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Cultural Relations in ASEAN-India Thirty Years Partnership Sampa Kundu*

India and Southeast Asia have deeply influenced each other in the field of culture. This commentary looks into the features and components of modern-day cultural interactions between India and Southeast Asia. It also presents an overview of the profile of cultural relations between the ASEAN and India and the way forward.

The dialogue relations between India and the ASEAN began in 1996 and then elevated to the summit-level partnership in the year 2002. The year 2022 witnesses the completion of three decades of relationship between the two civilizations. This commentary seeks to locate the role of cultural cooperation in the strategic dimensions of India-ASEAN relations. The objective of this commentary is to illustrate and explain the important position of cultural cooperation in India's external relations with its eastern neighbours.

Traces from the Early Times

Ancient kingdoms in Southeast Asia including Funan, Sri Kshetra, Pagan, Khmer, Sri Vijaya, Sailendra and Majapahit were impacted by Indian political and religious thought, art and architecture, language and literature. Thai language and Bahasa Indonesia have Indo-Sanskrit vocabulary incorporated in them. Buildings and monuments in Pagan, Borobudur, Angkor and Lara Djonggrang represent cultural assimilations between India and Southeast Asia in the field of architecture. Ramakein, Amaramala, Arjuna Vivaha, Bharat Yuddha, Wajang Kulit are some of the literary masterpieces that were partially adopted from Ramayana and Mahabharata. Buddhism was extended to Southeast Asia from India and rest of South Asia. Modern-day Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia practice Theravada Buddhism, Bali and Java are two islands in the Islamic nation of Indonesia that practice Hindu cultural traits.

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Cultural Assimilation Continues in the 20th Century

Professors K M Panikkar, Nilakanta Shastri, R C Majumdar and many other historians have worked on the cultural, maritime and historical connections between India and Southeast Asia. Even prior to them, India's first Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore took three voyages to different parts of Southeast Asia and was extremely excited to find out the cultural, religious and civilisational similarities between India and Southeast Asia.

The poet visited Indonesia, Malaya, Singapore, Thailand (then Siam), Burma (now Myanmar), Taiping (now Taiwan) and wrote about the mysterious yet strong similarities between both the regions. He also met the Indian and Chinese communities, the local kings and their royal families and the British and other European administrative officials. Some of his speeches were dedicated to the children in the region referring to the importance of liberalised education to strengthen the cultural roots in the young minds.¹ Moving to the contemporary period, many of those Indian diaspora communities in Southeast Asian countries like Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand have contributed significantly to the national developments of their respective host countries.²

Post-1947, the Government of India has taken various initiatives to enhance the cultural ties between India and Southeast Asia and the Look East/Act East Policy has augmented those efforts by transforming them into some tangible as well as intangible benefits for India's strategic interests. The Ministry of Culture, Government of India and the MEA's ICCR continue with those initiatives and add to the cultural engagements and interactions between India and ASEAN countries, both at the bilateral and multilateral levels.

Post-Cold War Era- Cultural Interactions between India and ASEAN

The Indian Ministry of Culture had launched the Scheme for Promotion of International Cultural Relations, which was later renamed as Global Engagement Scheme (GES). The GES has three components, namely, Festival of India, Grant-in-Aid to the Indian friendship and cultural societies based in foreign lands, and contribution grants made for international cultural institutions like the UNESCO, World Heritage Fund, IRCOM, etc. Besides these initiatives, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) has been portrayed as a premier institution representing and advocating Indian cultures, heritages and languages abroad. India has signed multiple MoUs with the ASEAN countries to strengthen cultural connectivity with the oldest one with Indonesia in the year 1955.

Jakarta in Indonesia became one of the first Southeast Asian places to host ICCR in the region in 1989. In the year 2000, ICCR brought two special publications, namely, *Rama Story in South East Asia* by Prof. Satyavrat Shastri and *A Treasury of Sanskrit Literature* by Dr A N D Haksar. In 1999-2000, cultural delegations from Myanmar, Singapore and Vietnam visited a few cities in India to foster cultural interactions between the regions. These delegates were sponsored by the ICCR and the respective governments.³

Similar types of cultural engagements continued in the next two decades. India's Vice President Hon'ble Krishan Kant visited Cambodia in 2001-02 and had a stopover in Angkor Wat. The Vice-President had promised that India will assist Cambodia in renovation of more temple areas in Angkor. To deliver the goals, a delegation from Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) participated in a discussion on restoration of Ta Prohm in Cambodia. ASI's assistance to the restoration and conservation of the temples in Cambodia continues till today. This has been in sync with India's commitments to the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and the CLMV (Cambodia-Lao PDR-Myanmar-Vietnam) countries in redeveloping the age-old ties between them and India.⁴ Cooperation in the field of temple restoration continued as India provided assistance for the preparation of a Management Plan for Preah Vihear Temple and its enlistment on the World Heritage List of UNESCO. The ASI and Forest Research Institute (FRI) participated in a Technical Meeting of the International Coordinating Committee for Safeguarding the Temples of Angkor held at Siem Reap from 8-9 June, 2010.

In 2002, Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh announced seed money of US\$ 1 million for establishing a Museum of Traditional Asian Textiles in Siem Riep, Cambodia. By 2004, the Cambodian authority had allotted one acre plot for the museum and the project was jointly coordinated by ICCR and APSARA Authority of Cambodia under the MGC programme.

In 2006, ICCR's two Cultural Centres in Indonesia (Jakarta and Bali) conducted a number of outreach programmes in places like Medan, Bandung, Batam and Lombok. "Bharat Katha" dance programme was organised by the Jawaharlal Nehru India Cultural Centre (JNICC) and a 12-member Indonesian dance troupe from Taman Mini Indonesia Indah visited Gujarat in September 2006 to perform at the state-sponsored Navratri festival. In the same year, Thailand organized International Ramayana Festival where Indian troupes participated.⁵

The formation of renovated Nalanda University may be considered as one of the milestones in India-ASEAN cultural engagements in the modern times. The Government of India discussed about the potential of re-establishing Nalanda University with Singapore and few other Southeast Asian governments. In July 2007, Nalanda Mentor Group, led by Prof. Amartya Sen, had its first meeting in Singapore. An exhibition on the theme of 'On the Nalanda Trail: Buddhism in India, China and Southeast Asia' was also organised in Singapore's Asian Civilizations Museum in November 2007. This exhibition was attended by the Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh.⁶

Thailand's Chulalongkon University hosted an international conference on the theme of 'Tagore's Vision for Asia: Human Solidarity beyond Nationalism' on 16-17 June, 2011 to commemorate 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore. An exhibition on 'Tagore and the Romance of Travel' was conducted on the same occasion. Another seminar, 'Life and Legacy of Tagore' was conducted in Hanoi, Vietnam in assistance with the Museum of Literature, Hanoi.⁷

The year 2012 was special as 10 years of Summit diplomacy was celebrated by ASEAN and India. On this occasion, the ICCR organised painting exhibitions, performing arts and several conferences across the region. The ICCR also sent performing groups with the ASEAN India

Car Rally and the INS Sudarshini expedition on the occasion of ASEAN-India Commemorative events. Separate cultural troupes were also sent to Malaysia, Thailand and Myanmar.⁸

Table 1: Cultural Agreements between India and Southeast Asian Countries

Cultural Agreement between India and Cambodia	31 January 1996
Agreement Concerning Cultural Relations between India and Indonesia	29 December 1955
Cultural Agreement between India and Malaysia	March 30, 1978
Agreement between India and Myanmar on Cultural Cooperation	January 25, 2001
Cultural Agreement between India and Philippines	September 6, 1969
MOU between India and Singapore Concerning Cooperation in the Fields of the Arts, Heritage and the Archives	February 5, 1993
Cultural Agreement between India and Thailand	April 29, 1997
Cultural Agreement between India and Vietnam	December 18, 1976
MoU on restoration of UNESCO World Heritage Site at Vat Phu	May 2007
MoU on cultural cooperation with Brunei	May 2008

Source: Ministry of Culture, GOI⁹

In 2014-15, the Indian side continued to support Cambodia and other Mekong countries in water resources development, electric transmission line, restoration of temples, and capacity building of human resources. India co-chaired the International Coordinating Committee (ICC) for safeguarding and development of the historic site of Preah Vihear in December 2014. Cambodia also hosted Buddha Mahotsava, Ramayana Festival, Women by Women painting exhibition as part of Festival of India programme in February 2014. Lao PDR, Singapore and a few other countries too hosted the Festival of India in 2014 comprising food festival, yoga sessions, film shows and so on.¹⁰

In July 2015, the first and second phases of Ta Prohm temple renovation and conservation were completed by the ASI and the third phase was undertaken. Cambodia celebrated the first International Yoga Day on 21 June 2015 on a grand scale in front of the Phnom Penh Royal Palace, in Siem Riep and also in Sihanoukville. On the occasion of 50th anniversary of India-Singapore diplomatic relations, an exhibition was organised on the theme of “Treasures from Asia’s Oldest Museum: Buddhist Art from the Indian Museum Kolkata” in Singapore’s Asian Civilisations Museums in June 2015.¹¹

India hosted the 5th International Buddhist Conclave in October 2016 which was attended by Buddhist organizations and monasteries from most Southeast Asian countries. The Indian mission in Jakarta organised the Pravasi Bhartiya Divas on 9 January 2017 to create avenues for the Indian diaspora communities in making civilisational linkages between India and Indonesia noteworthy. The 14th edition of Global Indian Festival was hosted by Kuala Lumpur in June 2016.

The year 2017 was the 70th anniversary of India-Thailand diplomatic relations which was celebrated through Swasdee India Year and Namaste Thailand Year respectively in Thailand and India. Both Thailand and India signed the Executive Programme for Cultural Exchange to celebrate the long years of partnership. India also hosted the International Buddhist

Conclave in October 2016 in Sarnath and Buddhist religious delegations from Southeast Asia participated in the event.¹²

Box 1: Initiatives to Strengthen Cultural Relations between India and ASEAN

- Students Exchange Programmes
- Special Course for ASEAN Diplomats
- Delhi Dialogue
- International Conference on Cultural and Civilisational Links
- Media Exchange Programmes
- Young Farmers Exchange Programmes
- ASEAN- India Youth Summit
- Network of Think-Tanks
- Exchange of Parliamentarians between ASEAN and India
- DIA: ASEAN-India PhD fellowship Programme
- ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Lecture Series

India has offered the Doctoral Fellowship in India for ASEAN (DIA). The DIA was announced by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2018 at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit in New Delhi. Under this programme, 1000 fellowships are being provided to the ASEAN scholars to pursue PhD at Indian IITs. Apart from that ASEAN and India have institutionalized programmes like media exchange, student exchange, Delhi Dialogue, youth summit, network of think tanks and so on (Box 1). These programmes cover wider spectrum of people-to-people contacts while encouraging cultural partnership.

Way Forward

Future of cultural cooperation between India and ASEAN is even brighter. The ASEAN as a regional group has embarked upon the journey of community building. The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Blueprint 2025 focuses on regional and international cooperation in the areas of culture and arts. This gives India, as one of the dialogue partners of ASEAN, special opportunities to create new vistas of cooperation with the ASEAN courtiers. ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Culture and Arts (SOMCA) recently conducted a meeting with the Indian Mission to ASEAN in Jakarta to discuss the future of cultural cooperation between both the sides. Conducted in October 2021, this meeting emphasized on continuation of people-to-people contacts between ASEAN and India. To ensure the continuation of cultural contacts between ASEAN and India, new areas of cooperation need to be identified. First, establishment of the ASEAN-India Network of Museums (AINM) would be a step ahead for the cultural bonhomie between India and ASEAN. Second, a bottom-up approach to encourage more youth interactions at various platforms would be beneficial for both the regions. Third, the tangible forms of cultural

cooperation including tourism, educational advantages and transport and connectivity programmes need to be strengthened.¹³

Concluding Remarks

Culture has the potential to foster strategic interactions and engagements. An interest in culture of a country or region may increase tourism; trade in traditional medicine and traditional lifestyle commodities; dialogues between students, scholars, engineers and scientists leading to science and technology cooperation and innovation and so on. Like the private and corporate world, in foreign policy and diplomacy too, the goal should be to ‘master the connectivity between strategy and culture. They both should be anchored by capabilities’.¹⁴ The symmetry between culture and strategy and considering culture as part of strategic cooperation has helped India in strengthening its footprints in Southeast Asia. A continuation and expansion of such activities and vision is, therefore, inevitable for India in its Act East and Indo-Pacific approaches.

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Considering the work of the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Group (AIEPG), and its Report with recommendations for forging a closer partnership for peace, progress and shared prosperity, the Heads of the State/Government of ASEAN and India at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit 2012, held at New Delhi on 19-20 December 2012, recommended the establishment of ASEAN-India Centre (AIC), which was formally inaugurated by the Hon'ble External Affairs Minister of the Government of India on 21 June 2013 at RIS. AIC serves as a resource centre for ASEAN Member States and India to fill the knowledge gaps that currently limit the opportunities for cooperation. AIC works with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India and undertakes evidence-based policy research and provide policy recommendations.

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