Chapter V

Conclusion
Geographically contiguous India and Southeast Asia share some commonalities in cultural and religious practices. Waves of migrant Indians travelled to Southeast Asia from time to time and strengthened these cultural bonds. Deification of kings, religious practices, norms and ethos of the social life in Southeast Asia appear similar to that existed in India ever since the ancient times. It is very curious that though Southeast Asia was subjected to external influences such as Chinese and European cultures the Indian cultural impact continued to exist in the region.

During the colonial period India strongly advocated decolonisation of Southeast Asian countries along with other Asian and African countries. India’s keen interest in convening Asian Relations Conference in 1947 and its active involvement at Bandung Conference of 1955 which discussed Afro-Asian issues were the reflections of independent India’s thrust towards strengthening India and Southeast Asian countries bilateral and multilateral relations. India’s strong urge to reestablish
relations with Southeast Asia was, however, hampered by Cold War politics and also India's debacle in the Sino-Indian War of 1962 during which period many of Southeast Asian countries did not sympathise with India. Further, India moved closer to the Soviet Union for its own security reasons while many Southeast Asian nations tied up with the United States. This cleavage continued to haunt the relations between India and Southeast Asia though India maintained bilateral relations with some of the non-Indo-China countries not at a higher level. India did not evince much interest when the pro-American Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines together established a regional organization called the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, popularly known as ASEAN in 1967. Over years this organization developed as a credible outfit which addressed the region's political, economic and security issues. The economies of ASEAN have developed rapidly gaining the reputation being called as 'tiger economies' with which the extra regional powers wished to establish contacts and get the respective economies integrated under globalization.

The end of Cold War by the last decade of the previous century changed the global political environment paving way for enhanced economic relations among nations. India also altered its foreign policy priorities and took several economic initiatives and reforms with renewed activism. In this process India found an economic opportunity in
Southeast and East Asia to rejuvenate its stagnant economy. The
domestic economic reforms in turn attracted ASEAN to look at India with
interest on the developments in the country. Prime Minister P.V.
Narasimha Rao, at this juncture, launched India’s ‘Look East Policy’ with
a clear idea to integrate Indian economy with that of ASEAN. India’s
Look East Policy aimed at strengthening political and economic relations
with Southeast Asia and also with the countries in the East such as Japan
and Korea and also Australia to woo investors and to use the
infrastructural technologies available in these countries. In addition,
India also aimed at forming multilateral security and defence links with
Southeast Asia. India vigorously retraced its footprint in Southeast Asia
to strengthen its relations with the region as India realized that to emerge
as a major power it must develop strategic partnership with ASEAN and
to use the latter as a bridge to connect itself with East Asian countries. In
order to integrate with ASEAN India desired to associate with the
organization as a Dialogue Partner. Initially ASEAN, however, accorded
Sectoral Dialogue Partnership in 1992 as an acknowledgement of the
usefulness of the collaboration with India primarily in the economic
matters. As the developments in India and ASEAN were encouraging to
each other India was accorded Full Dialogue Partnership in 1995. By
becoming Full Dialogue Partner of ASEAN India got the scope to expand
its multilateral relations with the major countries in the world who were
also dialogue partners of ASEAN. The ASEAN mechanism provided an
opportunity for an intensive engagement among dialogue partners with a clear agenda and in frequent intervals. India's admission as a member in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), a security related forum, facilitated the country to establish multidimensional security and defence linkages with ASEAN and the Dialogue Partners. The economic and security linkages between India and ASEAN were further strengthened as India successfully scored diplomatic victory from the fall out of its nuclear tests in 1998. Some of the Southeast Asian nations overtly expressed that strong India would be in the interest of Southeast Asian stability, security, and economic development.

A close scrutiny of India's Look East Policy reveals that both India and ASEAN made good progress in the economic matters for the ten years i.e. 1992 to 2002. The two way trade with ASEAN was only less than three billion in 1992 and it grew to ten billion dollars by 2002. By conservative estimates the growth was not substantial but taking into consideration of estrangement of India and ASEAN and missed opportunities prior to the end of Cold War both sides felt happy over the economic development. In addition, the decade also laid a solid foundation for an all round development and strengthening relations between India and Southeast Asia. For India, ASEAN became launching pad to interact with East Asian Economic giants. Even when the Southeast Asian Countries were facing difficult times during the financial crisis the relations between India and
ASEAN registered progress. ASEAN Ministerial Conferences, Post Ministerial Conferences and the Senior Official Meetings, held periodically, helped to further strengthen the relations. The cooperative interaction between India and ASEAN helped both the regions to develop confidence to further enhance their relations. The Subregional engagement in the form of Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) covering India and some countries of ASEAN in each outfit provided further scope to get India integrated with Southeast Asia through tourism and cultural exchanges. These cooperative endeavours helped to grow the economic relations.

In the matters of security and defense links, India and ASEAN relations acquired a new dimension during the period of study mentioned above. By the time India secured dialogue partnership, China had already surged into Southeast Asia through its economic resurgence. It established roads and sea links with almost all Southeast Asian nations. China's defense overtures to Myanmar was a matter of great concern to India and the ASEAN nations alike. Against this background, India's integration with ASEAN came as a boon to both India and Southeast Asia. Southeast Asian nations willingly associated with India recognizing its military strength capable of helping Southeast Asia in case of any threat. Once critical of growing military strength of India, the Southeast Asian nations,
one by one, established defence links with India. Naval exercises, sea patrolling, training of defence personnel of ASEAN became a regular phenomena. Even the MGC and BIMSTEC acquired security overtones apart from economic linkages. The mutual understanding and confidence between India and ASEAN led to the Summit level interaction between them in 2002. India as a new partner reinforced its bilateral and multilateral relations with ASEAN in promoting regional peace and stability.

A decade of engagement thus helped both India and ASEAN to take their economic, political and security relations to a new high. India's emerging posture as a growing regional and global power assured ASEAN of multiple benefits. India was looked as a nation ready to help and strengthen the stability and security of Southeast Asia and also Asia – Pacific region.