

**INDIA-SOUTHEAST ASIA INTERSECTIONS OF HISTORY, CULTURE  
AND LITERARY TRADITIONS**SONU TRIVEDI<sup>1</sup>, §

**Abstract.** India and Southeast Asia have shared dynamic interactions across history, culture and literary traditions. This Paper explores these connections that have shaped the dynamics of India-Southeast Asia relations over the period of history. It investigates historical linkages and maritime networks to understand the ancient trade routes that facilitated economic and cultural exchanges across the Bay of Bengal. It seeks to study the complex interactions of ideas and institutions and their adaptations by these societies. The Paper further analyses temple complexes and sacred sites tracing the impact of Indian and Buddhist cosmology in the Southeast Asian landscape. Finally, it examines literary encounters and their adaptations in shaping collective identities across both regions. The Paper argues for developing a dynamic reciprocal engagement based on shared civilizational heritage for deepening its footprints in the region amidst the changing geo-politics of the region.

**Keywords:** India, Southeast Asia, Historical Linkages, Maritime Networks, Cultural Exchange, Temples, Epics, Folklores.

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## 1. Introduction

Shared heritage and cultural ethos constitute the corner stone of India's relations with Southeast Asian nations. Prime Minister Narendra Modi calls it as "companions in the Global South, not only commercial partners but also cultural partners" (PM India, 2025). As we complete over three decades of ASEAN-India partnership, it is time to reflect at the ancient maritime networks, historical narratives and cultural exchanges between the countries of Southeast Asia and India.

Southeast Asia has been a thriving destination for Hindu and Buddhist missionaries along with traders and merchants since ancient times. The cultural contacts and exchanges via trade, language, religion and Indian epics are well documented. They travelled to faraway kingdoms in the Far East in large numbers and this led to expansion of Indian culture and civilisation to different parts of Southeast Asia. References to *Swarnabhumi* and *Jambudweep* abound in our mythologies and ancient literature about this region.

Under this backdrop, this paper explores the historical linkages and maritime networks and studies the cross-cultural exchange of ideas and institutions between India and Southeast Asia. It also looks at the literary encounters, epigraphic sources and shared geography as symbols of civilizational interaction. Given the changing geo-political dynamics and uncertainty in the Indo-Pacific, this paper argues for closer links with Southeast Asian countries. In recent times, the shared cultural ethos and people-to-people ties have been the main anchor of the relationship, and it would be a natural outcome for India to deepen its footprint in the region.

## 2. Historical Linkages and Maritime Networks

It is believed that Southeast Asia since early years had been considered as the land of opportunities where traders and missionaries from different parts of India visited and established their roots in the region. The references of *Kalinga*, *Chola* and *Pallavas* of India could be found in the ancient kingdoms of Southeast Asia such as *Srivijaya* kingdom of Sumatra and Malaya, *Sailendra* dynasty of Java, *Angkorean* kingdom in Cambodia and *Champa* kingdom in Vietnam.

Since the early times, archaeologists, geographers and historians have traced the land and sea-routes that resulted in the 'Indianisation of Southeast Asia' from very early period. Italian geographer, G. E. Gerini writes about "a double stream of emigrants from India flowed into Indo-China at a very early period. One proceeding from the north advanced overland, through Manipur and Burma and influence the northern part of Indo-China as far

as Tonkin Gulf and Chinese borders; the other coming from South reached Indo-China by sea, and its influence extended mainly over Malay Peninsula, Siam, Kamboj and Southern Annam. Thus, it could be seen that Northern Indo-China owes its early civilisation to settlers from Northern India; while its southern portion, including the Malay Peninsula and Archipelago, is indebted for its ancient development to adventurers and colonists from the Coromandel and Malabar coasts" (Gerini, 1909).

Sea power had thus, united the mainland and peninsular India with the Hindu Kingdoms in the East (Panikkar, 1943). Kalidas Nag (1926), likewise talks about existence of two ancient trade-routes for communication for 'Eastern Asiatic people' – "one was the land-route from India via Assam and Burma to China and another was the sea-route via Indo-Chinese". According to R. C. Majumdar, "Generally, the Indians proceeded by sea to the East and Southeast from Tamralipti, Kalinga, Masulipatnam and Broach. In addition to the sea-route they also proceeded to the East and South-East by land-route through Eastern Bengal, Manipur and Assam". He further adds, "The colonists who proceeded by sea established the famous kingdoms of Champa (Annam) and Kamboja (Cambodia) in addition to many other notable kingdoms in lower Burma, Malay Peninsula and the islands of Sumatra, Java, Borneo, Bali etc" (Majumdar, 1927). Among the eastward maritime activity of India, "the pioneering work seems to have been done and the lead taken by the ancient kingdom of Kalinga" (Mookerji 1912). It is further believed that, Champa, the capital of Anga (modern Bhagalpur in Bihar) was a commercial centre from where merchants sailed to Suvarnabhumi and they also founded a settlement in Cochin China (modern Vietnam), named after their famous native town (Davids. 1903). Tamralipti was another harbour of great antiquity which figures in the writings of Fa-Hien and Hiuen Tsang, as a maritime settlement of the Buddhists (Mookerji 1912).

Maritime trade also resulted in cultural engagement between people of India and Southeast primarily through successive waves of religious influence, which began with 'Hinduism, Buddhism and later Islam'. These exchanges also led to the spread of language, literature, art and architecture, social practices, customs and traditions as well as governance and administrative procedures. The local people adapted the new civilisation and embraced "the religion, art, social manners and customs, alphabet, literature, laws and administrative system" which was passed on to them from India (Majumdar, 1927). It is believed that "the greater part of the area, so far as accessible by sea, had been more or less thoroughly Hinduised, and rulers with Indian names ending in the patronymic 'varman', and using an Indian alphabet, were established in Champa, Cambodia, Sumatra, and even Borneo" (Coomaraswamy, 1927).

### 3. Transmission of Ideas and Institutions

The Southeast Asian region cannot be understood without a familiarity about ideas, norms and institutions that have predominantly guided the region to its present form. Shared cultural heritage between India and Southeast Asia is visible in the syncretic union of Hinduism and Buddhism.

It is believed that the Indians left traces of their influence on “Burma, Champa, Cambodge, Sumatra and Java. By the 5<sup>th</sup> century not only Champa and Cambodge were thoroughly *hinduised*, but fresh Hindu colonies appear in the Malay Peninsula, in ancient Siam, in Laos, in Borneo, Sumatra and Java” (Nag, 1926). This period has been regarded as ‘Hindu renaissance’. He adds further, “Brahmanism and Buddhism were flourishing peacefully in these cultural colonies of India in Southeast Asia”. According to him, “The Brahmanical and Buddhist leaders as well as Indian merchants, princess and intellectuals cooperated intensively with the gifted indigenous population and thus laid securely the foundation of Greater India” (Kalidas, 1957). Majumdar (1955) believes that, “along with merchants, *Ksatriya* chiefs and religious missionaries, were the pioneers of the “Hindu Colonisation” in Southeast Asia”<sup>1</sup>.

Sardesai (1989) considers “Brahmans and the priestly class as the prime agents of the process of Indianisation”. According to him, “the initiative for the Indianising process in Southeast Asia most certainly came from the region’s ruling classes, who invited Brahmins to serve at their courts as priests, astrologers, and advisers. They had monopolised knowledge of the sacred lore, the rites and rituals, and customs and laws” (Sardesai, 1989). The Indian style administrative structure based on ‘Divine theory of Kingship’<sup>2</sup> and the ‘Code of Manu’<sup>3</sup> were widely adapted by the Southeast Asian royalty.

The process of Indianisation in Southeast Asia is also supposed to have “included the alphabetical influence on their scripts; importance of Sanskrit in the vocabulary; introduction of the Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata and works on a variety of subjects like philosophy, astrology, medicine, mathematics and the arts” (Sardesai 1989). It is believed that “Funan’s adoption of Sanskrit as the court language and its encouragement to

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<sup>1</sup>The term ‘Hindu’ according to R. C. Majumdar is used here in a very broad sense. “It does not refer to followers of Brahmanical religion. As is well known, the word Hindu is derived from Sindhu, the name of mighty river on the Western border of India. Gradually, the name Sindhu in its phonetically changed form Hindu came to denote whole of this country.”

<sup>2</sup>Kingship, according to ancient Indian tradition had divine sanction. King was perceived as protector of Dharma (righteousness). He was ordained by God for the protection of the people.

<sup>3</sup>It is believed that Manu was the first law giver. He codified the laws of social order, which acted as legal and ethical guide for societal conduct and preservation of Dharma.

Hinduism and after the 5<sup>th</sup> century, to Buddhism as well must have helped the process of Indianisation of the whole area" (Sardesai 1989).

K. M. Panikkar describes Southeast Asia as 'Further India'. According to him, "the name is significant and embodies the idea which had been recognised from early days that India and Southeast Asia were connected integrally in their political, social and economic life and have reacted on each other in their historical growth" (Panikkar, 1943). The expanding maritime linkages and cultural influence of India in the region led to the state formation and socio-political transformation of Southeast Asia, largely designated by scholars like George Coedes as the 'Indianized States of Southeast Asia'. Indianisation, according to Coedes, "must be understood essentially as the expansion of an organized culture that was founded upon the Indian conception of royalty characterised by Hinduist or Buddhist cults, the mythology of the *Puranas*, and the observance of the *Dharmasastras*, and expressed itself in the Sanskrit language" (Coedes, 1975).

British historian D. G. Hall, in his notable work 'A History of Southeast Asia', regards "relations between India and Southeast Asia probably go back far into pre-historic period. New states grew up around sites which Indian seamen had frequented from time immemorial" (Hall, 1975). He outlines that, organised culture established in Southeast Asian states was based on four elements:

- (a) "a conception of royalty characterised by Hindu or Buddhist cults,
- (b) literary expression by means of the Sanskrit language,
- (c) a mythology taken from the Epics, the *Puranas* and other Sanskrit Texts containing a nucleus of royal tradition and the traditional genealogies of royal families of the Ganges region, and
- (d) the observance of the *Dharamashastras*, the sacred laws of Hinduism and in particular 'Laws of Manu'" (Hall, 1975).

French scholar Coedes also describes deep traces of the Indianisation in Southeast Asia characterised by "the importance of the Sanskrit element in the vocabulary of the languages spoken there; the Indian origin of the alphabets with which those languages have been or still are written; the influence of Indian law and administrative organisation; the persistence of certain Brahmanic traditions in the countries converted to Islam as well as those converted to Singhalese Buddhism; and the presence of ancient monuments which, in architecture and sculpture, are associated with the arts of India and bear inscriptions in Sanskrit" (Coedes, 1975).

One of the early historians, Nicholas Tarling, describes “Indian influence reaching South-east Asia primarily overseas” (Tarling, 1966). The influences came along trade routes brought by merchants and missionaries. Indian culture not only spread to courts but also to other fields such as crafts and customs. In his writings, Tarling elaborates on “Indian influences in public architecture, court rituals, astrology, and other religious observance”. Other studies also reveal that “traces of the region’s contact with the high cultures of India are not preserved only in monuments. Indian influences remain alive and well in the rituals of Southeast Asia’s royal courts. Hinduism and Buddhism were nurtured and promoted by courts around the same time, and across a broad area of Asia”. Southeast Asia, thus, “remained a patchwork of Hindu–Buddhist kingdoms that were heavily influenced by the Indian civilization” (Sanyal, 2016).

Rooted in the Indian idea of ‘Mandala System’, the state structure in pre-colonial Southeast Asia was highly decentralised and royal authority wielded power based on fluid alliances. The administrative structure of these states was designed on concentric circles with fluctuating borders based on the loyalty of the local chiefs and warlords. A deeper look at the Mandala system reveals that the states in early Southeast Asia were unlike modern nation-states, with fixed borders. Various Kingdoms in Southeast Asia adopted this model for defining the inter-state relations, where the central King *Vijigisu* acquired the title of ‘*Chakravartin*’ (World Conqueror), the neighbouring states joined this Mandala as *Mitra* (friends) and enemies formed their alternative Mandals with *Ari* and *Ari-Mitra* joining their respective alliances. In this Mandala, the role of *Madhyam* (buffer state) and *Udasin* (neutral power) was reasonably significant as their deployment to either side decided the outcome of war and peace in maintaining their foreign relations (Kautilya, n.d., as translated by Shamastra, 1929)<sup>4</sup>. Some of the major Southeast Asian Kingdoms following this model were the Majapahit Kingdom of Java; the Srivijaya Kingdom of Sumatra; the Khmer Empire of Cambodia; the Pagan Kingdom of Burma; the Ayutthaya Kingdom of Thailand; and the Champa Kingdom of Vietnam. “Although each state had different strategies of centralisation and expansion, they were shaped mainly by the concept of the universal king based on the selected ritual of the ruler” (Patcharaporn et al., 2025). The concept of the Mandala based on overlapping circles, provides an important theoretical framework for understanding the political authority and state structure in Southeast Asia.

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<sup>4</sup>Kautilya mentions about inter-state relations and formation of alliances by the Central King with the neighbouring states in Arthashastra, Book VI, Chapter-2.

#### 4. Epigraphy and Sacred Geography

The magnitude of Indian influence is evident in the early Sanskrit inscriptions, sculptures and religious monuments that emerged as symbols of sacred geography in Southeast Asia. These relics and artifacts are evidence of cultural flows and civilisational interactions between the two regions. Epigraphic sources suggest numerous Sanskrit inscriptions found in Southeast Asia, for example, “the Vo-Canh inscriptions at Champa (2<sup>nd</sup> -3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D.), the *Kutei* inscriptions of *Mulavarman* from East Borneo (5<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) and the *Tarumanagara* inscriptions from West Java” (Basa 1998). Others include *Vat Thipedi* and *Pre Rup Stele* inscription (9<sup>th</sup> Century) of Cambodia, *Sawlumin* Inscription (11<sup>th</sup> century) in Burma and *Kalimanatan* stone pillars in Indonesia.

The earliest temple in Southeast Asia is from the Mekong Delta region (1st century AD). Others include brick temples at Oc Eo (4<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> century) and stone and brick art at Nen Chua (4<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> century). Art and architecture of these temples have been shaped by Indian styles and motifs. These temples have an enormous wealth of ‘Hindu icons’ made of wood, stone, and terracotta (Lahiri, 2004). Some of these temple sites represent Hindu-Buddhist syncretism, with the sculpture combining Hindu and Buddhist elements. These could be seen at *Candi Jago* (from the *Singhasari* Kingdom in East Java), depicting stories related to Buddhism and Hindu mythology. It is also noteworthy that images of Shiva adorned the well-known Buddhist temples of Dong Duong (during the Champa Kingdom in Vietnam). “This kind of syncretism led to the development of a unique artistic style and iconographic forms of both Hindu and Buddhist deities, where the Shaivite faith had a great impact on the Buddhist rituals and practices” (Abira, 2018). The temples of Angkor Wat, Bagan, My Son, Borobudur and Prambanan are testimony to deep influence which sculptors and artisans of this region had with the art forms prevailing in India. The local art forms were blended with the Indian architectural style; as a result, the monuments bear evidence to the centuries-old civilisational linkages that Southeast Asian countries have with India.

The Pyu Pagodas at the ancient site of Prome are characterised by a cylindrical pointed dome and *sikhara* (tower), indicating architectural influence from temples of Odisha. It is believed that, “Buddhism achieved its first permanent foothold in Southeast Asia among the Pyu cities, where it was embraced by all classes of society from the ruling elite to agrarian labourers” (UNESCO, 2014). Several Pagodas also proliferated during the period of Pagan Kingdom in Burma, one of the finest being the Ananda Temple, made of bricks. “The beauty of the Ananda temple is enhanced by the numerous stone sculptured reliefs and glazed terra-cotta plaques that adorn its walls depicting episodes from Buddha’s life

and Jataka stories". Its construction style is believed to be based on similar Temples in Bengal (Majumdar, 1952).

The monuments of Cham heritage in My Son is a testimony to our civilisational legacy. "The earliest inscriptions of Champa bearing evidences of Brahmanic and Buddhistic influence, go as far back as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century" (Nag, 1926). French scholar, Jean Francois Hubert lays down, "From the 8 -15<sup>th</sup> centuries, Cham culture was mainly Hindu (Buddhism was essentially depicted in sculpture from the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries), which is to say that it borrowed from India its cults, principally that of *Shiva*, its language, Sanskrit, its social structure (four varnas) and its concept of royalty" (Hubert, 2005). According to him, "the spirit of *Shiva* is omnipresent in Cham sculpture". *Vishnu* has also been depicted on a pedestal of My Son temple. "He also appears riding a *Garuda* and holding a *sankha*. *Lakshmi* is also referred to as *Padma* and *Shri*. The representations of *Gajalaksmi* are also visible in these temples. At Tra-kien, she is shown as holding two lotuses" (Boisselier, 1963). "The famous Cham archaeological sites of Tra Kieu, Myson and Dong Duong in the Quang Nam province indicate profound Pallava impact of the Amravati school of art" (Sardesai, 1989).

The monument of *Borbudar* in Java built around 9<sup>th</sup> century by the *Sailendras* is a splendid monument of their power and glory, bearing the impression of Mahayana Buddhism (Majumdar, 1952). *Hindu Shaivite* tradition have largely influenced the Javanese art literature and inscriptions in the later periods. Its impact could be seen in the great *Prambanan* and *Panataram* temples "consecrated to Brahmanical deities like *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, *Shiva*, *Durga*" as well as brilliant stone carvings based on the life stories of Rama and Krishna (Nag, 1926).

Similarly, in Cambodia, the monument of Angkor Wat which is dedicated to *Vishnu* along with the famous *Shiva* temple of Baphuon at 'Angkor Thorn', (later converted into a Buddhist Temple) are reflections of the Hinduisation of the region. Various other Hindu temples such as *Baksei Chamkrong*, *Banteay Chhmar*, *Preah Khan*, *Banteay Srei*, *Pre Rup*, *Phnom Krom* etc., representing Hindu Gods, are bearers of Hindu culture and civilisation in this region.

Temples of Ayutthaya based on Hindu-Buddhist cosmology have resulted from historical interactions with Indian belief systems mediated through Mon, Khmer and Malay networks, as well as local reinterpretation by Thai animist and monastic communities. The royal temples and rituals have symbols of Indian iconography such as Naga serpents guarding the stairways and entrances and *garudas* representing *Vishnu*'s mount, *yakshas*, *devas*

and *apsaras* among others. The prang towers of these temples are reminiscent of chedis or stupas are based on Buddhist architecture. “In the building complexes every urban element was created in relation to an ideal Indian cosmological layout and the supreme hierarchy of the god-king ‘Rama’” (McGrath, 2007). Murals of these temples depict Ramakien episodes and Jataka tales.

These temple complexes influenced by Indian tradition through mythology, rituals and religious beliefs have evolved as major pilgrimage sites in Southeast Asia. As sacred geographies, these places hold spiritual significance, reflecting their origins and illustrating how they have been transmitted, localised, and integrated into regional belief systems.

### 5. *Literary Encounters and Narratives*

Folklores have played a very important role in making Indian literary works popular in Southeast Asia. According to R. C. Majumdar, ”the folk literature in India clearly refers to regular voyages between India and Southeast Asia and there is no doubt that Indian merchants visited different parts of that region for purpose of trade” (Majumdar, 1955). One such story is about the establishment of the Kingdom of Funan in Cambodia by an Indian mariner named *Kaundinya* (Sanyal, 2016). The inscriptions and Cambodian annals mention about *Kaundinya*, “the foremost among Brahmans, marrying a daughter of the king of serpents, called Soma”. In return, the Serpent King gives him land and constructs the capital city named ‘Kambuja’, where he ruled and laid the foundation of the first Indianised Kingdom in this region (Majumdar, 1943; Gaudes, 1993; Chandler, 2008).

German Indologist Hermann Jacobi has outlined the historical connections between Kalinga and Champa in *Uttaradhyayana Sutra*. This literature mentions about the maritime contact between the two regions. It describes how a merchant named Palita from Champa came to the town of Pithunda for business. “A merchant gave him his daughter while he was doing business in here. When she grew, he took her with him on his return voyage. The wife of Palita was expecting and the child was delivered at the sea. Since the boy was born at sea (*samudra*), he was named *Samudrapala*. The merchant went leisurely to Champa, where the boy grew up surrounded by comfort” (Hermann, 1895).

Recognising the naval prowess of Kalingan merchants and various expeditions to *Suvarnadvipa*, the legend of ‘*Bali Yatra*’ is worth mentioning. This festival features ‘*Boita Bandana*’ on *Kartik Purnima* (full moon day), where miniature boats with a candle burning inside it are floated on Mahanadi River to invoke the safe journey of the merchants (*Sadhabas*) to islands of Bali, Java, Sumatra and Borneo during auspicious months of

*Kartika*. During this festival, “songs and plays based on the old folk tale about ‘*Tapoi*’ are also performed (Sanyal, 2016). It is noteworthy that a similar festival ‘*Masakapam Kepe-sih*’ is also observed in South Bali in the memory of their maritime ancestors returning to their home in Kalinga. It is believed that the famous ports of “Tamralipti, Manikpatna, Chelitalo, Palur, Pithunda were used for maritime trade between the two regions” (Indian Culture, Govt. of India). Along with trade, this also facilitated cultural exchanges, transmitting Hinduism, Buddhism, Indian scripts, temple architecture and rituals from India to Southeast Asia (PIB, 2025).

Burma, referred to as *Brahmadesa* in various chronicles and inscriptions have witnessed, “Indians proceeding - both by land and sea and setting up various kingdoms in different parts of both Upper and Lower Burma”. These records also tell us the story of introduction of Buddhism in Pagan in Upper Burma. The Burmese Kingdom of Pagan was established around 849 AD. Its early history mentions about King Anawratha (1044-1077) as one of the greatest rulers of the time. He is believed to have unified Myanmar, and the “boundaries of his kingdom extended from Bhamo in the north to the Gulf of Martaban in the south” (Sardesai, 1989). Anawratha was deeply religious and follower of Theravada Buddhism. Under him, Buddhism rapidly spread across Myanmar and mainland Southeast Asia. Indian traders and explorers entered Lower Burma following the eastern coastline of Bengal and introduced Indian culture to the indigenous population. These rulers, “adopted the Indian concept of kingship, royal duties and court etiquette” and established the Hinduised Mon settlements in the Lower Burma (Majumdar, 1952).

The Mon Kingdom of ‘*Davaravati*’ based on the legendary capital of *Krishna* in the Mahabharata was the official title of the Thai Kingdom of *Ayutthaya* and coronation of the King under the name of ‘Ramadhipati’ speaks of the strong Indian influence in this region (Hall, 1955; Coedes, 1975). “Rama Khamheng, or ‘Rama the Brave’ is regarded as a renowned statesman, under whom the Tais absorbed the best elements of the civilisations with which they came into contact. By the trade route through Assam, joining China and India, they had made contact with the Buddhism of northern India (Hall, 1955). “The king in Ayutthaya assumed the status of *Mahadhammaraja*, a guardian of the way of Buddha, the Lord of Life, protector of mountain forests and life-giving water” (McGrath, 2007).

Annals and chronicles also mention about several Hindu and Buddhist Kingdoms in the insular Southeast Asia. Some of the major kingdoms of this region included the *Srivijaya*, *Sailendras*, *Mataram*, *Kediri*, *Singhasari*, and *Majapahit*. The Javanese epic poem - The *Nagarkertagama*, refers to *Kertanagara* (1268-1292), Singhasari dynasty’s greatest king,

as a hero and great warrior. “He was a fine scholar, and devotee of Shiva as well as of Tantric Buddhism. He promoted a syncretic cult of Shiva-Buddha” (Sardesai, 1989). In one of the verses, *Nagarkertagama* mentions “*Jambudvipa* and Java are the good lands par excellence. The intimate relation between the two countries is also indicated by the fact that the laudatory poems in honour of the Javanese king were written by the monk Buddhaditya of Kanchi (Conjeevaram) and a Tamil Brahmana named Mutali Sahridaya” (Majumdar, 1952). To add further, the theme of Javanese *Wayang* (shadow play) have been stories from Indian epics and the typical Javanese textile print *batik* is of South Indian origin. The *ikat* style of weaving cotton and silk threads popular in Indonesia is also of Indian origin (Coomaraswamy 1927).

Numerous literary sources have focused on the models of kingship and social order along with Indian derived law texts (Lahiri, 2004; Hooker, 1978). Scholars have studied how the Indian *Dharmashastras* exercised a deep influence on the development of indigenous law in the countries of Southeast Asia. The native rulers in countries, where Indian civilisation had brought Brahmanical traditions, were inspired by the Indian legal codes given by Manu and others” (Bhattacharya, 1993). One such example could be found in Burmese law books with the title ‘*Manudhammasattham*’.

The oral storytelling tradition based on *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines, Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia exhibit the legacy of Indian civilisational heritage. These texts have been adapted to the local customs and traditions in order to make them more contextual and localised. This led to the emergence of new texts and modified versions of some of these epics as *Ramakein* (the Thai version of Ramayana) which is the national epic of Thailand, *Kakawin Ramayana* (Indonesian version), an old Javanese rendering of the Sanskrit Ramayana, *Seri Rama* (Malaysian adaptation), *Maharadia Lawana* (the Philippino adaptation), *Yama Zatdaw* (the oral tradition of the Ramayana story in Myanmar), Robam dance drama (the Vietnamese version based on folk tales from Ramayana), The *Phra Lak, Phra Lam* (the Lao version of the Ramayana) and RamKer (Cambodian Ramayana). These epics symbolises some of the legendary works prevalent in Southeast Asia and artists from the region participate every year at the The International Ramayana Festival organised in India since 2015.

It is however, noteworthy that the calendrical system, Sanskrit as the court language including poetry and mythology speak about the success of India’s ‘outreach and internationalism’ during ancient and medieval times. Other linkages include the rich tradition in

the Hindu-Buddhist forms of rituals and worship style still prevalent in most of the South-east Asian countries. Presence of huge Indian Diaspora and people of Indian origin in the region bear a deep testimony to the migration of people and Indian culture from this far of land to Southeast Asia.

## 6. Conclusion

These shared cultural heritage forms a solid foundation for people to people ties and cooperation in the socio-cultural sphere. The maritime linkages have served as a vital link for transmission of social and cultural ideas and belief systems to take deep roots in Southeast Asia. These have led to evolution of state structure and political institutions based on Indian model and adapted as per their indigenous culture and civilisation. The architectural and sacred geographic influence exhibits how Hindu-Buddhist aspects of cosmology and iconography have been depicted in royal courts, temples and cultural spaces. Furthermore, folklores and textual traditions have led to fusion of Indian epics, myths and literary forms with local narratives.

Recognising the significance of this interconnectedness in the past, efforts are made in recent times to reinforce cooperation between the two regions, wherein the 'Act East Policy' of India has been the main anchor of this relationship. India has been actively engaging with the Southeast Asian countries through ASEAN and East Asia Summits in upholding a rules-based order. Commercial ties have been strengthened through India-ASEAN Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement, enhancing supply chain resilience and equitable market access. Several restoration projects by Archaeological Survey of India in Southeast Asia have revived the ancient maritime linkages. Shared narratives from Ramayana, Mahabharata, Jataka tales and Buddhist networks highlight the dynamic cultural and religious exchanges from antiquity till today. In addition, several cultural diplomacy initiatives have fostered reciprocal engagements voicing the concerns of the 'Global South'.

On the whole, these multi-layered intersections continue to shape the cultural identities, highlighting a shared heritage between India and the countries of Southeast Asia. This recognition of civilizational legacy can be used as a foundation for deepening strategic, commercial and cultural ties between the countries of the region. In an evolving geopolitical environment, these efforts with ASEAN centrality would create a more inclusive regional order in the Indo-Pacific.

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