



## Mapping India's Historical Ties with Southeast Asia

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### ABSTRACT:

Maritime trade relations formed the foundation of the long standing relationship between India and Southeast Asia. This interaction also resulted in extensive cultural exchanges and eventually led to a blend of Indian culture with the local culture in Southeast Asia. The flow of goods, ideas, trade and people from India to Southeast Asia goes back to thousands of years. This intermingling of various cultures was possible due to the high mobility by seabound trade and eventual settlement by the Indian diaspora. In this context, the Tamil connections to Southeast Asia can also be traced back to 2000 years ago, encompassing the domains of cultural, architectural, linguistic and religious influence, amongst others. Medieval Tamil inscriptions present in Sumatra and Thailand shed light on the trade relations and mention important associations of Indian merchants. India and Southeast Asia also share a past of colonisation by the western powers of the British, French, Dutch, and the Portuguese. Southeast Asia witnessed a heavy flow of migrants after the 1870s, most of whom were indentured labourers who worked for the colonial masters. The prominent section of these migrants was of the Tamils. This migration, too, prompted an intermingling of ideas and cultural practices. Two instances of Southeast Asian countries in which Tamil culture prominently marked its presence are in Malaysia, particularly in Penang, and in Singapore. In Singapore, Tamil is one of the four official languages, along with English, Malay and Mandarin. In Malaysia, Tamil, along with Chinese, is recognised as a minority language.

### INTRODUCTION:

Because of these trade relations in existence since ancient times, languages, too, have occupied a crucial place in the history of these two regions. This can be corroborated from the names by which the ancient Indians referred to Southeast Asia, that is, "Suvarnadeep" or "Suvarnabhoomi" (Land of gold) derived from Sanskrit, referring to the riches encountered

during trade voyages. Other names derived from Sanskrit by which Southeast Asia was known to Indians were "narikeladvips" (island of coconuts) and "karpuradvipa" (island of camphor). Sanskrit had come to create for itself an important place in Southeast Asia. Sanskrit was a language that became associated with the political and courtly culture. Sheldon Pollock, a prominent Indologist, in his

work "The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India" has used the term "Sanskrit Cosmopolis" to describe "that Sanskrit became the premiere instrument of political expression in the polities that comprised it, those of most of South and much of Southeast Asia". The language of Pali, too, shares a significant connection to Southeast Asian countries. Pali is essential for the study of Theravada Buddhism and to this date is still in use in the Theravada Buddhist countries like Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Myanmar. Scripts, like languages, had reached Southeast Asia as well. The Pallava script of Pallava dynasty (3rd to 5th century AD) of Southern India had also travelled to Southeast Asia. The languages predominant in the Pallava dynasty were Tamil, Prakrit and Sanskrit and the Pallava script traces its origin from the Tamil-Brahmi script. It occupies an important place in the history of Southeast Asia due to the fact that many scripts from various Southeast Asian countries trace their descent from the Pallava script such as Balinese and Javanese amongst many others.[iv] Numerous other scripts found in Southeast and East Asia (Thai, Lao, Burmese amongst others) also find their genesis in the Brahmi scripts which is one of the oldest scripts in India and its origin is believed to go back to as early as 8th to 7th century BC.

**PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS:**

Buddhism has a strong influence in the Southeast Asian region. Maritime Silk Routes were the main modes of the spread of Buddhism in Southeast Asia. The branch of Buddhism predominantly followed in Southeast Asian countries is the Theravada. Angkor Wat in Cambodia is one of the most famous Buddhist temples in the world. Influence of Buddhism in Southeast Asia is evident from the presence of monasteries, the religious practices and architectural examples.

Religious influence of Hinduism is also profoundly present in Southeast Asia. For instance in contemporary Thailand, Ganesha is referred to as "Phra Phikanet" and is a deity associated with prosperity and wealth. Religious texts like Ramayana is one pivotal factor in the shared cultural bond between India and Thailand. Ramayana in Thai culture is referred to as Ramakien. Prominent influences of Indian culture are also found in Laos. Ramayana occupies an important place in Laos culture as well. At present, there are two Ramayana versions in Laos known as Khvay Thurapi and Phra Lak Phra Lam.[v] Also, the Panchatantra stories came to be popularised in Laos and were adopted in their local traditions thus undergoing through some modifications but retaining the Indian essence. In central Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia, there is a statue of Arjuna Wijaya depicting a scene from

Mahabharata with Arjuna and Krishna seated on a chariot being hauled by eleven horses. Also, the knowledge that Indians were present in Vietnam and Cambodia can be found in stone inscriptions dating back to as early as to the 3rd century.

**METHOD:****Religious and Spiritual Influence:**

Buddhism has a strong influence in the Southeast Asian region. Maritime Silk Routes were the main modes of the spread of Buddhism in Southeast Asia. The branch of Buddhism predominantly followed in Southeast Asian countries is the Theravada. Angkor Wat in Cambodia is one of the most famous Buddhist temples in the world. Influence of Buddhism Southeast Asia is evident from the presence of monasteries, the religious practices and architectural examples. Religious influence of Hinduism is also profoundly present in Southeast Asia. For instance in contemporary Thailand, Ganesha is referred to as “Phra Phikanet” and is a deity associated with prosperity and wealth. Religious texts like Ramayana are one pivotal factor in the shared cultural bond between India and Thailand. Ramayana in Thai culture is referred to as Ramakien. Prominent influences of Indian culture are also found in Laos. Ramayana occupies an important place in Laos culture as well. At present, there are two Ramayana versions in Laos known as Khvay

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**DISCUSSION IN THIS STUDY:**

Ancient linkages and historical ties continue to have contemporary resonance. For example, India and Southeast Asia have been connecting on restoring archaeological sites and even on cultural preservation. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has been one of the leading agents for the restorative actions in the places of historical significance in many Southeast Asian countries. It played an important role in the conservation of the Angkor Wat Temple of Cambodia when that country had called for international effort to help save the temple. Some other sites of historical significance where the ASI is investing its efforts on restoration are the Ta Prohm temple of Cambodia, the Ananda Temple of Myanmar, the Vat Phou temple of Laos, the My Son temple of

Vietnam and the Borobudur temple of Indonesia. These initiatives to restore archaeological sites are creating a bond that not only enhances bilateral relations between the two sides but are also aiding the preservation and restoration of heritage sites which are of immense historical and cultural value.

**CONCLUSION:**

India and Southeast Asia have deep-rooted historical connections which impact their contemporary ties. These rich contexts of past relations that encompass religion, culture, architectural and spiritual domains are the aspects which make their relationship unique and distinct in the contemporary world order. It was in the 1990's when both sides started to further renew and strengthen their old ties. One of the key drivers of this was India's 'Look East' Policy of 1991 and the 'Act East' Policy of 2014. At present, there is a convergence of economic and political interests and the future holds the promise of even greater synergy of bilateral ties. As people are continuously rediscovering and working on the past linkages, people-to-people ties will see further intensification as well as greater collaboration between India and Southeast Asia based on a deeper understanding of historical connectivity

and better appreciation of the shared past. What is of essence is that past connectivity between India and South East Asia continues to be reflected in myriad ways in the day-to-day lives of the people of Southeast Asia.

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