CHAPTER V

SOCIO-CULTURAL DIMENSION

Culture, along with commerce, contributed to exchange of ideas for centuries in the pre-colonial period between India and Southeast Asia. However with the onset of colonialism, the age-old linkages were snapped and the Indians and Southeast Asians came to view each other as strangers though they share several cultural similarities. The contacts forged during the common struggle for freedom could not survive for too long as the mutual perceptions were coloured by the ideological conflicts during the Cold War era. The end of the Cold War has led to the emergence of a vigorous debate about cultural issues. It is in this context that the present chapter focuses on the socio-cultural relations between India and ASEAN countries.

India and Southeast Asian countries have cultural bonds since ancient times. The influence of the cultural interaction between India and Southeast Asia is evident in the religions, languages, and customs of every-day life of peoples. Many Indianised kingdoms such as Funan and Champa in the Indochina peninsula, Sailendra, Srivijaya, Majapahit empires in the Malay Archipelago existed in Southeast Asia during its ancient past. The gigantic monuments like Angkor Vat in Cambodia and Borobudur in Indonesia are living testimonies to the fruitful cultural interaction between India and Southeast Asia during the pre-colonial era.

According to French historian G. Coedes, the features of ‘hinduisation’ in ancient Southeast Asian kingdoms are:
... a concept of royalty based on hindu and buddhist cult; the mythology of the Puranas; the observance of the Dharmasastras; the use of Sanskrit as a means of expression; the use of alphabets of Indian origin; the pattern of Indian law and administration; the persistence of certain brahmanic traditions even in the countries converted to Islam or Singhalese Buddhism; the presence of monuments connected by their architecture and their sculpture to the arts of India, and bearing inscriptions in Sanskrit. ¹

It is significant to note here that despite the tremendous impact of Western conquest and rule for nearly four centuries in Southeast Asia, the Indian cultural patterns survived till now.

An Indonesian scholar, Soedjati Djiwandono, quotes President Sukarno as saying:

In the veins of every one of my people flows the blood of the Indian ancestors and the culture we possess is steeped through and through with Indian influences. Two thousand years ago, people from your country came to Jawadvipa and Suvarnadvipa in the spirit of brotherly love. They gave the initiative to found powerful kingdoms such as those of Sri Vijaya, Mataram and Majapahit. We then learned to worship the very Gods that you now worship still and we fashioned a culture that even today is largely identical with your own. Later, we turned to Islam, but that religion too was brought to us by people coming from both sides of the Indus.²

The King of Cambodia, Norodom Sihanouk, while inaugurating the Jawaharlal Nehru Boulevard in Phnom Penh in May 1955, remarked:

When we refer to two thousand years old ties which unities us with India, it is not at all a hyperbole. In fact, it was about two thousand years ago that the first navigators, Indian merchants and Brahmins brought to our ancestors their Gods, their techniques, their

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organisation. Briefly, India was for us what Greece was to the Latin Orient.³

The first-generation leaders and scholars from Southeast Asian countries themselves acknowledged India’s contribution to the enrichment of their culture as mentioned above. However, owing to the need to foster a stronger sense of national identity, the recent leaders highlight the indigenous features rather than alien influences. Therefore, as J.N. Dixit cautions, “any assertive attempts at cultural diplomacy on the part of India in relation to these (Southeast Asian) countries can, and does, affect their sensitivity.”⁴

**Cultural bonds**

The only cultural centre of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) that is located east of India is in Indonesia symbolising the closer cultural affinities between the peoples of the two countries. The Indian epics Ramayan and Mahabharat are hugely popular, especially in Thailand and Indonesia. They provide themes to many of the performances of the popular performing art, Wayang Kulit (puppet show). The Arjuna statue near the National Monument in the heart of central Jakarta is a striking symbol of the common cultural heritage. The Indian film stars are popular in many ASEAN countries. Most of the Indonesian television channels show Hindi films daily. The popularity of the Indian films and television serials in Indonesia has grown beyond belief.

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The growing interest in cultural aspects, for instance, was symbolised by the proposal made by the Singapore Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, to India in September 1992 to set up a permanent exhibition of Indian culture in Singapore to highlight the different cultural streams.\(^5\) Subsequently Singapore signed a MoU for Cooperation in the Arts, Archives, and Heritage with India in February 1993.\(^6\) India has regular cultural exchange programmes with most of the ASEAN countries.

India and ASEAN identified tourism and people-to-people contacts as among the areas for intensified cooperation under the dialogue partnership framework. We shall discuss here the cooperation in these two areas.

**Tourism**

Tourism emerged as one of the major foreign exchange earners for many countries. India and ASEAN have recognised the imperative for cooperation in the tourism sector due to the vast potential that exists for mutual benefit. They have agreed to cooperate specifically in the areas of travel, hotels and joint marketing of tourist destinations. India is interested in learning from the experiences of tourism marketing strategies of ASEAN countries.\(^7\) The areas identified for cooperation include management of destination tourism, cooperation between the travel trade on the two sides, cooperation in the hotel industry, promoting a Visit India-ASEAN Year, and establishing an ASEAN-India Tourist Information Centre. Familiarization tours and tourism seminars were organised. A study for preparing a tourism profile

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\(^6\) Ibid., p. 29.

from the perspective of ASEAN-India cooperation was commissioned under the ASEAN-India Fund. India attended the meeting of ASEAN National Tourist Organisations in Chiang Rai, Thailand.

Pilgrimage tourism covering Buddhist tourist circuits is another important factor in the relations between India and Mainland Southeast Asia. In a symbolic gesture, India waived the visa fee for Thai monks visiting India on pilgrimage, which was deeply appreciated by the Buddhist society of Thailand.

India and five ASEAN states on the mainland Southeast Asia, namely, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam have initiated the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) forum to promote tourism, culture and education as a first step, to be followed by cooperation in developmental areas like transport and infrastructure. The Foreign Ministers of India and the five Mekong River riparian countries jointly announced the MGC forum in Bangkok in July 2000 and launched it in Vientiane in November 2000. The objective of this forum is to promote cultural links between India and these five ASEAN states. In tourism, the need to promote the Buddhist pilgrimage sites in the member countries was highlighted. The people of the Greater Mekong sub-region and the people of India, especially of the northeast region share many socio-cultural similarities in religious practices, social values, rites and ceremonies, physical features, dress & handicrafts or food habits.

India and ASEAN countries can derive significant benefits from tourism to their socio-economic development through its potential to expand their economic base, increase foreign exchange earnings, provide employment and
enhance the standard of living. India and ASEAN could address more effectively many of the common issues in the tourism sector through mutual cooperation. They can benefit by sharing experience and expertise. Joint ventures in hotels, resorts and other tourist facilities can be promoted between India and ASEAN countries. More interaction is needed on a regular basis among tourism officials of India and ASEAN. Tourism industry representatives should be actively involved in tourism promotional activities of the governments.

India and ASEAN countries share a wealth of historical and cultural heritage. They could join hands in promoting tourism under a common tourism banner. They could combine their resources to undertake joint tourism promotion and marketing activities. Joint tourism promotion could lay special emphasis on historical and cultural heritage. In particular, religious site circuits have good potential to attract visitors. Joint tourism promotion is cost-efficient and is of particular importance since in spite of abundant attractive tourist destinations in the India and ASEAN countries, some destinations are yet to be known to major tourist markets because of insufficient promotional efforts. As the visa restrictions have been hindering tourist inflows, visa regime needs to be liberalised to encourage people to travel.

The crisis-struck ASEAN economies have launched tourism promotional activities on a big scale since 1997. As tourism is a labour-intensive sector, it creates employment at various levels. It brings in foreign exchange very quickly. The Malaysian Tourism Promotion Board (MTBP) has launched a major promotional campaign in India, especially in the wake of the economic
crisis. It allocated as much as US$ one million on advertisements for the year 2001 alone in India. It has been conducting road shows in major Indian cities. In 2000, tourism in Malaysia from India grew by 185 per cent over the previous year with 132,000 tourists visiting the country.

**People-to-People Contacts**

It is vital to foster people-to-people contacts to sustain any partnership. India and ASEAN proposed the setting up of ASEAN study centres in India and India study centres in ASEAN and establishing interlinkages between ASEAN universities and their Indian counterparts, and also collaboration in vocational and technical training. During his visit to Thailand in 1993, Prime Minister Rao inaugurated an India study centre, the first of its kind in Thailand, at the well-known Thammasat University and academic links were intensified. Efforts are also being made to establish India Chair in Malaysia and Malaysia Chair in India.

**India-ASEAN Eminent Persons Lecture Series Programme**

One of the innovative features of the India-ASEAN partnership is the India-ASEAN Eminent Persons Lecture Series that was instituted by India to generate mutual awareness and create mutual interest. The Malaysian Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad delivered the inaugural lecture in December 1996. Many distinguished persons from all walks of life have delivered the public lectures on various topics both in India and the ASEAN states. The Research & Information System for the Non-Aligned and other Developing

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9 Arun Dasgupta, "Intellectual and Academic Cooperation between India and Southeast Asia" in Baladas Ghoshal, ed., *India and Southeast Asia: Challenges and Opportunities* (Delhi, 1996), pp. 81-94.
Countries (RIS), New Delhi, designated as the nodal institution, regularly organises these lectures. So far fourteen eminent persons from the ASEAN region have delivered lectures in India and seven eminent Indians have done so in the ASEAN states. The topics, speakers, dates and venues of lectures are mentioned below.

Lectures delivered in India

1. Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (Malaysian Prime Minister), *Prospects for Improving India-ASEAN Economic Cooperation*, New Delhi, 21 December 1996.

2. Dr. Bernardo M Villegas (University of Asia and Pacific, the Philippines), *APEC: Retrospect and Prospect*, New Delhi, 17 June 1997.

3. Dr. Thaksin Shinawatra (the then former Deputy Prime Minister and the present Prime Minister of Thailand), *Building India-ASEAN Synergy in an Era of Globalisation: Lessons from the East Asian Economic Crisis*, New Delhi, 12 May 1998.


8. Dr. Mohammed Ariff (Executive Director, Malaysian Institute of Economic Research),
   (a) *Crisis Management: The Malaysian Model*, Bangalore, 6 May 1999.
9. Mr. Soubanh Srithirath (Minister, Office of the President of the Lao PDR), *ASEAN-India Partnership Towards the Next Millennium*, New Delhi, 22 December 1999.


11. Mr. Rodolfo C. Severino (Secretary-General of ASEAN), *ASEAN and India – A Partnership for Our Time*, New Delhi, 9 January 2001.


13. Mr. Hor Namhong (Senior Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs & International Cooperation, Cambodia), *ASEAN-India summit Partnership: Challenges and Prospects*, New Delhi, 14 March 2002.


**Lectures delivered in ASEAN countries**

   a) *Space Remote Sensing for Sustainable Development*
   b) *Small and Beautiful-Thrust of the Next Millennium*

2. Dr. R.A. Mashelkar (Director-General, Council for Scientific & Industrial Research, New Delhi), Thailand, July 1998.
   a) *Management of Innovation in the Developing World: A New Challenge*
   b) *Globalisation of Indian R&D: The Challenge and Opportunities*

3. Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan (Academic Director, Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts, New Delhi), Malaysia and Indonesia, August-September 1999.
   a) *Culture and Development*
   b) *Ramayana in Southeast Asia and India*
   c) *Conservation & Documentation of Heritage in India and Southeast Asia*
   d) *Temple Architecture: India and Southeast Asia*

4. Dr. P.N. Tandon (Emeritus Professor, Dept. of Neurosurgery, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi), Philippines and Malaysia, November 1999.
   a) *Health and Development: Consequences on Each Other*
   b) *Neuroscience Research in India*
   c) *State of the Art of Neurosurgery in India*
5. Dr. C. Rangarajan (Governor of Andhra Pradesh), Singapore and Indonesia, February 2000.
   a) Structural Reforms- A Case Study of India
   b) Economic Reforms in India
   c) Exchange Rate Management and Capital Flows - Lessons from India and East Asia

   a) The Biological Century and Our Common Future
   b) Building a Community Nutrition Security System

7. Mr N.R. Narayana Murthy (Chairman & Chief Mentor, Infosys Technologies Ltd, Bangalore), Corporate Governance - A Luxury or a Must?, Malaysia, April 2002.

Among the Indian speakers who have delivered lectures in ASEAN countries, we find experts from the “low politics” fields such as technology, economics, and culture. The topics have been chosen to generate awareness of the situation in various fields in India and present an Indian perspective on diverse issues concerning both sides. So far, all the lectures, except one, were organised in New Delhi. By organising the lectures in other cities apart from New Delhi, greater awareness may be generated about ASEAN in India.

Role of the Overseas Indians

There is a sizeable ethnic Indian community in the ASEAN region. Ethnic Indians are found occupying several important positions. One of the founders of the ASEAN, who signed the Bangkok Declaration on 8 August 1967 was the then foreign minister of Singapore, Mr Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, was a person of Indian origin. The first Secretary-General of ASEAN, after its reorganisation in 1992 was Dato’ Ajit Singh, a Malaysian national and a person of Indian origin. He played a key role in bringing ASEAN closer to India through his strenuous efforts. He undertook as many as six visits to
India during his five-year tenure (1993-97) to generate mutual awareness and enhance understanding between the two sides.

Table 5.1: The Indian Diaspora in the ASEAN countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>PIOs</th>
<th>NRIs</th>
<th>Stateless</th>
<th>Total Size of Indians</th>
<th>% of the Native Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brunei</td>
<td>331,000</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>7000</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>7,600</td>
<td>2.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>11,340,000</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>NIL</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>Negligible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>200,000,000</td>
<td>50,000</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>NIL</td>
<td>55,000</td>
<td>Negligible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laos</td>
<td>5,100,000</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>Negligible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>22,890,000</td>
<td>1,600,000</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>50,000</td>
<td>1,665,000</td>
<td>7.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>46,500,000</td>
<td>2,500,000</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>400,000</td>
<td>2,902,000</td>
<td>5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>76,000,000</td>
<td>24,000</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>38,000</td>
<td>Negligible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>3,160,000</td>
<td>217,000</td>
<td>90,000</td>
<td>Negligible</td>
<td>307,000</td>
<td>9.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>62,000,000</td>
<td>70,000</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>NIL</td>
<td>85,000</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>78,000,000</td>
<td>NIL</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>Negligible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>505,321,000</td>
<td>4,461,668</td>
<td>136,577</td>
<td>462,110</td>
<td>5,060,355</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Figure 5.1: % Share of the Indian Diaspora in the ASEAN Region
As Table 5.1 shows, more than five million people with connections to India are in the ASEAN region. Most of them are in Myanmar, Malaysia, and Singapore that were under British rule. Most of them moved to these places during the colonial era.

Even though the Chinese constitute the majority of its population, Singapore is represented abroad not by persons of the Chinese origin alone. Indeed all but one of its foreign ministers since its independence in 1965, Sinnathamby Rajaratnam (1965-80), Suppiah Dhanabalan (1980-88), and Prof S. Jayakumar (since 1994) happen to be persons of Indian origin. Similarly two ethnic Indians, Bilahari Kausikan and Kishore Mahbubani, have held the post of the Permanent Representative of Singapore to the United Nations. The present President, S. R. Nathan, is also of Indian origin. The Chinese-led Singapore has certainly reaped the benefits of utilising the talents of the ethnic Indian community.¹⁰

Culture far from being divisive factor between India and Southeast Asian countries is being promoted as a unifying element to forge a long lasting relationship. The areas of tourism and people to people contacts have ensured the participation of the public in this relationship. The Indian diaspora is another bridging factor between India and Southeast Asian countries.

¹⁰ During his first visit to China in May 1976, the Singaporean Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, was presented a gift of a Chinese book on the 1962 Sino-Indian War. But he returned it, as he is sensitive to the feelings of the Indian community in Singapore.