture, civilizational ties, religious affinity, maritime relations, and historical linkages can help people better to resolve challenges and move towards a comprehensive strategic partnership. Moreover, high level visits and exchanges have undoubtedly spurred up cultural ties and the recent government has been focusing on reviving the historical past. The people are the real agents and the Indian government is trying to sustain various aspects of cultural ties by establishing and funding a large

number of local cultural organizations as local participation is essential for any sustained cultural essence.

The influence of India can also be felt in the food and flavours of South East Asia. There are many spices in common between Indian and Southeast Asian foods. There is a remarkable similarity in their eating habits and patterns as nearly all the people of Southeast Asian region eat rice and curry like the people of Eastern India with many common ingredients. Indian herbal medicines have also reached Southeast Asia from ancient times and are used even today in many countries. Closer links with the Southeast Asian region is thus a natural outcome for India and its 'Act East policy'.

The interconnectedness that had prevailed for around 2,000 years between south and Southeast Asia and was altered into a sense of "otherness" in the post-colonial period has been resurrected again with renewed convergences between states and peoples through soft power approaches, revisiting historical interactions, exploring new markets, mutual economic interests and addressing common strategic concerns. The ideological connection of the "Suvarnabhumi" (the land of gold referred to in ancient Indian texts) has been energized in popular imagination through people-to-people exchanges, rising tourism activities and recollection of historical and cultural linkages. Southeast Asian Buddhists are tied to their pilgrimage sites in India that remain an important source of connectivity.

The culture was adaptable and magnanimous enough to adapt to religion, and religion created space for culture. This is an elemental part of our shared inheritance, not merely myriad forms of geographical proximity has been on display but social proximity too, i.e., similar social and political processes that ultimate became the significant factor in promoting the selection and adaptation of Indian cultural elements in Southeast Asia.

CONCLUSION:

It can be rightly concluded that as per historical evidence, the relations between India and the South East Asian countries goes back to the inception of history and onset of historical adventures. But as per evident recent record, India's recent Look East policy or Act easy policy can officially be regarded as the clear cut beginning of this bond. Further the commemoration of the completion of thirty years of

this sacred bond had made 2022 as a year to remember. In this area cultural diplomacy has laid the foundation of this advantageous partnership. Interestingly all the three religions namely Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam form the pillars of this strong bond. These nations have common heritage, religious monuments, inscriptions, idols, architecture, nomenclature and values. The mercantile class, taking up profitable spice and silk route had spread the awareness and had strengthened the economic basis and foundation of this relationship. Moreover, Hindu priests and Buddhist monks played a very constructive role in spreading Hindu beliefs and thoughts. Sanskritization of language and impact of culture has been very vivid and clearly visible.

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