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India-ASEAN Relations: The Youth and Education Factors

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) celebrated its 50th birth anniversary on 8 August 2017. This year also marks 25 years of ASEAN's 'Partnership Dialogue' with India. To mark this milestone, India hosted the first India-ASEAN Youth Summit in August 2017. The summit highlighted an area of vast potential cooperation between the two sides: youth relations, particularly through educational arrangements. This paper looks at the progress achieved so far in this regard and the potential going forward.

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Introduction

India hosted the inaugural India-ASEAN Youth Summit in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, from 14 to 19 August 2017. The summit was part of a plethora of events planned to commemorate the 25th year of 'Partnership Dialogue' between India and ASEAN. India and ASEAN have traditionally shared warm ties since the early 1990s when the two became 'sectoral partners' (in 1992), 'dialogue partners' (in 1996), 'summit level partners' (in 2002) and eventually,

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‘strategic partners’ (in 2012).² The partnership build-up led to the transformation of India’s ‘Look East’ policy, enunciated in 1991, with a focused diplomacy towards Southeast Asia, to the current ‘Act East’ policy. Through the course of this relationship, there has been an exponential growth in bilateral and multilateral cooperation between the two sides; at present, there are 30 dialogue mechanisms³ in play. While much of this cooperation has naturally been focused on the economic and trade aspects of the relationship, given the economic profiles of the players, some efforts have also been made in the area of developing youth interactions. In this regard, the youth summit functioned as a much-needed supplement.

The India-ASEAN Youth Summit: A Catalyst for Cooperation

The youth summit was jointly organised by India’s Ministry of External Affairs, Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sport and the India Foundation, a New Delhi-based think tank. ASEAN was represented by a collective 100-member delegation (10 from each member state) and there were 75 delegates from India.⁴ Additionally, an Observer Group⁵ from the ASEAN Secretariat was present. The summit was graced by several Indian dignitaries such as Minister for External Affairs Sushma Swaraj and Minister of State for External Affairs V K Singh, alongside numerous Indian business leaders, academics and cultural personalities. The opening address was delivered by Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh Shivraj Singh Chouhan, who highlighted his government’s efforts in the areas of environment, agriculture and women’s empowerment.⁶ The United Nations (UN) Secretary General’s newly-appointed Envoy on Youth, Jayathma Wickramanayake, was present at the summit, emphasising the potential of youth to achieve the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals.⁷

² Ministry of External Affairs, India. ‘India-ASEAN Relations’, Available at <http://www.mea.gov.in/aseanindia/20-years.htm>. Accessed on 16 August 2017.

³ Ibid.

⁴ *The Times of India*, ‘India-ASEAN Youth Summit to be held in Bhopal this month’. Available at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-asean-youth-summit-to-be-held-in-bhopal-this-month/article-show/60025326.cms>. Accessed on 16 August 2017.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *The Times of India*, ‘Youths hold key to growth: Gen Singh’. Available at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bhopal/youths-hold-key-to-growth-gen-singh/articleshow/60065727.cms>. Accessed on 16 August 2017.

⁷ *Office of Secretary General’s Envoy on Youth*, ‘In her first visit to India, Youth Envoy highlights that young people hold the key to Sustainable Development Goals’. Available at <http://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2017/08/first-visit-india-youth-envoy-highlights-young-people-hold-key-sustainable-development-goals/>. Accessed on 31 August 2017.

The summit focused on politics, trade and culture. Particularly, India's deep historical and cultural ties to the Southeast Asian region were underscored. In the valedictory statement, Minister Sushma Swaraj outlined religious commonalities between the two sides, pointing out how Buddhism and the Hindu epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were connecting blocks.⁸ Additional areas of focus from the Indian side included tourism in India as well as ASEAN's potential engagement with north-eastern India (in line with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's repeated emphasis on Northeast India as a focal point for the country's 'Act East' policy).

In effect, the summit acted as an outreach exercise for youth from both sides. A member of the Singaporean delegation described the overall experience as "eye-opening",⁹ and opined that it provided an opportunity for the Singaporean delegates to learn first-hand about India, which they might likely not have done otherwise. The scale and purpose of the summit served to accentuate and provide a boost to an often overlooked and underdeveloped area of India-ASEAN engagement: the youth and education sector.

India-ASEAN Youth Cooperation: Stilted Progress, Soaring Prospects

Youth development, as an area of cooperation between India and ASEAN, has achieved some traction over the course of the last two decades. This progress has naturally taken place through the medium of educational enterprises. Education has been described as a "rich area"¹⁰ of cooperation between the two sides. India's higher education segment is projected to be valued at US\$37.8 billion (S\$51.32 billion) in 2020 and the private education sector is projected to be worth US\$133 billion (S\$180.5 billion).¹¹ Concurrently, a report estimated that the private education expenditure in Southeast Asia for 2015 was US\$60 billion (S\$81.4 billion).¹² There are, undoubtedly, significant prospects in educational linkages.

⁸ *The Indian Express*, 'Buddhism, Ramayana, connect ASEAN to India, says Sushma Swaraj'. Available at <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/buddhism-ramayana-connect-asean-to-india-says-sushma-swaraj/>. Accessed on 21 August 2017.

⁹ The author's interview with a member of the Singaporean delegation.

¹⁰ *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, 'Enhancing India-ASEAN Connectivity', Ted Osius and Raja C Mohan, 2013, p. 36.

¹¹ *The India Brand Equity Foundation*, 'Education Industry Analysis'. Available at <https://www.ibef.org/industry/education-presentation>. Accessed on 4 September 2017.

¹² *Parthenon-EY*, 'Education in Southeast Asia'. Available at http://cdn.ey.com/parthenon/pdf/perspectives/Parthenon-EY_SE-Asia_Paper_final_092016_singles.pdf. Accessed on 4 September 2017.

In terms of initiatives, the ASEAN-India Student Exchange Programme was established in 2007 by India's then-Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, under which nearly 250 students from ASEAN have visited India each year to gain first-hand knowledge of the country through interactions with Indian youth as well as academics, policy makers and businessmen.¹³ In 2009, the Indian government announced a US\$50 million (S\$67.8 million) 'India-ASEAN Cooperation Fund' which would finance various collaborations, including in the educational sector. Following a report by the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Group, the Indian and ASEAN leaders recommended the creation of an 'ASEAN-India Centre' (AIC), at a joint commemorative summit in 2012.¹⁴ The AIC was subsequently launched at the Research and Information Systems think tank in New Delhi in 2013. More recently, in 2016, the ASEAN Studies Centre was also opened at North Eastern Hill University in Shillong with the purpose of "facilitating research projects, studies, workshops and related activities".¹⁵

Initiatives aside, the sector of higher education has also seen some development. The General Scholarship Scheme of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) currently provides both undergraduate and postgraduate scholarships for students from the ASEAN member-states of Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam,¹⁶ among many other countries. The ICCR has also established 'Chairs of Indian Studies' at universities in several countries, including Indonesia, Cambodia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.¹⁷ The objective of these Chairs is to function as a "nucleus"¹⁸ for Indian studies and information about India through cooperative educational and cultural activities involving students and academics.

Progress has also been achieved in bilateral higher education ties between individual ASEAN member-states and India. For example, earlier this year, during Malaysian Prime Minister

¹³ *Centre for People Empowerment in Governance*, 'ASEAN-India: Building Youth Partnerships Through Culture and Entrepreneurship'. Available at http://www.cenpeg.org/events/jan2015/ASEAN-India=Building_Youth_Partnerships_through_Culture_and_Entrepreneurship.html. Accessed on 4 September 2017.

¹⁴ ASEAN-India Centre at RIS, Available at <http://aic.ris.org.in/about-aic/>. Accessed on 26 August 2017.

¹⁵ *The Business Standard*, 'Asean Study Centre inaugurated in Shillong'. Available at: http://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/asean-study-centre-inaugurated-in-shillong-116080801801_1.html. Accessed on 31 August 2017.

¹⁶ *Indian Council for Cultural Relations*, 'General Scholarship Scheme-GSS'. Available at: <http://iccr.gov.in/content/general-scholarships-scheme-gss>. Accessed on 13 September 2017.

¹⁷ *Indian Council for Cultural Relations*. Available at <http://iccr.gov.in/sites/default/files/list%20of%20chairs.pdf>. Accessed on 13 September 2017.

¹⁸ *Indian Council for Cultural Relations*, 'ICCR Chair Abroad'. Available at <http://iccr.gov.in/content/iccr-chair-abroad>. Accessed on 13 September 2017.

Najib Razak's visit to India, several memoranda of understanding (MoUs) were signed, one of which was an agreement on mutual recognition of equivalence between the higher educational qualifications in India and Malaysia.¹⁹ Singapore in particular, with its sizeable ethnic Indian population, has been arguably India's closest bilateral partner in this regard. In 2012, India's Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship signed a MoU with Singapore's Ministry of Education focused on capacity development in vocational education and skill development.²⁰ The Nanyang Technological University (NTU) has also established the NTU-India Connect Research Internship Programme for Indian undergraduate and graduate students to pursue research projects at NTU.²¹ The Singapore Management University instituted an India Desk and signed MoUs with the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore; Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur; Indian Institute of Foreign Trade, New Delhi, and the Bombay Stock Exchange Institute, Mumbai, among others.²²

Despite the aforementioned efforts, the progress by the respective sides in using education as a means to harness youth potential remains stilted at best. The scope of the problem perhaps lies in the fact that the two sides do not really see each other as close educational partners. Despite India being second only to China in the numbers of outward-bound students in 2016,²³ the United States (US) or Europe still remains the first preference for these students for academic or professional opportunities. For those Indian students who do choose Southeast Asia, countries such as Singapore and Malaysia attract the lion's share of preferences. On the Southeast Asian side too, the situation is much the same. A survey by the Association of Indian Universities, an educational society, pegged the number of Southeast

¹⁹ Ministry of External Affairs, India. 'List of Agreements/MoUs exchanged during the State Visit of Prime Minister of Malaysia to India'. Available at <http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28296/List+of+AgreementsMoUs+exchanged+during+the+State+Visit+of+Prime+Minister+of+Malaysia+to+India>. Accessed on 31 August 2017.

²⁰ Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, India. Available at <http://www.skilldevelopment.gov.in/global.html>. Accessed on 4 September 2017.

²¹ Nanyang Technological University, 'NTU-India Connect'. Available at <http://global.ntu.edu.sg/GMP/ic/Pages/default.aspx>. Accessed on 13 September 2017.

²² Singapore Management University, 'About SMU-India Initiatives'. Available at <https://www.smu.edu.sg/singapore-india-business-dialogue/2012/overview>. Accessed on 13 September 2017.

²³ UNESCO, 'Education: Outbound internationally mobile students by host region'. Available at <http://data.uis.unesco.org/Index.aspx?queryid=172>. Accessed on 5 September 2017.

Asian students in India at a paltry 1,924 in 2014-15.²⁴ In comparison, the number of Singaporean students alone enrolled in the US in 2015 was 4,727.²⁵

Singapore and Malaysia are among the preferred destinations for Asian and international students, and for the less-developed ASEAN economies such as Laos and Myanmar, which perhaps lack the institutional facilities to attract overseas students. Interestingly in this context, an analysis of the top universities²⁶ in the more-developed ASEAN countries such as Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines (all of which are members of the ASEAN University Network) indicates that none of their universities has exchange programmes or educational MoUs with any Indian counterpart,²⁷ despite the relative locational proximity. It is not difficult to infer that the situation will be much the same in respect of the lower-ranked universities, given that they do not possess the same funding, facilities and networks as the top-ranked ones.

As seen above, youth relations and educational linkages between India and ASEAN still have a long way to go. However, the very lack of infrastructure provides an opportunity for the two sides to collaborate. India and ASEAN (barring Singapore and Malaysia) are largely among the least-preferred destinations for foreign students. According to the 2017 Global Innovation Index, of the 127 countries surveyed, India, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines are ranked 102, 103, 104 and 105 respectively in ‘tertiary inbound mobility’ (that is, the number of foreign tertiary students enrolled in a country as a percentage of the total tertiary students). Thailand is ranked 66, Malaysia is placed at 26 and Singapore is ranked first²⁸ (Laos and Myanmar were excluded from the report, though it is unlikely that their rankings would be better than those of most ASEAN countries analysed). Thus, leaving aside Singapore and Malaysia, the report implies a severe dearth of international students in India

²⁴ *Association of Indian Universities*, ‘Internationalisation of Higher Education in India - Annual survey of International Students in India 2014-15’. Available at [http://www.aiu.ac.in/International/AIU_International_Students_2017%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.aiu.ac.in/International/AIU_International_Students_2017%20(2).pdf). Accessed on 13 September 2017.

²⁵ *The Straits Times*, ‘Number of Singapore students in US hits 10 year high’. Available at <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/number-of-singapore-students-in-us-hits-10-year-high>. Accessed on 13 September 2017.

²⁶ Ranking used is QS World University Rankings 2018. Available at <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2018>. Accessed on 16 August 2017.

²⁷ The universities analysed for this were as follows: Universitas Indonesia, Chulalongkorn University (Thailand) and University of Philippines. All information was derived from the respective university websites, correct as of publication.

²⁸ *The Global Innovation Index 2017*. Available at <https://www.globalinnovationindex.org/gii-2017-report#>. Accessed on 30 August 2017.

and most of the ASEAN countries. This gap could certainly be filled through a cohesive plan to encourage and incentivise the movement of students from India to all ASEAN countries and vice versa. The creation of such regional student connectivity will certainly benefit both parties. Apart from the large education market values noted previously, student exchange programmes in particular have been proven to add economic and human resource values as well. The European Union's Erasmus Programme, arguably the most successful regional student exchange programme, is widely lauded for the many benefits that the participants and countries receive. Impact studies have shown that the programme has improved the employability and competencies of students and has led to the internationalisation of higher education institutes.²⁹ Furthermore, the experiences of international students help to build networks which in turn can later be leveraged by them and their 'home' countries for economic value. Such students may become part of the diaspora populations in their host countries and send remittances back home or set up businesses.

In fact, the Indian and ASEAN academic exchanges can offer both sides a unique and increasingly valuable opportunity – prospects for the development of skills and entrepreneurship within an Asian environment. Skill development and innovation are two key areas which are in dire need of attention in both India and ASEAN. Institutionalised educational initiatives can serve as a bridge between the two sides in these sectors. For instance, in skill development, ventures such as the aforementioned ASEAN-India Students Exchange Programme can perhaps be expanded to include customised 'work plus study' exchange placements for ASEAN students. Countries such as Singapore and Malaysia, which are well versed in attracting foreign students, could provide crucial support in this endeavour either through logistical advice or as brokers of MoUs between educational institutions and employers. Additionally, India's competitive federalism can also be co-opted in this regard. The diverse nature of the economies of the Indian states, which specialise in different industries, sectors and services, can perhaps be matched with those of ASEAN countries for mutual learning of skills and best practices. Some Indian states have already tapped this potential. In 2012, the port city of Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh hosted diplomats from several ASEAN countries at a conference which discussed many areas of cooperation,

²⁹ *European Commission*. 'The Erasmus Impact Study'. 2014. Available at http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/library/study/2014/erasmus-impact_en.pdf. Accessed on 26 August 2017.

including educational tie-ups.³⁰ The state of Rajasthan also collaborated with Singapore in setting up the Centre of Excellence for Tourism Training³¹ in 2016. India's north-eastern states too can stand to benefit from their regional proximity to Southeast Asia. Viable youth collaborations in the region can be started through co-developed academic/vocational programmes in sectors such as tourism, which is a big part of the economic landscapes of the region.

In terms of innovation, student exchanges can also be key to unlocking the potential among countries especially such as India, Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines which are undergoing digital revolutions. The aforementioned innovation index ranked India at 60 overall, with Vietnam (47), Thailand (51), Brunei (71) and the Philippines (73) relatively close by on either side. However, the respective competitive advantages of these countries and the massive variations in their market sizes can be utilised for mutual innovation growth. For example, India ranks first in the index for export of information and communication technology as a percentage of total trade. Indeed, after attending the youth summit, a member of Singapore's delegation opined that India's technological prowess and innovation in areas such as banking, transportation planning and smart cities was of a very high calibre and could provide useful lessons for the ASEAN economies.³² On the other hand, many of the ASEAN countries, while lacking in infrastructure, possess other proficiencies. Cambodia is ranked first in microfinance gross loans as a percentage of total trade. Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia rank 5th, 7th and 13th respectively in creative goods exports as a percentage of total trade. Malaysia ranks first in high-technology imports (less re-imports) as a percentage of trade and the Philippines ranks 8th in research talent as a percentage of business enterprise. Singapore, naturally, is a leader in several innovation indicators such as intellectual property payments, government effectiveness and regulatory quality, among others. Thus, given this diverse mix, a focused multilateral innovation policy, executed through educational networks, which harmonises these separate competencies and leverages them into viable ventures, can lead to collective innovation development across the board.

³⁰ *The Hindu*, 'It's 'look Vizag' mantra for ASEAN countries now'. Available at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Visakhapatnam/its-look-vizag-mantra-for-asean-countries-now/article3369687.ece>. Accessed on 31 August 2017.

³¹ *The Straits Times*, 'Training centre in Rajasthan a collaboration with Singapore'. Available at <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/training-centre-in-rajasthan-a-collaboration-with-singapore>. Accessed on 31 August 2017.

³² The author's interview with a member of Singapore delegation.

Conclusion

In the context of the much-fancied Asian century, India and ASEAN stand out as key players. The ongoing negotiations for trade pacts such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership leave little or no doubt that the two will be engaged in deep cooperation in times to follow. Furthermore, the demographic dividend (a larger proportion of younger, working-age population) is set to benefit both in the near future. Under the UN's definition of 'youth' (persons between the ages of 15 to 24 years), almost 18 per cent of the Indian population (as of July 2016) were classified as youth.³³ Similarly, one-half of ASEAN's population in 2014 was below the age of 28.8 years³⁴ More importantly, a critical mass of these populations are or will be digitally empowered, thereby reducing the barriers for the flow of information and ideas. The shared cultural and historical ties of several ASEAN countries with India (through tourism, migration and diaspora populations), along with the burgeoning incomes through economic growth, can serve to cement the connections across the youth space.

At the Third Roundtable of the ASEAN-India Network on Think Tanks, Vietnam Minister of Foreign Affairs Pham Binh Minh emphasised that youth interactions were the “most important”³⁵ aspect for developing strategic connectivity between India and ASEAN. This statement could well be considered critical to usher in a new phase of relations. The strategic partnership between India and ASEAN has laid the foundation for mutual progress in the years to come. However, while both sides have acknowledged that the key to their respective success lies in the development of their youth, concrete action towards developing the India-ASEAN youth relations has yet to be taken. The process will certainly take time and effort, yet it is crucial that India and ASEAN recognise this opportunity early and capitalise on it.

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³³ CIA: *The World Factbook*, India, Available at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/in.html>. Accessed on 16 August 2017.

³⁴ *The Straits Times*, '7 numbers that explain the significance of ASEAN Economic Community'. Available at <http://www.straitstimes.com/business/companies-markets/7-numbers-that-explain-the-significance-of-asean-economic-community>. Accessed on 16 August 2017.

³⁵ ASEAN-India Economic Relations: Opportunities and Challenges, Proceedings of the Third Round Table on ASEAN-India Network of Think-Tanks (AINTT), AIC at RIS, 2015. Available at <http://www.ris.org.in/sites/default/files/pdf/FINAL%203RD%20AINTT%20REPORT%20-%20WEBSITE.pdf>. Accessed on 26 August 2017.