

ISAS Special Report

No. 16 – 12 July 2013

469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isasec@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



Debating India's Look-East Engagement: Singapore's Contribution

S D Muni¹

Two popular myths have been built around India's Look-East Policy, nursed primarily by the media writings and interested political constituencies. They are: (i) that the Look-East Policy was initiated in 1991 and (ii) that this policy was primarily driven by economic consideration. Neither of these myths can stand a critical historical and in-depth scrutiny. As a civilisation of sun worshippers, India has always been looking towards and engaging with the East, in many varied ways. One can easily identify four phases, or say waves, of India's eastward *yo-ho*. One is ancient historical (pre-colonial), second during the British Empire, third since independence (1947-1991) and the last one being the contemporary and most-recent one, since 1991.

Enough attention is being paid these days to the last two phases while there are only scanty and hazy narratives to unravel the first two. Historically, India's engagement with the countries of Southeast Asia was primarily civilisational and cultural, carried mostly on the back of commercial and human transactions. The colonial period, during the British Empire in India, eroded most of the hitherto-prevailing commercial links between the two Asian regions. Instead, strong components of Indian diasporas and security initiatives, for the protection of imperial stakes, were added, extending as far as Hong Kong. India was the military bastion of British imperial possessions east of the Suez Canal, and Indian soldiers and military resources were used to secure trading, territorial and political interests. This unfortunately dented the image of India and Indians in the Southeast Asian countries as an icon of civilisation and culture and instead added an imperial, expansionist flavour to India's

¹ Professor Sukh Deo Muni is Visiting Research Professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at isassdm@nus.edu.sg and sdmuni@gmail.com. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of ISAS.

long-standing friendly and peaceful image. The induction of the indentured labour to profit from the plantations in Malaysia and Indonesia created political and social constituencies of Indian diasporas in these countries occasionally described as “ugly Indians”. Such constituencies continue to mar India’s contemporary relations with these countries. There exists a considerable knowledge gap regarding India’s engagement with the East, particularly in the first two phases of historical and colonial periods.

Singapore’s contribution in facilitating India’s Look-East Policy is widely acknowledged. In official circles, the first major articulation of this policy came in the form of the then Prime Minister Mr Narasimha Rao’s famous 13th Singapore Lecture in September 1994. Singapore has facilitated India’s integration with ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) since the beginning of the 1990s and was even helpful in India securing membership of the East Asia Summit in 2005. Beyond the diplomatic and policy support, Singapore has also been making a significant contribution to bridging the existing knowledge gap in India’s historical engagement with its extended eastern neighbourhood. Recall the support extended by Singapore and the role played by its then Foreign Minister Mr George Yeo in crystallising the proposal of Nalanda University, initiated by the then Indian President Dr. Abdul Kalam.² A few years back, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies based in Singapore under the leadership of its then Director Ambassador Kesavapany established Nalanda-Srivijaya Centre for studies on the culture and civilisation of this region. During the past two years, Singapore institutions and scholars have produced three important studies on India’s historical links with Southeast Asia. These studies are:

Balaji Sadasivan, *The Dancing Girl: A History of Early India*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 2011. Pp. xxii+312.

Kwa Chong-Guan, (Edited), *Early Southeast Asia Viewed from India: An Anthology of Articles from the Journal of the Greater India Society*, Manohar Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, 2013. Pp. xlvii+300. (Published under Nalanda-Srivijaya Series).

Amitav Acharya, *Civilizations in Embrace: The Spread of Ideas and the Transformation of Power, India and Southeast Asia in the Classical Age*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 2013. Pp.xv+88. (Published under Nalanda-Srivijaya Series).

Of them, the one by late Balaji Sadasivan, the Senior Minister of State in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore, must be ranked highest in its contribution, not for its text but because the study itself will remain a living example of Singaporeans’ emotional admiration for and depth of knowledge about India’s history, culture and civilisation. The former Indian High Commissioner in Singapore on the late Minister’s contribution said that the Minister “sometimes embarrassed me by knowing more about the country I represented”. Balaji also wrote this book with passion even when being a medical doctor, not an academic or a historian. The other two studies, by Kwa Chong-Guan and Amitav Acharya, will go a long way in energising the debate on India’s pre-colonial links with Southeast Asia.

² S.D. Muni, “Nalanda University: a soft power project”, *The Hindu*, August 30, 2010.

Peaceful Engagement

All the three studies underline a predominantly peaceful nature of India's eastern links which flourished on extensive and diverse commercial and cultural links. Questions are periodically raised on the peaceful nature of these links. Balaji and Geoff Wade (in his 'Foreword' to Amitav's study)³ refer to the aggressive missions of the Chola Empire, particularly during Rajendra Chola's rule in the early 11th Century CE. Balaji writes:

In 1026, when the Chola Empire was at its zenith, its ruler Rajendra Chola sent his Imperial Armada to Southeast Asia. The navy sacked Kadaram and attacked the maritime kingdom of Sri Vijaya bringing its ruler captive to India.

Balaji however hastens to add that

This belligerent act was the single exception to what was in general, a peaceful relationship between ancient India and Southeast Asia during which India, along with China, were benevolent beacons of civilisation that influenced Southeast Asian culture.

*There are no contemporary records to explain the nature or reasons for the hostile Chola naval expedition. However, it appears from an inscription dated 1086 found in Kadah that peaceful trade relations were restored during the reign of the later Chola rulers.*⁴

Chong-Guan's Volume contains a full Chapter by R C Majumdar on "The Struggle between the Shailendras and the Cholas" where Chola's "great naval power" and "aggressive imperialism" is corroborated on the basis of Tamil and Sanskrit evidence.⁵ But Majumdar also acknowledges this was related to the reign only of Rajendra Chola. The Chola Kings, before and after Rajendra Chola, had periods of friendly and commercial relations between the Chola Kings and Shailendra rulers. Majumdar's narrative also suggests strong commercial links between the Cholas and China. The possibility of the Cholas using naval power to secure their trade with China from disruptions caused by the Shailendra rulers cannot be ruled out.⁶ In that case, Cholas' use of naval power was more for the protection of their commercial interests than for territorial expansion or imperial aggressiveness. And with the end of such disruptions, relations turned friendly and cooperative. Even if Cholas' aggressiveness is accepted as a matter of fact, it related to only one of the Chola Kings and is only one example so far, contrary to the otherwise peaceful and mutually beneficial contacts between India and its neighbouring eastern civilisations spanning through almost a millennia. This is however an area to be explored by further archaeological and historical research.

³ Acharya, pp. vii-xv.

⁴ Balaji, Chapter 14, p. 129. Kadaram or the state of Kadah was in Malaysia.

⁵ Chong-Guan, Chapter 11, pp. 119-133.

⁶ Sen, Tansen, "The Military Campaigns of Rajendra Chola and the Chola-Srivijaya-China Triangle" (2009) as cited in Amitav, p.21.

Amitav's emphasis on the peaceful nature of India-Southeast Asia engagement is also driven by his theoretical quest for exploring how ideas in general travel from one place to another and get absorbed or adopted.⁷ He offers his study as an alternative model of "Cultural Diffusion"; a rebuff to "Clash of Civilization" theories. This is evident from the very title of his study; "Civilizations in Embrace".

Who Impacted Whom

The footprints of India's presence in Southeast Asia are felt even today in the popular perceptions through the religious monuments of Angkor Wat of Cambodia and Borobudur Temple of Indonesia. Though the impact of Hinduism and Buddhism, the two dominant religions with their birth places in India, is most widely visible in the region, it was not just the impact of these two religious systems. Even Islam came to Southeast Asia through India, carrying with it, its Indianised flavour and social ethos. But again, it's not just the religious belief systems, practices and norms that dominated the cultural and civilisational stream which flowed from India to Southeast Asia. "There were also a number of Indian legal, political and diplomatic texts which made their way into the ancient Southeast Asian political landscape".⁸ Both religious and secular flows covered almost all the aspects of life such as art and architecture, social structures, languages and literature, political institutions and organisations, legal systems and forms of governance. The main question at stake, raised by Amitav is about the process of impact formation, of "cultural diffusion" i.e. how actually this Indian influence travelled to and got accepted by the East.⁹ Chong-Guan's Volume being an Anthology, from the *Journal of the Greater India Society*, clearly supports the thesis that "Indianization" of Southeast Asia was primarily an Indian enterprise spanning through more than twelve centuries. One of the Chapters in this volume ("India and the Pacific World" by U N Ghoshal), quoting Kalidas Nag's study, takes the discourse on Indian cultural influence even beyond Southeast Asia deep into the Pacific, linking it to 'Oceania and Polynesia' and 'aboriginal American cultures'. According to Kalidas Nag:

The expansion of Indian culture into the Pacific world is a grand chapter of human history...What parts of this cultural complex would reach the Eastern Pacific basin and the New World are problems of future anthropologists and antiquarians...The colossus cultural drama is reappearing to us like an ancient mutilated play with many acts and interludes still missing...but whatever portions have already been recovered, inspire us with awe and admiration...There was no sordid chapter of economic exploitation or political domination in the development of Greater India which, coming as a legacy from Emperor Asoka of third century BC continued for over 1000 years to foster the fundamental principles of maître (fellowship) and Kalyana

⁷ Amitav, Chapters 4 and 5, pp. 43-70.

⁸ Amitav, p.9.

⁹ Ibid, p.10

*(universal well being) which form the universal bed-rocks of Hindu-Buddhist idealism.*¹⁰

Amitav marshals arguments based on various available studies on the subject to question Indianisation thesis and rejects India's predominant role in evolving the regional cultural synergy in Asia. He describes the efforts and contributions of the proponents of 'Greater India Society' as "revisionist historiography". He accuses its 'prominent advocate' R C Majumdar of adopting an "overly nationalistic tone and cultural arrogance", citing many other critics in his support.¹¹ Amitav makes two alternate propositions. One that the East Asian societies had their own respective cultural identities and thus there was no question of "passive acceptance" by them of the Indian influences. They in fact were "active borrowers", not only seeking selective and desired Indian influences on their own ("region's ruling classes who invited Brahmins to serve on their courts"), but also adjusting and adopting them to their respective requirements.¹² Thus the process of Indian influence was not "Indianization" but a regional "localization" of the best Indian practices. This is illustrated for example, by referring to the "differences in the practice of Theravada Buddhism between Thailand and Burma".¹³ He also brings in the flow of Chinese influence, particularly in Vietnam in support of his "localization" argument.¹⁴

Amitav also brings in another concept. Referring to the works of Hermann Kulke, Amitav argues that the Indian impact on Southeast Asia must be seen neither as "Indianization" nor "localization" but as "convergence" of cultures and their evolution. Both India and Southeast Asia had a lot in common with each other and evolved on the basis of give and take. The resilience of Hinduism and the use of Sanskrit language are referred to buttress the "convergence" proposition.¹⁵ Amitav's "convergence" proposition, however, stands on a very thin empirical ground. Kulke's is a recent study and not many have examined this proposition closely. While Amitav makes cogent arguments by mustering the support of a number of European scholars, his rejection of "Indianization" is rather harsh and emotional, targeted mostly at Majumdar's writings. And that too, when he himself quotes Majumdar saying; "the Indian cultural interactions with Southeast Asians might have been a two-way street of mutual influence".¹⁶ A large number of Indian scholars, including those affiliated with the Greater India Society, have written about "Indianization" with different perspectives, even contrary to that of Majumdar's, and Amitav should have taken them into account for a balanced assessment.

¹⁰ Chong-Guan, Chapter 4, pp. 51-52.

¹¹ Amitav, pp. 10-13.

¹² Amitav (p.22) refers to the study of D.R. Sardesai, Southeast Asia Past and Present (3rd Edition). Boulder Co. Westview Press, 1994.

¹³ Amitav, p. 25.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 27.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 35.

¹⁶ Ibid, p.14.

Chong-Guan's volume presents rich and diverse perspectives on the 'Indianization' thesis which do not fully submit to the charge that "Indianization" of Southeast Asia was a process of "colonial and imperial expansion". Indian colonies in Southeast Asia referred here were cultural colonies established and nursed in mutual harmony and with mutual understanding. In his masterly introduction to the Anthology, Chong-Guan quotes Majumdar as saying "there was a complete cultural fusion between the two races".¹⁷ He extensively refers to Rabindranath Tagore, the moving spirit of the Greater India Society, to show that this society and its members were driven not by narrow nationalism or the grandiose notions of Indian superiority, but were fired by "international humanism". Vishwa Bharati University at Santiniketan was established by Tagore to "promote his vision of oneness of Asian Humanism" which attracted scholars and Indologists from Europe as well as other parts of Asia.¹⁸ In Chong-Guan's assessment, "in contrast to the violence of European colonialism", the "Indian colonization of the Far East was peaceful, humane, benign and welcomed by the pre-literate natives".¹⁹

The legacy of the Greater India Society is being continued, in the words of Chong-Guan by "a new generation of Indian institutions and scholars", who also distance themselves from any nationalist or India-dominated view of scholars like "Majumdar and Coede's". He quotes G C Pandey, the editor of "Interaction with Southeast Asia" as saying: that "the development of common and parallel civilizational trails in India and Southeast Asia" came "through a long process of interchange".²⁰ This cannot be denied as cultures are inherently porous, evolutionary and trans-national, and they evolve and grow in sympathetic and friendly ambience. Cultures imposed through force generate conflicts and often lead to distortions.

An overall assessment of available literature and evidence would suggest that the reality of India's impact on Southeast Asia is closer to Amitav's concept of "localization". There is no doubt that Indian impact was predominant, and to match that, there is no evidence yet that the Southeast Asian cultures helped in shaping Indian ideas and institutions. Chong-Guan's Volume and those of many other European scholars, on whose analyses Amitav also relies, leave no one in doubt that Indian cultural ideas and initiatives were welcomed, adopted and imbibed by the Southeast Asian societies to suit their respective needs and ethos.

The Task Ahead

Historiography is not a fundamental science. It depends upon available data and conscious or unconscious subjective interpretations. Subjectivity in historical explorations creeps in, not only because of the nationalities, locations and networks of the scholars but also because of the political, economic and strategic contexts of regional and international affairs of the times

¹⁷ Chong Guan, p.xxx.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. xix.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. xxix.

²⁰ Ibid, p. xl.

when studies are undertaken. If it is assumed that the Indian scholars were driven by their nationalistic and emotional impulses, surely, the European and East Asian historian who claim to counter the “Indianization” thesis also cannot be taken as being free from their biases. The confusion created by such subjective impulses can only be reduced, if not completely removed, by further scholarly explorations based on hard and authentic evidence. The message of both the studies by Amitav and Chong-Guan is that the field of studying linkages between India and East Asia is still in its infancy and that more archaeological findings, their close and careful scrutiny, discovery of and discourse on historical evidence and a fresh look at the available sources are needed. Until that is done in sufficient strength, firm conclusions like “Indianization” or “Convergence” must wait.

As yet, even the available evidence has not yet been properly organised and interpreted. For instance, the studies under review are based largely on the interaction between Indian on the one side and Indonesian and Malay cultures on the other. Very little is said and reflected in these studies on similar archaeological and available historical evidence from countries like Laos, Vietnam and Thailand. Laos in its southern belt has pre-Angkor archaeological findings as also living evidence in its Mekong basin areas like Suvannakhet, of strong Shaivaite Hindu culture which linked itself with Khmer in Cambodia and Champa in Vietnam. There is hardly any authentic scholarly study of these linkages available. Cambodia has also just discovered a whole new City further north of Angkor Wat which will have to be studied in depth.

There is a greater need to encourage such studies not only in countries like Singapore but also Indonesia, Malaysia and above all, in India. The officialdom in India has been extremely slow and stingy in encouraging the protection of available India-linked archaeological material in Southeast Asian countries like Laos and Vietnam. In the late Nineties, the Government of India started collecting *Ramayana* artefacts from various Southeast Asian countries to compare and contrast the forms of *Ramayana* traditions prevalent there, but there are no signs of that project reaching culmination. The requests made from Laos for financial support to help them properly house the archaeological findings of Hindu temples have yet to receive proper response. Constraints of financial resources or the considerations of India’s official secular ethos must not be allowed to interfere with the projects of discovering India’s own cultural roots and engagements. Such discoveries would greatly enhance the potential of India’s soft power. For instance, the studies like that of Kalidas Nag on ‘India and the Pacific World’ cited above may provide a new meaning and thrust to the concept like Indo-Pacific which has been readily endorsed by India at a time when Asia-Pacific region is unfolding its new strategic contours. The new Nalanda University must have a special mission to explore the past of India and Southeast Asia that continue to thrive in the present and have a great promise for their future.

.....