



## Beyond Festivals and Exhibitions: Deepening ASEAN-India Cultural Cooperation

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### Key Takeaways

- Culture must be understood as living knowledge systems shaping governance, sustainability, and development.
- Intangible heritage should inform contemporary policy – not be confined to conservation and festivals.
- Nurturing knowledge exchanges while preserving cultural heritage can foster deeper ASEAN-India integration through shared consciousness.

### Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and India consistently emphasise their *shared civilisational heritage* spanning more than 2,000 years, shaped by ancient maritime trade, linguistic exchanges, religious and philosophical transmission, and architectural and artistic adaptation. These historical linkages are routinely invoked in joint statements, commemorative initiatives, and strategic partnership documents. Yet a persistent gap remains between stated ambition and practical implementation.

While ASEAN-India merchandise trade has increased from USD 101 billion in 2023 to USD 107 billion in 2024<sup>1</sup>, cultural cooperation continues to receive comparatively modest attention and



funding. This imbalance invites reflection on how cultural cooperation is conceptualised, resourced, and operationalised. If civilisational connectivity is presented as a foundational pillar of the relationship, cultural engagement cannot remain peripheral, symbolic, or episodic.

This commentary examines ASEAN-India cultural cooperation through the lens of the cultural economy, while arguing for a broader reframing that moves beyond the preservation and promotion of tangible and intangible heritage. It proposes recognising knowledge systems as dynamic, living frameworks that generate economic, social, and governance value when embedded in society. Such a reframing allows cultural cooperation to contribute meaningfully to sustainability, inclusion, and long-term development, rather than remaining confined to festivals, exhibitions, and short-term exchanges.

## Revisiting the Creative Economy Framework

The global creative economy, valued at \$985 billion and projected to reach 10% of global GDP by 2030<sup>2</sup>, has attracted increasing policy attention. Underscoring the economic relevance of culture within contemporary development strategies, both UNESCO and the World Bank have respectively recognised culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development and acknowledged the role of indigenous knowledge systems in climate adaptation. Within the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN's creative economy contributed over \$200 billion<sup>3</sup> while India's creative sector provided employment to 12.9 million<sup>4</sup> people.

However, limiting ASEAN-India cultural cooperation to the creative economy risks underestimating the deeper potential implied by repeated invocations of "shared civilisational heritage." Creative economy frameworks focus primarily on subsectors producing cultural goods and services, such as design, media, crafts, and performing arts. While important, this sectoral focus does not adequately capture how cultural and knowledge systems permeate economic

organisation, governance practices, and social life.

Beyond subsectors producing cultural goods and services, knowledge-centred approaches recognise cultural dimensions permeating economic and social activity. This encompasses knowledge systems shaping production, community practices organising exchange, and philosophical traditions guiding development. These approaches differ from social science frameworks that dominate policy discourses and fragment knowledge into disciplines. Such frameworks, while presented as neutral or universal, represent particular knowledge systems with their own cultural assumptions and values. Knowledge dialogues instead engage integrated systems that refrain from dividing humans from nature, or material from spiritual dimensions.

Diversity within and between Southeast Asia and India thus constitutes interconnected variations rather than isolated traditions. Historical precedents demonstrate this integration and offer perspective that can transform development and cooperation. For instance, ancient maritime routes carried Buddhist philosophy from Nalanda to Srivijaya, mathematical concepts from Kerala to Java, and agricultural techniques from the Ganges to Mekong. The Bay of Bengal created avenues for exchange rather than boundaries, showing mutual benefit from complementary knowledge systems. These holistic epistemologies offer alternative development approaches for contemporary challenges.

## Knowledge Systems as Strategic Assets

Knowledge systems such as traditional agriculture that offers climate-resilient food security; indigenous water management systems that address urban flooding; and community governance enabling participatory planning yield strategic advantages across sectors. During COVID-19, traditional medicine demonstrated value as accessible, community-rooted health infrastructure.

Historical precedents validate how knowledge exchanges create value where ancient Nalanda's

intellectual networks created philosophical foundations for governance across Asia<sup>14</sup>, while maritime networks built trust that facilitated trade worth billions today through shared epistemologies. On the other hand, traditional medicine represents multi-billion dollar markets; while indigenous agricultural systems feed 80% of biodiversity<sup>13</sup>; Islamic banking that creates alternative financial systems and traditional crafts sustain livelihoods while preserving identity are some prime examples of how knowledge sharing has led to shared growth and prosperity which transcends both geographies and time alike

Yet these economic figures reveal a paradox: quantifying knowledge systems risks reducing living practices to extractable commodities, fragmenting the integrated relationships that create their actual value. While ASEAN targets a \$1 trillion digital economy by 2030<sup>11</sup> with tourism contributing around 12% to the bloc's GDP<sup>12</sup>, cultural exchanges transcend metrics. Indigenous knowledge systems generate substantial economic value beyond conventional metrics. Frameworks such as King Bhumibol's Sufficiency Economy that moderate growth with sustainability; indigenous agricultural systems that influences climate biotechnology; and collective responsibility which guides AI ethics enrich contemporary practice. Weaving traditions preserve mathematical knowledge while creating global market products, and culinary systems maintain biodiversity while generating revenue through tourism and agricultural exports. Traditional medicine systems like Ayurveda, Jamu, Thai medicine, and Vietnamese *thuoc nam* represent sophisticated frameworks that have sustained the test of time; treating populations during periods of colonialism, conflicts, and pandemics.

Indigenous knowledge systems therefore offer solutions that resonate locally and providing complementary development pathways. Such systems contribute economically not by commodifying culture, but by recognising how diverse systems create sustainable livelihoods and inclusive growth and, assist in achieving inclusive growth. Knowledge sharing across regions provide diverse models balancing material

progress with wellbeing. Such exchanges provides values and insights on elements like dialogues that build trust, cultural exchange that create mutual understanding, people-to-people connection which forges solidarity, things that common data cannot capture directly.

## **Harnessing Institutional Infrastructure and Policy Framework**

Current regional cooperation underestimates how shared knowledge systems inform approaches to development. Economic frameworks risk fragmenting culture into competitive sectors, prioritising measurable outputs over engaging diverse systems that address sustainability transitions and equitable development. Moreover, the activities like but not limited to youth summits, media exchanges, and artist camps are yet to capture the true potential knowledge systems.<sup>9</sup>

The ASEAN bodies, think-tank networks, centres and entities already provide infrastructure that can be catalysed to strengthened ASEAN-India cooperation. However, these could evolve from isolated exchanges between governments into platforms facilitating living systems through expanded multi-stakeholder participation, accessible proceedings and year-long digital platforms.

The ASEAN Strategic Plan for Culture and Arts (2016-2025)<sup>5</sup> and the 2021 ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework recognised creative economy as post-pandemic catalyst<sup>7</sup>. The 2022 Siem Reap Declaration on Promoting a Creative and Adaptive ASEAN Community to Support the Cultural and Creative Economy aspires to holistic outcomes<sup>7</sup>. However, these policies prioritise economic growth over deep engagement integrated with knowledge systems. Similarly, the ASEAN-India Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2021-2025) and the Plan of Action to Implement The ASEAN-India Partnership For Peace, Progress And Shared Prosperity (2021-2025) lists generic aspirations for the 'creative and performing arts, cultural education, conservation and management

of cultural heritage' and to promote media exchanges.<sup>8</sup>

However, the Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2026-2030) invokes "civilisational and historical links" and proposing "platforms for knowledge exchanges." Recognition of 'tangible and intangible heritage' in the latest Plan opens up space for dialogue and engagement. Despite numerous such initiatives, the implementation of the Plan still focuses on preservation, while acknowledging the significance of intangible cultural heritage to engage living knowledge systems is crucial. Approaching intangible cultural heritage primarily to preserve it underestimates its potential.

## Challenges and the Way Ahead

Championing knowledge approaches raises contradictions which are inevitable. Both, ASEAN and India, have thousands of ethnic groups that create tensions between preserving distinct traditions and building unified frameworks. National projects often prioritise dominant cultures, potentially marginalising systems crossing borders.

Beyond political and cultural tensions, the growth-focused economic paradigm presents additional challenges. When growth metrics drive policy, commercialising meditation and yoga generates billions but disconnects practice from philosophy. Traditional medicine faces similar risks when knowledge holders are excluded. In Bali, visitors transform spiritual sites into sales opportunities. Where practices operate within markets, ensuring equitable participation becomes critical. Knowledge exchanges should address these tensions while frameworks balance community benefit with authenticity.

The realisation of "shared values" remains limited when activities focus primarily on celebrations and festivals with USD 1-5 million budgets<sup>10</sup>. ASEAN's cultural cooperation also relies heavily on Dialogue Partner funding. While Japan's Integration Fund alone contributed USD 100 million in 2023<sup>15</sup> and Korea's Cooperation Fund

is set to reach USD 48 million annually by 2027<sup>16</sup>, India's dedicated cooperation funds remain in the low single-digit millions per initiative, leaving ASEAN-India cultural cooperation fragmented rather than ASEAN-led. As a result, resources do not match aspirations, and opportunities to leverage traditional knowledge for catalysing development are missed.

ASEAN and India can better align their ambitions with resources by enabling intellectuals, artisans and creative communities to share knowledge across generations. By nurturing knowledge exchanges alongside heritage preservation and cultural connectivity, both regions can foster integration through shared consciousness and inclusive development.. Such approaches, rooted in historical connections rather than strategic competition, elevates agency of societies inhabiting interconnected spaces. Knowledge frameworks can structure policies invoking civilisational heritage and cultural connectivity by engaging epistemological diversity from consensus-building governance to indigenous resource management practices that are shaping contemporary economic and social life. These approaches offer alternatives to externally imposed frameworks and enable regions with shared experiences to chart paths that honour their traditions and aspirations.

## Conclusion

Knowledge systems are not merely cultural heritage to be safeguarded, but active frameworks that can inform contemporary challenges, from community resilience, to sustainability to governance and economic organisation. A knowledge-centred approach between India and ASEAN could transform 'platforms for knowledge exchanges' into substantive engagement with how societies structure economies, and pursue civilisational and cultural connectivity through contemporary applications. This requires developing capacities and the policy frameworks that mediate between diverse knowledge traditions by learning from

how communities already navigate such differences, rather than reinforcing dominant frameworks.

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