

TIES THAT BIND: INDIA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA CONNECTIVITIES

By Jayati Bhattacharya



Khon performance at Thammasat University Main Auditorium, Tha Phrachan Campus, Bangkok, Thailand. Khon is a dance and drama performance based on the *Ramayana*. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/yxrdu3n4>.

Imagining India in Southeast Asia is often guided and influenced by a number of factors. It may depend on how the contemporary global and the regional media views and portrays the Indian sub-continent through various news on religious dissensions, political rivalries, border disputes, terrorist attacks, and many other aspects that usually govern the ratings of the highly competitive and numerous television channels.

The perceptions of India may also be formed by a substantial Indian diaspora in different parts of Southeast Asia who may have migrated to the region in different periods of history under different compulsions or opportunities. These migrants have kept alive their ethnic identity through marrying each other, and nostalgic homeland memories handed over to succeeding generations. The “India” in Southeast Asia is also viewed through the lenses of colonial trappings and long-lasting legacies of discrimination and domination: specifically British hegemony over all of South Asia (present day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Afghanistan) and many parts of Southeast Asia (modern Malaysia, Myanmar and Singapore) British played a substantial part in creating narratives of the Indian population focusing upon jobs “typical Indians” do, crafting racially demarcated enclaves in everyday lived spaces, and consciously determining a minority status for Indians through strategic migration policies, established an identity of the “other” that had long lasting legacies in post-colonial times.

Perceiving “India” or “Indians” through any of these prisms constraints the ability and the willingness to comprehend the development, complexities, and diversities of the idea of “India” that has had a civilizational background of more than 5,000 years. With rapid economic changes and globalization, particularly in the latter part of the twentieth century and at present, there is also an increasing consciousness in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, of an emerging India, its dynamic, tech-savvy and globetrotting professionals and entrepreneurs, the highly acclaimed Indian spiritualism and yoga culture, and perhaps the only counter-option to China’s growing potential regional dominance.

Indian words like “karma,” “yoga,” “guru,” have been easily incorporated in everyday popular speech in Southeast Asia and across the globe. In Southeast Asia, the numerical strength of the Chinese diaspora is much

stronger than the Indian diaspora making the cultural familiarity with China much more aligned to the growing assertiveness of China in the South China Sea and East Asia. Geographically, the largely archipelagic Southeast Asia has been a meeting ground of both Indian and Chinese cultures for well over a 1,000 years and has blended with unique indigenous features that characterize most of the Southeast Asian states. Thus, many Southeast Asians view India with mixed feelings; both with a sense of a deep-rooted cultural connections, but also with a lack of understanding of India and Indians beyond what the media makes superficially visible. This makes teaching and learning about India both interesting as well as challenging in many ways. In the essay that follows, I address the different aspects of connections and disconnections between India and Southeast Asia and the relevance of mutual appreciation in the context of a resurging Asia.

Centuries of Cultural and Religious Connections

India shares a unique connection with Southeast Asia that has been shaped and reshaped by numerous historical developments. Adherents of religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam made their way to Southeast Asia via a variety of sea and land routes through South Asia, causing an integration of the belief systems in the region with indigenous flavors and distinction. Indonesia, for example, has emerged as the country with the largest Muslim population in the world yet, *Garuda*, the legendary bird in Hindu and Buddhist mythological traditions, is the national emblem of the country. In addition to the popular Garuda Airlines, Indonesia's prime airline carrier, Garuda is



Angkor Wat, the largest religious monument in the world, was originally constructed as a Hindu Temple during the Khmer Empire. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/ybywvn3j>.

represented in an impressive ornate statue in the Prambanan Temple, and also made its way into the *wayang*, or the traditional puppet culture of Java. The Garuda makes its pervasive presence felt in Thailand as well, a predominantly Buddhist country, where it is more mythically represented with a human torso and red feathers. These kind of cultural representations and connections continue in the Suvarnabhumi airport at Bangkok, capital of Thailand, where the international travelers are greeted with an impressive mythical exhibit of the *Samudra manthan* (churning of the ocean) that is directly influenced by Hindu mythological beliefs. A similar depiction of the *Samudra manthan* can be viewed in the walls of the temples at Angkor Wat dedicated to Lord Vishnu, one of the famous World Heritage sites in what is today, Cambodia. The localization of Indian influences can also be seen in the various adaptations of the Indian epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in temple performances, enactments in theater shows or in *wayang* puppetry culture.

Historian and archaeologist Pierre Manguin, describes the trajectories of historical narratives in Southeast Asia: “Indianization’ has never been a standardized paradigm; definitions have evolved with the passage of time and as the concept became entwined in multiple historicities, each one with its own different cultural background.”¹ The monsoon maritime routes were the most significant and perhaps the earliest conduits of cultural and economic exchanges between South and Southeast Asia. Trade prevailed between Tamil merchants in the eastern peninsular Indian sub-continent with the Thai port of Takua Pa and north Sumatra during the Mughal period (1000 CE onwards). The kingdom of Funan, in present Cambodia and in portions of present Việt Nam, was one of the earliest of the Hinduized states (first, fifth, and sixth century CE) and flourished until the ninth century CE. Jayavarman II, who was regarded as the incarnation of Lord Shiva from the Hindu cult, then founded the Angkor Empire. His lineage continued

until the twelfth century. Closer to the Bay of Bengal, the Pyu people in lower Burma were Hindu-Buddhist and fifth century CE collections of Pyu inscriptions with Sanskrit vocabulary indicate contacts with Bengal and Assam in modern India into Burma (now Myanmar). By sixth century CE, the Pyu people became predominantly Buddhists.

The cultural and economic interactions continued and fused with Arab and Persian maritime trade giving way to the “Indo-Islamic trading world –*al-bahr al-hindi*”² across West, South and Southeast Asia from the seventh to the eighth century. Angkor Wat (Cambodia), Borobodur (Indonesia) and Ananda Temple (Bagan, Myanmar) were constructed during this phase. Intellectual historian and Sanskrit scholar Sheldon Pollock describes this phenomena a creation of a Sanskrit cosmopolis for much of the first millennium CE.³ In spite of the inevitable impact of Indian culture, the extent, means, and homogeneity of Indian influence in Southeast Asia has been intensely debated.

In Indonesia, the oldest forms of writing are Sanskrit language inscriptions on stone pillars in Eastern Borneo that date back to 400 CE. In around 600 CE, the royal edicts in Sumatra were written in local Malay language in Indian script.⁴ Brahmins from South Asia found employment across the Bay to legitimize and perform coronation ceremonies for their patrons/ rulers in different polities in Southeast Asia. Buddhist monks and Brahmins took positions as scribes, record keepers, or spiritual guides. The kings of Java, Sumatra and Bali, among other places, strengthened by these educated elite's support, legitimized their rule as incarnation of Hindu Gods or Buddhist devotees in the early centuries of the Common Era. From the thirteenth century onwards, they began assuming the title of Sultan and sponsored the religion of Islam and Islamic institutions. Harbor masters were appointed from merchant's diasporic communities and given the title of Port Masters (*shahbandars*) who were responsible for other traders and for collecting taxes. Southeast Asian rulers were now drawn into the Islamic merchant networks and channeled their revenues in promoting and supporting the spread of Islam. The Hindu-Buddhist influence was predominant throughout the Srivijayan kingdom, based in Palembang, Sumatra, encompassing other parts of Southeast Asia and lasting until approximately the twelfth century. This kingdom's rulers firmly entrenched Buddhism. The Chinese pilgrims and monks who traveled between India and China through maritime routes, have left indelible accounts of their voyages that are important sources of information on Buddhist doctrines, rituals, commercial exchanges, travel routes, and intercultural perceptions throughout South and Southeast Asia. The Chinese pilgrim, Yijing travelled in the second half of the seventh century CE from Canton to Palembang in South Sumatra, before sailing up to Kedah in the Malay Peninsula.⁵ He then traveled to the Nicobar Islands and onwards to Tamralipti (then a port city) in Bengal. This was a major route of the sailing winds that travelers followed.

The Shailendras were another powerful Buddhist dynasty originating in east Java who, along with the Srivijayan kingdom, flourished until the emergence and eventual dominance of the Majapahit Empire in the fourteenth century CE. Srivijayan rulers had maintained good relations with the Tamil Chola Empire, based in Southern India, under Raja Raja Chola I, but the Cholas invaded Srivijayan cities during the reign of Rajendra Chola I. Kedah, now in modern Malaysia, also came under the Chola rule in approximately 1025, along with what is now Pattani in Thailand. The Chola influence in the region was substantial and is discussed in the important medieval Malayan chronicle *Sejarah Melayu*.⁶ The Hindu-Buddhist religions continued and co-existed along with the spread of Islam. In mainland Southeast Asian polities, Hindu-Buddhist worldviews continued to thrive, while Islam flourished more in coastal areas. Yet, popular art forms like wayang shadow plays, inspired by Hinduism and based upon Hindu-Java epics, remained and attracted wealthy patrons of different Islamic sects. Eventually Islam became the predominant religion of about 42 percent of Southeast Asians, living in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei, with minority adherents located in Thailand and the Philippines.

The religious impact on Southeast Asia from the Indian subcontinent is distinctly visible and has been indigenized with various manifestations of diverse rituals, practices and beliefs. Hinduism and Buddhism spread from India and mostly existed with mutual appreciation until many of the mainland states embraced Buddhism. Though Islam started flowing into the region through itinerant merchants and preachers, it was not until the fourteenth century CE that an Islamic state was established in Sumatra. All the religions co-existed with the existing culture and traditions and acquired a unique Southeast Asian identity. Most of the participants in the Muslim trade network were transient and localized in port cities. “Opportunities in the ports were disproportionately enjoyed by

foreigners” as historian Jean Taylor points out in her discussion on Indonesia,⁷ and rulers utilized the urban skills of foreigners like Chinese, Arabs or Indians for market administration. New port cities did not create new job opportunities for the rural people so no major shift of immigrants from rural to urban areas occurred. Fusion of the agrarian and the maritime economies for the most part did not occur, so pre-Islamic cultural foundations remained in practice in the country-sides. Foreigners settled in towns and cities with incentives for positions in courts or marriage to local women. In Java, Islam appropriated and Islamized some Hindu elements. By contrast Bali, now a popular tourist destination in Indonesia, is a good example of how a form of Hinduism prevailed as the dominant religion of the people, but one which has also been rooted in doctrines originating from spiritual traditions of Nusantara (a Javanese term meaning the “outer islands,” often adopted to describe maritime Southeast Asia or the Malay Archipelago), thus creating unique hybrid spiritual practices. Various competing sects of Hinduism and Buddhism fused together into the Agama Tirtha, more popularly known as the Bali Hindu religion. The everyday rituals have also incorporated certain practices from Islamic tradition.

Textiles formed a strong connection between India and Southeast Asia. Though Indonesia had an age-old tradition of local weaving for more than 4,000 years, Indian textiles were highly acclaimed and continued to be imported through different periods in history, not only as clothing or gifts and rituals in various ceremonies, but also as textiles used to decorate images in temples and ceilings, or in manuscript covers. The popular textile imports from India comprised of the double-*ikat* silk *patola*, a unique pattern of woven fabric and block-printed cotton textiles. There are numerous archeological evidences of these exchanges through different periods of history, ranging from the ninth to tenth century Java inscriptions, to excavations at burial sites at Ban Do Ta Phet in Thailand and Pontanoa Bangka in Sulawesi-one of the main islands in the Indonesian archipelago circa 500 CE, or architectural influences found in eleventh and twelfth century Pagan temples in Myanmar. These findings verify what historians and archaeologists of Southeast, South, East Asia, and other regions have known for many years, the existence of robust maritime and land trade routes populated by innovative and creative merchants and entrepreneurs.

Some fifteenth century sources describe the significant role of two South India based merchant communities, the Chulias (Tamil Muslim merchants) and the Kelings/ Klings (Chetti, Tamil, Telegu, Kannada Hindu merchants) in the emporium of Melaka (in modern Malaysia). There were other groups of textile traders who settled in the Malay Peninsula and north Sumatra (Indonesia) from Gujarat in western India.⁸ Historic sites in peninsular Thailand like Khao Sam Kaeo and Phu Kaho generate evidence of large quantities of glass and precious stone beads imports from India, and domestically producing them for growing markets in the region. Textiles and “Indianized” pottery, both imported and domestically produced, reveals the role of both artisans and technology in transfers from India to Southeast Asia.⁹ These examples bring to light different perspectives of trans-oceanic exchanges across the eastern Indian Ocean.

Colonial Disruptions and the Post-colonial Disconnect

The period of colonial expansion (approximately sixteenth to twentieth centuries) in most of South and Southeast Asia created major disruptions in age-old connectivities. While Britain colonized Burma, Malaysia and Singapore, France dominated Indochina (Việt Nam, Laos and Cambodia), The Netherlands controlled Indonesia, and Spain colonized the Philippines. Colonization ushered in new political structures that were hegemonic and discriminatory to indigenous populations. It implemented new economic models and institutions that introduced a labor-intensive plantation economy, commercialized agriculture, and the connection of these economic institutions’ produce to global demand and supply networks. It demarcated new territorial boundaries, separating communities and cultures that had co-existed for several or multiple generations.

Colonial rule also facilitated and strategized large movement of peoples across the Bay of Bengal. Between 1840 and 1940, about 8 million people traveled from India to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), and about 4 million to Malaya and 12

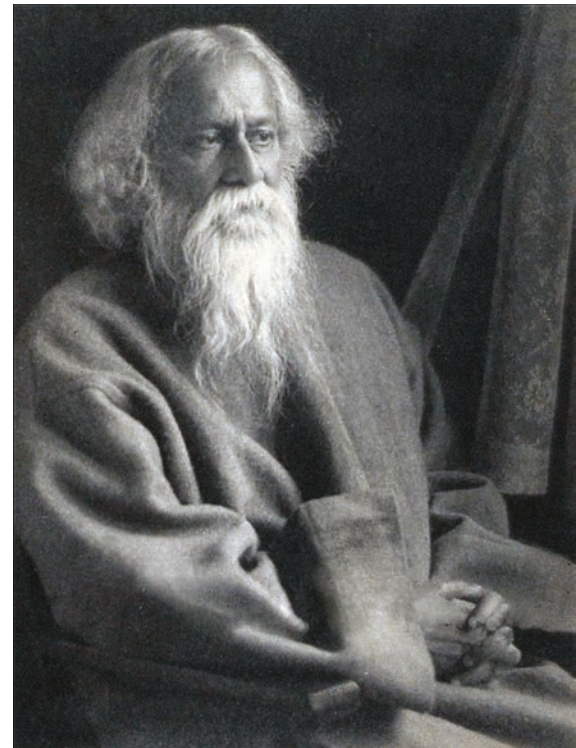


Detail of a patola sari from Gujarat, late eighteenth century; in the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (formerly the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India), Mumbai. Source: *Britannica Encyclopedia* at <https://tinyurl.com/yclxclmw>.

to 15 million to Burma, with approximately half of them returning within three to seven years.¹⁰ At the same time, Western domination brought access to European languages, modern technology, advanced communication links, and familiarity with Western political ideologies. Particularly from the 1920s and 1930s, there was an increasing sense of intellectual connections throughout Asia arousing anti-colonial feelings and nationalist sentiments, and an awareness of mostly peaceful and rich historical exchanges. Several Indian nationalist leaders traveled to Southeast Asia including Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, P. J. Mehta, and Periyar E.V. Ramasamy (commonly known as Periyar.) Subhas Chandra Bose, the Indian freedom fighter, established his base in Singapore and proclaimed the Azad Hind Government (free government of India) under his leadership in 1942. He inspired sympathy and affec-

tion from the people of different sections of society, particularly in the Malayan peninsula and Burma. Bose established the Indian National Army and the first all women army, the Rani of Jhansi regiment, the only one ever established for the Indian anti-British struggle.¹¹ Though his clarion call to “March to Delhi” (*Delhi Chalo*) was not successful and eventually suppressed by the British, Bose effectively empowered large populations of oppressed people with ideas of self-awakening and self-respect that had long-term effects in the political movements of the Malayan peninsula.

One of the most important representatives of the intellectual circulation of ideas was the Indian poet, novelist, philosopher, lyricist, musician and the first Asian Nobel Laureate, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore's voyages to Southeast Asia, China, and Japan in 1916, 1924, and 1927 spread ideas of freedom, fraternity, and universalism that rose above all man-made boundaries and reverberated strong resonances of the then-rising intellectual trend of “One Asia”. His university, Visva-Bharati at Shantiniketan (abode of peace) had invoked historical connections with Buddhist philosophies of peace and brotherhood along with the civilizational links across the region.¹² Tagore spread his ideas through his travels and speeches, to Burma, Malaya, Singapore, China and Japan, and many places in the West as well. Indonesian *batik* textiles, which



Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/yclxclmw>.

had originated in India, resurged in Bengal after Tagore's visit. Tan Yun Shan, the Chinese teacher and scholar, who met Tagore in Singapore in 1927, later established the school of Chinese studies (*Cheena Bhavana*) at Shantiniketan.

The Indian social activist and politician Periyar's tour at Penang, Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur, and Singapore and his interactions with plantation workers brought his social reform movement from the sub-continent to Southeast Asia and aroused significant enthusiasm among many people.¹³ Important Southeast Asian leaders received educations in India and spearheaded anti-colonial movements. Burmese monk and independence leader U Ottama, educated in Calcutta for three years, became involved in both the revival of Buddhism and organizing the nationalist independence movement, in what is today Myanmar. He traveled across India and introduced wearing hand-woven Burmese cloth, inspired by Indian nationalist leader, Mahatma Gandhi's idea of the link between self-sufficiency and handspun cloth.

Several institutions were established in India that facilitated educational reforms, and the revival of Buddhism, as well as ancient Indian links with the East. By the early decades of the twentieth century, the theosophist movement in the Buddhist revival led to close interactions with Madras and the establishment of the Buddhist Theosophical Society in Colombo in what is today, Sri Lanka. Later, it was further consolidated in a more transnational Buddhist identity by Dharmapala, whose Maha Bodhi Society was established in Madras, Rangoon (Yangon), and Calcutta, among other places. Also, the Young Men's Buddhist Association at Colombo resembled similar organizations in Calcutta, Rangoon, Tokyo, and San Francisco.¹⁴ The Calcutta-based Greater India Society was established in the 1930s by scholars and intellectuals to revive ancient Indian links with Southeast Asia and for about two decades published eighteen volumes of *Journal of the Greater India Society*.¹⁵

Channels of interaction had opened in the twentieth century across the seas of the Bay of Bengal that were motivated by educational exchanges, religious revivals, cultural familiarities, political ideologies, and social reform movements. Yet, historically, rich exchanges have often been overwhelmed by colonial narratives framed with political and economic agendas, nationalist movements, and anti-British struggles. The rise of nationalism, while it highlighted and enthused anti-colonial protests in different forms and shapes, also led to constraining identities of people within territorial limits, community, language, or religious affiliations. Imperial Japan's aggressive footsteps in different parts of Asia, coupled with the world depression of the 1930's and World War II were major disruptions that interrupted the momentum of interactions between India and Southeast Asia.

Though the end of colonialism in the years following World War II presented numerous possibilities, most of the newly independent nation-states were strongly driven by ideas of self-determination, insular solidarity, and fervent nationalism, causing them to focus upon reconstructing their own economies and political systems after centuries of colonial rule. Yet earlier efforts at inter-Asian connections managed to inspire some state leaders to engage with the ideas of Asian unity and fraternity. An important step taken in this direction by Jawaharlal Nehru, leader of the Indian National Congress, who later became the first Prime Minister of independent India in 1947, was to host about thirty Asian states and 200 delegates at the Asian Relations Conference held in New Delhi in March-April 1947 in order to bring about cooperation and harmony among nascent Asian states. This objective was again emphasized at the Bandung Conference of 1955 led by Nehru, Indonesia's leader Sukarno, and other African and Asian nation-states in an attempt to foster and promote the principles of democracy, multiculturalism, and Cold War non-alignment.

The early efforts at post-colonial interactive dialogues deserve appreciation, but were heavily thwarted under the gathering clouds of the Cold War tensions and voluntary or highly incentivized demarcations of newly created countries under opposing Cold War blocs. Cold War geopolitics became staunchly embedded into the political, economic, cultural, and educational agenda resulting in the formation of South Asia, Southeast Asia and other regions (Middle East, East Asia). In part, the Cold War led to establishment of the "area studies" framework both in academic institutions and publication houses in creation of new knowledge about Asia. It also generated formation of alliances like the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and intra-cohesive regional bodies like ASEAN (Association for Southeast Asian Nations) and SAARC (South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation). India's position grew increasingly isolated across the Bay of Bengal which transformed its role from a "connector" to a "divider" in the region.

The "Indo-Pacific" Factor: Geopolitical realities of the Twenty-First Century

The twenty-first century has witnessed a new momentum of globalization in Asia and the world. Renewed foreign policy strategies, rising multilateralism, and market driven interests have steered geopolitical and academic discourses to "redirect connectivities through littorals, (coastal areas), territorial landscapes, maritime spaces, and cultural imaginary (values, institutions, laws, and symbols through which people imagine their social whole) throughout the region."¹⁶ In the recent paradigm of interactions, a distinct departure from isolationism and inward-looking policies, including a rising China, and an emerging India, have brought new possibilities and alignments across political, economic, and cultural spaces. This transformative perspective has been demonstrated in foreign policy strategies like the Look East/Act East Policy (LEP/ AEP)¹⁷ initiated by India in the 1990s, or the massive project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by China since 2013, and several other multilateral groupings across the Bay of Bengal maritime space. It has also led to steadily emerging academic discourses on "intra-Asian studies," "Indian Ocean studies," "diasporic networks," or "borderland networks," breaking the barriers of the traditional and the more rigid area studies approaches.

While the LEP was an effort by India to rebuild its relations with its eastern neighbors and also energize its northeastern states that were further elevated to the AEP in 2014, China's BRI is a more ambitious project that has invoked historical "Silk Road" links with more strategic opportunities and development of infrastructural facilities for many developing states. Both nations have taken initiatives, in different dimensions, to integrate with their "extended neighborhood" converging in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean maritime space.¹⁸ India and China directly meet in India's backyard, the Indian Ocean, with a number of Chinese economic-strategic investments around the Indian peninsula that is also popularly known as the "String of Pearls" strategy. The Indian strategic outreach efforts, on the other hand, have drawn in countries like the United States, Japan, and Australia in different alignments, thus extending the domain of mutual interests into the Indo-Pacific region.

Table 1: Number of Indian tourists to Southeast Asia 2010 to 2018.

COUNTRIES	YEARS								
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Brunei	4,904	4,616	5,104	6,281	6,046	6,379	7,193	8,691	8,635
Cambodia	13,542	15,240	18,999	23,610	28,529	36,671	46,131	59,571	65,882
Timor-Leste	2,027	1,451	862	738	799	821	804	728	N/A
Indonesia	159,373	181,791	196,983	231,266	267,082	319,608	422,045	536,902	595,636
Laos	3,321	3,227	3,275	4,551	4,547	5,492	8,249	4,343	4,864
Malaysia	690,849	693,056	691,271	650,989	770,108	722,141	638,578	552,739	600,311
Myanmar	9,849	12,318	16,868	52,284	62,117	59,692	63,864	86,704	102,702
Philippines	34,581	42,844	46,395	52,206	61,152	74,824	90,816	107,278	121,124
Singapore	828,994	868,991	894,993	933,553	943,636	1,013,986	1,097,200	1,272,077	1,442,277
Thailand	746,214	891,748	985,883	1,028,414	906,428	1,039,395	1,076,970	1,281,681	1,596,772
Việt Nam	33,000	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	65,600	85,000	109,464	132,371

Source: India Tourism Statistics, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India. Market Research and Statistics, <https://tinyurl.com/y67yrdsz> Retrieved August 24, 2020* Concrete numbers on Indian tourists to Việt Nam from 2011–2014 is difficult to come by. The government of Việt Nam often includes India in combined statistic for “other Asian countries” for these years. Available information on Việt Nam has been derived from different sources like *The Yearbook of Tourism Statistics* 2018 Edition, UNWTO. <https://tinyurl.com/y5crcont>; Việt Nam Net. (2017). “Việt Nam boosts tourism in Indian market,” <https://tinyurl.com/y2ae5vfn>; VNA. (2020). “Indian tourists to Việt Nam increase,” <https://tinyurl.com/y27ccl68>; ASEAN Visitor Arrivals Dashboard: ASEANStats-DataPortal. <https://tinyurl.com/y6penjdw> ; All information retrieved August 29, 2020.

Regional cooperation has been facilitated by internal economic reforms of states and market-driven regional integration process that has resulted in expansion of output, outbound investments, free trade agreements, and mobility of professionals and entrepreneurs between India and ASEAN. Bilateral and multilateral agreements of India with other ASEAN states have been directed towards infrastructure cooperation, commercial banking links, energy cooperation, tourism exchanges, and capability building in technology and communication. As tables 1 and 2 indicate, significant and steady increases between India and ASEAN have occurred; yet a comparative analysis with Chinese trade figures in table 2 reveal the gaps or the untapped possibilities of these exchanges.

India's increasing focus on its maritime space and its expanding role in guarding the sea/oil lanes against piracy, terrorist attacks, environmental degradation, and natural calamities, as well as exploring maritime resources, has led to multilateral agreements, multilateral naval exercises (MILAN), and security alliances in the region.¹⁹ The “Asia-Pacific” idea has reshaped itself with “Indo Pacific” strategy in extending the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific Ocean into one common strategic arc.²⁰ The maritime shift and ensuing power play has caused India and other countries like the United States, Japan and Australia to form the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) that involve all four countries. The India-China relationship remains a critical factor that is based on collaborations and shared

Table 2: ASEAN-India-China Trade in Goods Exchanges (In \$US Billions)

YEARS	INTRA-ASEAN	ASEAN-INDIA			ASEAN-CHINA		
		Imports	Exports	Balance of trade	Imports	Exports	Balance of trade
2014	608.1	24.3	43.7	19.4	212.7	154.0	- 58.7
2015	535.4	19.6	40.6	20.9	218.2	145.3	- 72.9
2016	518.0	20.8	37.8	16.9	224.6	144.0	- 80.6
2017	589.2	28.3	45.4	17.1	253.9	187.0	- 67.0
2018	648.8	30.3	50.6	20.3	284.8	197.7	- 87.1
2019	632.4	28.8	48.3	19.5	305.4	202.5	- 102.9

Source: ASEAN Trade Statistics International Merchandise Trade Statistics (IMTS): ASEANStatsDataPortal. (n.d.), <https://tinyurl.com/y6jjmkom> retrieved August 26, 2020.

prosperity. At the same time, India and other nations have a strong incentive to prevent China from dominating South-east and South Asia.

Looking Forward

The interconnectedness that had prevailed for around 2,000 years between South and Southeast Asia and was altered into a sense of “otherness” in the post-colonial period has been resurrected again with renewed convergences between states and peoples through soft power approaches, revisiting historical interactions, exploring new markets, mutual economic interests and addressing common strategic concerns. The ideological connection of the “Suvarnabhumi” (the land of gold referred to in ancient Indian texts) has been energized in popular imagination through people-to-people exchanges, rising tourism activities and recollection of historical and cultural linkages. Southeast Asian Buddhists are tied to their pilgrimage sites in India that remain an important source of connectivity. Improved political and economic relations, including investment and free trade opportunities, also facilitate them.

Foreign policy relations between India and most ASEAN states are highly positive with increasing attempts to leverage on mutual complementarities. Yet, China’s assertive approach in the South China Sea and the ambitious BRI project has oriented most of the region’s attention to the Asian giant. India is a nuclear-armed nation (with a declared no first use policy), but one that also engages in strong soft-power approaches, while not neglecting alternative and counter force as a part of the QUAD to apprehensive and unsure about Southeast Asia since choices are not easy to make. Approaching Indian interactions beyond the compulsions of geopolitics may prove to be in the long-term interests of the region, Asia, and the World. It has possibilities in providing new paradigms of pedagogy, policy, and research beyond zonal demarcations with fresh academic discourses based on alliances and allegiances, experiences, and imagination between India and Southeast Asia, perhaps contributing to unrealized innovative international policies.

NOTES

1. “Introduction” in Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani and Geoff Wade eds. *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia: Reflections on Cross-cultural Exchange* (Singapore: ISEAS, New Delhi: Manohar, 2011), p. xiv.
2. Kwa Chong-Guan ed. *Early Southeast Asia Viewed from India: An Anthology of Articles from the Journal of the Greater India Society* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2013), p. xxxiii.
3. Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California, 2006).

4. Jean Gelman Taylor, *Global Indonesia* (London, New York: Routledge, 2013), 1-13.
5. Faxian's *A record of the Buddhist Kingdoms*, Xuangzang's *The Records of the Western Regions Visited During the Great Tang Dynasty* and Yijing's *The Record of Buddhism as Practised in India Sent Home from the Southern Seas* and the *Memoirs of Eminent Monks who visited India and Neighbouring Regions in Search of Law during the Great Tang* were the most notable of the accounts by the three Chinese Buddhist monk travelers. For other details of their travels and translations, see Tansen Sen, "The Travel Records of Chinese Pilgrims Faxian, Xuangzhang and Yijing: Sources for Cross-Cultural Encounters between ancient China and Ancient India", *Education About Asia* 11, No. 3.(2006): 24-33.
6. For further references on the Chola expedition in Southeast Asia, see Hermann Kulke, K. Kesavapany and Vijay Sakhuja ed. *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa: Reflections on the Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2010).
7. Jean Taylor, *Global Indonesia*, 24.
8. Himanshu Prabha Ray and Susan Mishra, *Sailing to Suvarnabhumi: Cultural Routes and Maritime Landscapes* (New Delhi: Research and Information System for Developing Countries, ASEAN-India Centre at RIS, 2019), 13-21.
9. Pierre-Yves Manguin, "Introduction," xix.
10. Sunil S. Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 104.
11. For further information refer to Sugata Bose, *His Majesty's Opponent: Subhas Chandra Bose and India's Struggle Against Empire* (New Delhi: Allen lane, 2011), S. A. Ayer, ed. *A Beacon Across Asia—A Biography of Subhas Chandra Bose* (Kolkata: Orient Blackswan, 2008).
12. *Tagore Centenary Volume* (Singapore: Singapore Tagore Centenary Celebration Committee, 1961); Rabindranath Tagore's written letters, *Javajatrir Patra* [Bengali] Supriya Roy, ed., *Letters from Java: Rabindranath Tagore's Tour of Southeast Asia 1927* [Vol. 3 of Tagore Travelogues] (West Bengal: Visva Bharati, 2010).
13. For more insights into the circulation of ideas and people, refer to Jayati Bhattacharya, "Connectivity Across the Colonial Bay of Bengal in the 19th and 20th Centuries." in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History*. Ed. David Ludden. New York: Oxford University Press, June 2019, oxfordre.com/asianhistory.
14. Jayati Bhattacharya, "Connectivity Across the Colonial Bay of Bengal."
15. The Society published the series of journals between 1934 and 1959 with a gap between 1947 and 1954. A detailed study of the journal articles are made in Kwa Chong Guan ed. *Early Southeast Asia Viewed from India*.
16. Jayati Bhattacharya, "Sea of Changes: Shifting Trajectories Across the Bay of Bengal." *Asian Politics and Policy* 9, no. 2 (2017): 246.
17. The Look East Policy (LEP) was started as an active foreign policy program under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao in 1991 along with domestic economic reforms and market liberalization. It was directed towards a regeneration of the northeastern states and extending India's engagements with its eastern neighbors in Southeast Asia. It was actively pursued by successive governments irrespective of their political inclinations and elevated to a more vigorous Act East policy (AEP) to look beyond Southeast Asia into the Pacific under the present Prime Minister, Narendra Modi since 2014 onwards.
18. For an analysis of "extended neighborhood" see: David Scott, "India's "extended neighborhood" concept: power projection for a rising power." *India Review* 8, no. 2 (2009): 107-143.
19. MILAN is a multilateral naval exercise hosted by the Indian navy in the Bay of Bengal. It started in 1995 with the participation of Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Singapore and Thailand, but soon increased to 16 countries participating in 2018 around the rim of the Bay of Bengal and beyond. The Southeast Asian states include Singapore, Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Việt Nam.
20. Gurpreet Khurana used the term for the first time in 2007 in an article "Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for Indian-Japan Cooperation," Japan's PM, Shinzo Abe also mentioned it during his first term in office, August 2007 'Confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans.' Stephen R. Nagy, "It's too early to write off the Indo-Pacific Strategy," *The Japan Times*, 24 July 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/yafs2kgt>.

JAYATI BHATTACHARYA is a Senior Lecturer in the South Asian Studies Program at the National University of Singapore. She has research interests in business history, Indian trade diaspora, connected histories and comparative diasporas. She is currently involved in research on the transnational space across the Bay of Bengal region and has also initiated collaborations with a global network of scholars in this direction. Some of her publications include *Beyond the Myth: Indian Business Communities in Singapore* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2011) and a co-edited volume, *Indian and Chinese Communities Comparative Perspectives* (London: Anthem, ISEAS, 2015).