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Introduction

I left New Delhi in April 2012 to take up my assignment as Ambassador of India to Indonesia, Timor-Leste and ASEAN. I travelled through Bangkok since Indonesia and India, despite being close neighbours, had no direct air links. The travel route was through either Singapore, Kuala Lumpur or Bangkok.

At Suvarnabhumi Airport, Bangkok, I saw the impressive depiction of the "Samudra Manthana" (churning of the ocean). This brought a smile to my face because I thought I am now going to an area where I have never been before, but wherein Indian civilization has interacted over millennia.

In Jakarta I found so much resonance in names. There were many men called Arjun and ladies called Draupadi. They were mostly Muslim. There was a giant statue of Arjuna and Krishna on a chariot outside the National Monument or Monas in Jakarta.

In Bali much more is visible—Karna battles Ghatotkacha outside the airport; the Vanara Sena of Lord Ram in a roundabout to Ubud; the Krishna and Arjuna statue near the beach in Nusa Dua; a gigantic Garuda Wisnu Kencana statue of Garuda and Vishnu in Ungasan,

Bali. Similar impact of Indian civilization was evident in Cambodia, Vietnam and Myanmar.

Over the next few months, one thought crossed my mind: Indian influence is present in several ASEAN member states. Yet, its impact in contemporary times seems to be lacking. How is this to be overcome?

I asked myself: how have ASEAN's and India's growth brought the countries together?

India and ASEAN countries have been connected by trade, travel, education and people to people exchanges for several centuries. History is filled with accounts of civilizational links leading to cross-cultural fertilization as evident in Indian and other classical texts. For example, the Ramayana mentioned Yavadwipa, Vimanavatthu, Milindapanha, Brihatkatha, Matsyapurana, Vayupurana, Katyayana's Varttika and Ganapatha.

Beyond Indian texts, Ptolemy mentions Labadiou or Sabadiou for the islands of Java and Sumatra; Pliny in *Naturalis Historia* mentions various islands with which trade was conducted from seaports in western and southern India.

These cultural and trading linkages became more common around the ninth century AD. Later, the Majapahit kingdom (1293–1527), Sri Wijaya kingdom (700–1300) and Sanjaya kingdom (732–910) flourished in Indonesia. Similar kingdoms emerged in other parts of Southeast Asia—Champa in Vietnam (200–1700), Khmer in Cambodia (900–1400), Lan Xang in Laos (1357–1707)—with varying degrees of Indian influence due to close interaction with Indian people.

The Sri Wijaya kingdom, for instance, led commerce, by controlling the two passages between India and China—the Sunda Strait from Palembang and the Malacca Strait from Kedah. Arab accounts mentioned that the empire was so vast that in two years the swiftest vessel could not travel to all its islands, where camphor, aloe, cloves, sandalwood, nutmeg, cardamom, ivory, gold and tin were produced.

Magnificent temples emerged during this time. The Buddhist temple at Borobudur (8-9*c*) is the largest Buddhist stupa in the world. Constructed as a giant Mandala, it manifests esoteric Buddhist

cosmology. The temple has Indian and local influence with 2,672 relief panels and 504 Buddha statues. Stories from the Lalitavistara Sutra, Jataka tales and the Gandavyuha Sutra adorn the temple walls.

The Borobudur structure is tall and only the physically fit can clamber up its steps to see the sunrise. I could not do that and declined to climb it, but my local contact encouraged me to do so. He walked me around each of the five levels of the Borobudur temple, taking me through tales of the Jatakas and their local embellishments and as we went around, the climb to each level became shorter and hence not so tiring. An hour later, I reached the top of the temple among its myriad stupas! I was intellectually enriched, and I later realized the way to understand Indonesia is through gradual absorption.

Prambanan (8*c*) is the largest Hindu temple complex in Indonesia. It was initially mentioned in the Syiwagrha inscription (AD 856). With three main temples for the Trimurti—Shiva the destroyer of the universe, Vishnu the keeper of the universe and Brahma the creator of the universe—Prambanan also has accompanying temples to their respective mounts.

Angkor Wat (12*c*) was for centuries the Hindu and later Buddhist core of the Khmer kingdom. Its impressive monuments, various ancient town plans and huge water reservoirs, make it a unique architecture of an exceptional civilization. It is a significant site where Indian influence is visible. Other temples, such as Bayon, Preah Khan and Ta Prohm, also exemplify Khmer architecture.

My Son (4*c*) temple complex is regarded as one of the foremost Shiva Hindu temple complexes in Southeast Asia. It is the major site of Indian influence during the Champa kingdom of Vietnam. It is comparable with similar historical temple complexes in Southeast Asia, such as Borobudur of Java in Indonesia, Angkor Wat of Cambodia, Wat Phou of Laos, Bagan of Myanmar and Prasat Hin Phimai of Thailand.

In the ninth century, the Nalanda University established contacts with Sri Wijaya kingdom and its Muara Jambi University (7-12*c*). Buddhist scholars who went to Nalanda, often went to Jambi too. The

Deva Pala inscription on the Nalanda copper plate, dated 21st Kartika, in the 39th year of Deva Pala rule (9*c*) stated that at the request of Balaputra Deva, the illustrious king of Suwarnadwipa, Deva Pala presented five villages for the maintenance and sustenance of revered bhikshus and scholars, and the upkeep of a Nalanda monastery.

Of particular note was that Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam all came to the East through India. Along with these linkages came exchanges in literature, language, influences on art and architecture, amalgamation of festive traditions and in some places, styles of governance. However, just as the statues that I saw in my first months indicated, the cultural influences from India were adapted into the local culture.

Several kingdoms identified themselves as Hindu, Buddhist or later, Muslim, in what is often today one country. The sheer ethos of the Hindu epics—Ramayana and Mahabharata—as a cultural tradition is imbibed in most ASEAN countries. At the famous Ramayana Ballet at the Prambanan temple, a dancer named Arjun introduced us to his wife Shinta (Sita) and told us that their religion is Islam, and their culture is the Ramayana.

This period of interaction between India and ASEAN countries brought about a land route from India to Myanmar, Thailand and Laos and a sea route to Java, Sumatra, Borneo and beyond. The trade winds helped build such connectivity, which was essentially a commercial matrix since traders went from port to port, bringing with them their culture and civilization that are still visible today.

Besides the temples in Southeast Asia, there are many mosques in Indonesia that owe much to the Indian ethos. In Aceh, Serambi Mekkah or the Veranda of Mecca had close linkages of clerics and traders since Aceh was close to the Indian coast. Islam entered Indonesia from Gujarat. Researchers see similarities between tombs in Sumatra and Java, such as the 1297 tomb of Sultan Malik al-Saleh, and other period tombs in Gujarat.[1]

Some historians called this cultural sphere that emerged particularly from the Chola Empire, as Greater India. The Greater India Society emerged in 1927 and had leading Indian historians—R.C. Majumdar, Kalidas Nag, U.N. Ghoshal, Nalinaksha Dutt, Prabodh Bagchi, Himansu

Bhusan Sarkar and others—coming together to study the history of civilizational contacts between India and ASEAN countries.[2] They regarded this cross-fertilization as Indian internationalism and not merely local cultural and philosophical interaction.

Rabindranath Tagore, an Indian poet, perhaps felt that this statement was overstated. In his extensive travels in the region, he spoke about the east wind. But he did not go so far as to claim that the Greater India Society's ambition was real. The Indian ethos was always functional and never colonial.

In "Java" after his visit in 1927, Tagore evocatively wrote a poem:

["*In a dim, distant, unrecorded age*
We had met, thou and I, –
When my speech became entangled in thine
And my life in thy life"]

Colonialism

Pluralism, education and exchanges came across the Bay of Bengal, and they remain important today. India-ASEAN engagement saw India having similar colonial experiences with some ASEAN member states and different experiences with others. For example, the British rule in Myanmar, Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei gave India a sense of commonality. With Indonesia, there was a different set of objectives in terms of fighting against colonization and seeking development.[3]

The break between India and some of its civilizational links in Southeast Asia was due to competitive colonialism among the British, the Dutch, the Portuguese and others, whose spice trade disrupted many trading linkages between India and these countries. With Indonesia, it was the Dutch and not the British who were leading this trade, and the rupture was greater. Around the time that India became independent, there was a common aspiration among Southeast Asian countries for independence, particularly in Indonesia and Myanmar, and this led to a common cause for political emancipation, egalitarianism and an equitable international order. Such ideas flowered and were shared.

In 1927, Rabindranath Tagore visited Indonesia and his "Letters from Java" and the photographs at the Kunstring Palace in Jakarta show how well he was received by Indonesians and the Dutch alike.

India and Indonesia's common aspirations in seeking decolonization and justice for their people brought together many countries of the region in common cause. At the Asian Relations Conference in March 1947, India was committed to decolonization, a renewed post-war order, even before its own independence. At the Conference on Indonesian Independence in January 1949, Indonesia was focused on obtaining freedom from Dutch rule that was reimposed after World War II ended.

Biju Patnaik, among other Indian leaders under Nehru, is remembered by many even today. His daredevil air landings in Yogyakarta to bring Indonesian leaders for conclaves in India are legendary.[4] He and Sukarno became close friends. Former president Megawati, Sukarno's daughter, told me that Patnaik gave her the name Meghavati, which became Megawati in Bahasa Indonesia.

In 1950 when India became a republic, it was considered almost natural that the first chief guest at the Indian Republic Day was the Indonesian President Ahmed Sukarno and his wife, Fatima Wati.

The Colombo Powers—Ceylon, India, Pakistan, Burma and Indonesia—followed the Indian initiative at the Asian Relations Conference in 1947. They brought together their interest around the Bay of Bengal. Pakistan then had East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. Although the Bay of Bengal during that time included Indonesia and not Thailand, Indonesia is still relevant today and should be invited to BIMSTEC!

Among the leaders of the Colombo Powers, Nehru and Sukarno played important roles. After the Bogor conference in Indonesia in December 1954, they set about to hold the Bandung Afro-Asian Conference in April 1955. This was perhaps the first major postwar call for an equitable international order, an emphasis on decolonization and development, and a democratic framework for pluralistic values.[5]

The Continuity

Twenty-nine countries were present at Bandung. From present-day ASEAN, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam were there. Only Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei were absent. This conference provided major opportunities and challenges for development for India and several developing countries, particularly those in Asia and Africa.

Contemporary interests established then underwent several evolutions. An example was the Look East Policy (LEP) in 1992, which was built on the foundations of the Bandung process. Added to this were India's Indo-Pacific policy, the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) doctrine and later the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI).

During the decade of the Act East Policy (AEP) from 2014 to 2023, India, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, Cambodia, Thailand and partially Vietnam maintained their respective leadership. Hence, ASEAN leaders were greatly familiar with Prime Minister Modi.

Undoubtedly India and ASEAN are close neighbours who share a strong commitment to development while charting their own paths. Both have much in common to seek from the international order.

The Change

When ASEAN was established in 1967, India was deeply engrossed with its own internal problems: the uncertainty in the post-Nehru era, the resurgence after wars with China in 1962 and Pakistan in 1965 and food insecurity issues. The United States was involved in the Vietnam War. China was undergoing its cultural revolution. Hence, ASEAN could set its own pace relatively unhindered. That year, the Third Conference of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) failed to take place. The world was changing.

By the time the East Asia Summit was held in 2005, ASEAN had ten members, with a view to greater economic engagement with China and India. The European Union, Russia and the United States became strategic partners since the Cold War had ended, and this opened new opportunities.

ASEAN took another decade till 2015 to build its three communities. This brought parity between political-security matters, economic development and socio-cultural engagement. In reality, power politics continues to dominate, even though ASEAN is a liberal, functional construct. Over the last decade, China has become the dominant power in Southeast Asia, although its rise is resisted in the rest of the Indo-Pacific. And therein lies the genesis of this book.

Was India Offered a Place in ASEAN?

Well before the emergence of the LEP, Lee Kuan Yew, the outspoken Singapore leader who perceived India as having unrealized potential, felt that the country should be a part of ASEAN. He tried to offer it to Mrs Indira Gandhi. In a seminal paper on the LEP,[6] Professor SD Muni opines that India lost two opportunities to engage with ASEAN, though he does not entirely blame either side for the way it turned out.

During its formative year in 1967, ASEAN was seeking a broader regional cooperation mechanism, which would not be aligned with either of the big powers or have a Cold War dispensation. This was akin to the NAM, of which India was a founder. Among the original ASEAN-5, two were US allies. However, since the Vietnam War was at its peak, an autonomous ASEAN at the doorstep of Indochina was perhaps unacceptable to the dominant powers. Thus, ASEAN came to manifest a cleaved Southeast Asia, which had different ideological and strategic preferences. They certainly could not find a place for India, which was non-aligned and did not require the same big power umbrella that ASEAN sought.

Professor Muni recalls another lost opportunity: after Indira Gandhi's return to power in January 1980. He recounts that, following an official meeting in Malaysia in May 1980, a framework for economic cooperation between India and ASEAN was worked out.[7] However, soon after, India recognized the pro-Vietnam Heng Samrin regime in Kampuchea, but this position was different from that of ASEAN.[8]

Since the Heng Samrin regime was seen as supporting Vietnam (at that time Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar were not members of ASEAN), India's recognition of the regime prompted the India-ASEAN meeting to cease the economic framework. The ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in June 1980 did not have a positive outcome, leading to Foreign Minister Narasimha Rao not participating in it.[9]

This led to ASEAN's aloofness towards India mainly because of divergent positions on Kampuchea and consequently a lack of congruence on the ongoing Cold War and its ramifications. Professor Muni asks: why did ASEAN members overlook the possibility of economic cooperation with India? Why did they deal with India only on a strategic basis?

Evidently in its formative years, ASEAN made its strategic choices cautiously, and these were not limited to the decision on Kampuchea. The member states were clearly avoiding Soviet influence while maintaining the US security umbrella in the region. Of the original ASEAN-5 founders, Indonesia was a founding NAM member since 1961; Malaysia and Singapore joined NAM in 1970; while the Philippines and Thailand, both US allies, only joined NAM in 1992 and 1995 respectively, when India had partnership with ASEAN.

There are uncertainties around this. Like ASEAN, India could have first engaged ASEAN and then took steps to deal with the Kampuchea issue. It could judge its strategic priorities based on its long-term interests in Southeast Asia. However, ASEAN was certainly not the top priority for India, and neither was India a major priority for ASEAN at that time.

Be that as it may, these two opportunities for engaging ASEAN were not grasped by both sides and led to further differences in their world view in the years ahead.

These lost opportunities meant that India and ASEAN had to await more propitious times for engagement. Following the Gulf War in 1991, the economic crises in India led to an unprecedented reform agenda. The LEP emerged, and India engaged with ASEAN, which saw India as an opportunity now. The partnership relieved the economic distress in India.

The AEP was tasked to bring the India-ASEAN partnership to a new level. The LEP, the ASEAN-India Dialogue Partnership, the Summit and the Strategic Partnership were now set for invigoration by a resurgent India, which was not seeking economic support, but a partnership for development, support and security.

Notes

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