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CULTURAL FOUNDATION OF INDIA'S LOOK EAST POLICY: A CRITIQUE

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A B S T R A C T

Culture is important in narrowing down differences and mutual understanding in foreign relations. Although Indian civilization has been one of the sources of mainland Southeast Asia, viz. Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand, yet these countries have retained their unique 'Southeast Asianism'. Indian influences in statecraft, religion, arts and literature are described as Indianisation or Hinduisation. Historically, trade was the catalyzing factor for India's relations with Southeast Asia, which later was expanded to polity, religion, and arts and literature. The colonization and Cold War brought to a halt to the vibrant relationship which picked up with the Look East policy of 1991, and again with a renewed vigour in its rechristened Act East policy in 2014. This paper focuses on proper utilization of this cultural influence in bringing closer ties through the contemporary Look East-Act East policy, however, avoiding any hegemonic content that assumes a 'spiritual mother'. India is seen as a 'cultural exporter' to the world but also it has always been a 'cultural importer' in the past.

Keywords: Culture, India, Southeast Asia, Look East-Act East policy, and soft power.

INTRODUCTION

India has been striving for an 'Asianism' or 'Asia identity' based on ideational or spiritual aspects of its cultural civilization put forward by its many leaders including Mahatma Gandhiji, Rabindranath Tagore, and Jawaharlal Nehru. India's early civilizational and cultural linkages with Southeast Asia and East Asia provide the basis and foundation of its contemporary Look East policy, which, according to Acharya (2015), has three dimensions: economic, strategic, and institutional. India first called on its old cultural links while engaging with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) states (Das, 2013). The Look East envisages a relationship of these dimensions in such a manner that "while commerce, connectivity and capacity-building continue to propel the India-ASEAN relations to new milestones, culture and creativity provide mental and spiritual fodder to nurture this growing engagement" (Chand 2014). This paper locates the cultural influence of India on the mainland Southeast Asia or the Mekong basin constituting of Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand in the civilizational development, and examines the past cultural connection as the foundation of the contemporary Look East policy, and the practice of cultural diplomacy as an instrument of soft power.

The term 'culture', in general, is defined as 'the way of life'. In International Relations, a country uses its culture or cultural products in its foreign policy whether tangible – arts, literature, etc. or intangible – philosophy and music to achieve its foreign policy objectives. Culture becomes an important tool for India's continuous engagement with the region. Colonialism and ideologically inflated Cold War shattered the political relations. Nonetheless, there was ideational linkage shared by the two sides to fight against the colonialism and establish Asian solidarity as exemplified in the Bandung Conference of 1955, which was also called the 'The Conference of South-East Asian Prime Ministers' (Acharya, 2013).

The Look East policy of 1991 stresses on historical, cultural, and religious ties with Southeast Asia. It focuses particularly on Southeast Asia's religious assimilation of Hinduism and Buddhism, and also assimilation of language - especially Sanskrit, art and architecture

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(Blarel, 2012). This cultural influence is described as *Hinduisation* (Das, 2013) or *Indianisation* (Pandya & Malone, 2010; Kleinmeyer, 2004; Ooi, 2004) or'*Greater India*' (Pandya & Malone, 2010). Ooi (2004) states that the contemporary cultures still reflect the "influence of Indian religion, writing, and thought". The extent of Indian influence was so great that it left an imprint not just in the cultural domain but also in the political and social spheres, as Vladimir Braginsky puts it succinctly:

> From the early centuries A.D., India exerted a tremendous influence on the political, social and cultural evolution of the Southeast Asian peoples. Indian influence hastened the growth or final formation of the early stages of the 'old peoples' of the region, i.e., the Mons of modern Burma and Thailand, the Khmers of Cambodia, the Malays and Javanese of Malaysia and Indonesia. At that time, the art of writing had been brought from India and grand temples (e.g. Borobudur and Prambanan in Java, Angkor-Wat in Cambodia), decorated with magnificent bas-reliefs and sculptures, had been built. Initially, small states had gradually grown into vast and mighty multi-ethnic empires: Srivijaya for the Malays, Mataram and Majapahit for the Javanese, Funan and Angkor for the Khmers, and Champa for the Chams of Southern Vietnam (Braginsky, 2013).

This suggests that the two regions have greater connections at political, religious, cultural and social life. The cross-cultural exchanges at the political state make a vibrant India-Southeast Asia relationship. For example, the state official symbols of India and Thailand are a manifestation of two vibrant and tolerant civilizations whereby a Hindu majority India embraced the 'Lion Capital' of Ashoka the Great, who was a Buddhist king, likewise, a Buddhist majority in Thailand adopted 'Garuda', a bird-like mythological beast of Hindu belief. Besides, the ancient trade activities have brought the two regions closer religiously, culturally, and politically.

EARLIEST CONTACT

India's earliest recorded contact with Southeast Asia was near the end of the first century B.C. During this period, India and Sri Lanka were connected to mainland Southeast Asia by the sea trade that ran between eastern Roman Empire to the Han dynasty in China with stopovers on the sea routes in Thai peninsula, Mekong Delta and Indonesian islands (Kossak, 2001). It gave an opportunity for the Indian merchants to venture lucrative maritime trade with Southeast Asia through the Strait of Malacca. But most importantly, it allowed a cultural synthesis of two peoples – Indians and Southeast Asians.

At the social level, Indian traders in these stopovers eloped with local nobility, which later helped formed political system based on the Indian model of the divine kingdom. This was possible because the traders did not come alone. Brahmins and Buddhist monks accompanied them who "brought their religions, cosmologies, arts, architecture, and political system, the Sanskrit alphabet, and the rich religious literature of India to the region" (Kossak, 2001). The religious and political assimilations also brought about the development of "architectural treasures of Angkor, Borobudur and Prambanan" (Kumar & Siddique, 2008). Thereafter, India and Southeast Asia continually engaged culturally for the 'next thousand years' since Hindu and Buddhists believers of Southeast Asia visited sacred places in India (Kossak, 2001). This dramatic influence led Jawaharlal Nehru to refer to Southeast Asia as 'Greater India' (Pandya & Malone, 2010). These authors further tracked the spread of religions: Hinduism was brought to Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand; Buddhism spread through China and Korea reaching Japan and Vietnam, also thrived in Burma (now Myanmar), Cambodia and Thailand; Islam found its way to Southeast Asia via the east and west coasts of India.

LOCALIZATION OF INDIAN CULTURE

The cultural absorption took place not in its entirety but with modification of the original form imbibing its regional features, thereby, giving a new syncretic culture. These cultural transformations in art, architecture, literature, folklore, and political structure are brought by the new religions, Hinduism and Buddhism. As Braginsky (2013) describes "this process of mixing as Indian '*grafting*' on to the blossoming and fruit-bearing tree of local folk literature, bringing forth its further 'cultivation'". This was facilitated by encounters with Indian merchants, craftsmen, preachers, and story-tellers that allowed the Indian folklore to penetrate into Southeast Asian folk tradition.

Religion and Polity: The new religions from India - Hinduism and Buddhism, concepts of state and law, and art and literature were adopted by the local aristocracy and clergy leading to the formation of new elitist culture (Braginsky, 2013), which later would bring changes in its polity, social and cultural spaces.The Indian 'graft' had played a critical role in the creation of 'regional

unity' (Braginsky, 2013) in the 7th-12th centuries A.D. in Southeast Asia by bringing a homogeneous cultural basis and similar state systems arising out of similar responses from the locals to it. Thus, Hindu deities merged with local spirits; formed god-king of Indian style – *devaraja, Buddha –raja* – mixed with previous cults; increased the popularity of tantrism which could be seen in building temple-mountain that reflects the kingdom of gods. Angkor Wat, which was built in the twelfth century, is one of the famous temple-mountains. Then, Rajadhon (1988), as for instance, states that the spiritual life of Thai people revolves around two strata of beliefs: first is animism resembling that of the Chinese; second is Buddhism infused with elements of Brahmanism and Hinduism practised mostly by the elite class. This is further supported by Kleinmeyer (2004) for Southeast Asian states inspired by Hinduism founded political and religious centres at Angkor, Cambodia and Borobudur, Indonesia.

Hinduism along with the Mahayana Buddhism was the religion of the ruling elites which was "gradually replaced by more ethnically homogeneous or even mono-ethnic states" (Braginsky, 2013). Buddhism was firmly established in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. Despite only a few Hindus are left in Southeast Asia, there is still the literary influence of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The elitist doctrine and rigid hierarchy of caste system which is the inherent trait of Hinduism was the reason for its downfall. This author further states that people found salvation placed in themselves and more egalitarian in later religions - Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. The new religions were not disseminated by the ruling elites but directly to the people. However, Ooi (2004) further supports the uniqueness in the assimilation of new cultures into the local spaces. Although the Indian caste system was never applied in Southeast Asia, Sanskrit royal titles were adopted by the Southeast Asian elite (Ooi, 2004; Groves, 2018).

Literature and Folklore: Religious contacts also have a lasting imprint on the literature. Southeast Asia became acquaintance with earlier Indian texts of Vedas, *Puranas*, of Buddhist writings, of epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana.* Further, tales of the Panchatantra and Shukasapati ("seventy Tales of the Parrot"), plus refined courtly Sanskrit epics, or *kavya,* were quite familiar to the region (Braginsky, 2013). Thus, the region has vernacular literature based on the vernacular versions of *Ramayana.* The Hindu religion was for the elite and noble classes, so, Sanskrit writings were not accessible to the people at large. But general people got acquainted with the Hindu epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* in the form of stories of gods and demons.

Indian *Ramayana* is mythologized according to the agrarian cults, one form of local adaptations, which is different from the classical Valmiki. Most of the narrative literature in Buddhist Indo-China are full of mixed-plots from the *Ramayana, Jataka* and Panji – romances (Braginsky, 2013). Then, Ooi (2004) examines the Sanskrit influence which is accounted in the work of the Sanskrit epigraphist, George Codes, who published in French in 1944 "the history of the early 'Hinduized' kingdoms of Southeast Asia" on the basis of Sanskrit inscriptions. Then, the Thai kings were correlated to the heroes of the epics, *Mahabharata*and *Ramayana*. Indian languages such as Sanskrit, Pali and Tamil spread to the Kingdom of Khmer (old Cambodia) and the Kingdom of Burma before A.D. 400 (Mesangrutdharakul, 2014). This author provides a detailed account of the popularity of the Indian epics, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* which is supported by literary evidence such as folklore(*MukhaPatha*) or the Yonok chronicle in Northern Thailand. Moreover, the Tamilian forms of Kamba Ramayana and Tamil Purana influenced the Thai Ramayana (Ramakien). Then, the Pali version of Ramayana epics is imbibed in the Buddhist literary works in Laos, northern Thailand and reaching up to modern Yunan (Southern China).

Moreover, Mesangrutdharakul lists some Hindi words used in day-to-day Thai language: coolie, jira (cumin), thal (tray), sabun (soap), shutra (formula), anggul (grape), acar (vegetable pickle), gala (neck), cay (tea), dada (grandfather), bhai (elder brother), mang (mother), gobhi (cabbage), catni (sauce), caval (rice), masala (spices), alu (potato), and, so on. When we talk of Thailand's links with India, Satyavrat Shastri contends that "the strongest of these links, apart from that of religion, is provided by Sanskrit with which the Thais developed a sense of belonging since very early times" (Shastri, n.d.). Then, Pali and Sanskrit form the major chunk of Thai alphabet. Rajadhon (1988) mentions that Central Thailand has more words of Pali and Sanskrit origins relatively than in other regions in its vocabulary. Thus, they call their story of *Ramayana* 'Ramakien '(or 'Ramakirti'). Thai art has an element of the mixed character of various ideas from Buddhism tinged with

Hinduism. Both religions are intermixed completely, with the colour of their former animistic belief.

There had been a gradual shift in popularity of Indian epics - *Mahabharata* fade away and turned to *Ramayana* can also be supported in the famous book, *Essays on Thai Folklore*, by Rajadhon. Mesangrutdharakul also agrees to maintainof the peculiarity of each country's language and culture. The peculiarity could be seen in the modified form of the Pali version in region's folklore. Moreover, Rajadhon in this book also mentions the popularity of the tale of Rama in their local literature incorporating their local tales into it, while at the same time having Indonesian influence because of the Hinduized Chams whose state Champa is now Annan. However, unlike Thailand Burma absorbed mostly Buddhism with a little element of Hinduism.

INDIA'S LOOK EAST POLICY

We have seen the ancient cultural influence of India in Southeast Asia was brought about by the trade linkage, in fact, it was a trade-led connection, which later expanded into religious, cultural and social, and political dimensions. Although this connection was severed during British India, a common cause of independence movement in British India and the region brought it back for a short period. Thus, right before its independence in March 1947, India hosted in New Delhi the Asian Relations Conference. Soon followed in January 1949 by participating in the Special Conference on Indonesia to address the issue of putting an end to colonialism. However, the Cold War saw the two sides on different camps: India alleged some of these nations to be the United States of America (U.S.A.) allies, while they would label India a partner of the Soviet. The deteriorating domestic and international economic milieu, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the economic prosperity of Southeast Asia, etc. broke the ideological gate that was long shut on India's East neighbours, as India for quite some time had started 'outward-looking' economy before its speedy liberalization of the economy started in 1991. Thus, India showed its interests in engaging with the region through the Look East policy of 1991, which was officially announced in 1994. It has several dimensions – cultural, political, economic, and strategic.

The economic and strategic dimensions of the Look East policy (LEP) have been the dominant discourse in the Look East. In its first phase, India has developed institutional and economic engagements with ASEAN states; in the second phase from 2003, it moves towards free trade agreements and strategic/security cooperation. Thus, LEP is a success in bringing India closer to Southeast Asia. The latter finds it more appealing to engage with India, especially more after the 2008 global financial crisis that puts emerging Asian economies at the forefront of the international economy. This synchronizes the twenty-first century needs of a peaceful cooperation of India and ASEAN as global players acting regionally.

It is to be noted that in November 2014, Look East policy was renamed as "Act East" policy by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the 9th East Asia Summit in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar. The Act East has not diverted from the main goals and objectives of LEP in promoting commerce, culture and connectivity with ASEAN. The cultural aspect of it serves the common platform for the two sides, thereby, acting as a smoother of relations. It is, thus, a cementing force injecting civilizational values and memories that both sides hold dear. This ideational relation is actual and not just symbolic. The two sides have converted it into various international cultural exchanges towards strengthening people-to-people connections.

Cultural Diplomacy: Cultural diplomacy as a foreign policy tool involves mobilization of cultural resources – tangible or intangible – between two countries which serve as the base of any country's foreign policy objectives, including political, economic and strategic. The underlying idea behind cultural diplomacy is to foster national interests through mutual understandings by promoting various cultural activities such as cultural events, art exhibition, and other international cultural exchanges such as student exchange. Thus, cultural diplomacy represents the opposite of 'brute-force' of uncertain state behaviour by promoting mutual understandings.

The cultural foundation of political and economic relations with the Southeast Asian countries can be explained through the lens of 'soft power' paradigm of Joseph Nye. The cultural diplomacy falls within the power to influence or attract other countries in getting what you want without coercion (Nye, 2004). This form of power generally reduces the potential threat and tension through cultural contacts. However, Nye's concept of bringing the desired result of portraying a positive image of a country in another without any 'doubt' (David, 2016) is called into question. His position is a top-down version

of liberalism. The 'smart power' concept has the potential to give rise to 'culture' becoming a tool of manipulation (Zamorano, 2016). 'Smart power', as defined by Nye, means the skilful mix of soft and hard power in the foreign policy of a country, the discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper.

Soft power of country 'A' comes into play when other nations have a positive perception or image of the country 'A'. This is followed by their willingness to follow the civilisational values and aspects of country 'A'. At the heart of soft power application lies the people of these nations – which are often called the 'targeted' nations of country 'A'. Culture, in 'soft power' articulation designed in a bottom-up approach, is increasingly becoming an essential and efficient tool of diplomacy. The main focus of literature on cultural diplomacy talks of using 'culture' for maintaining its cultural influence. However, irrespective of what soft power theory says, cultural diplomacy involves mixing of culture and politics. Thus, extreme care should be given to avoid any tinge of cultural propaganda, and a top-down outlook originating from the political elites.

The role of culture in promoting political agenda and goals is well known. Cold war era is replete with examples of cultural activities exchanged between countries, either for the purpose of defeating enemy country or to resolve the dispute and normalize relations. In the case of defeating the ideological enemy, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the State Department's Division of Cultural relations of the U.S.A. funded cultural diplomacy in the immediate post-World War I. The U.S.A. floated various cultural activities, foreign conferences and intellectual publications. In the post-Soviet era, the U.S.A. set up various American centres to create a favourable image of the U.S.A. abroad. Nonetheless, the U.S.A. attempts are not devoid of power ambition even in the post-liberalization era. For examples, student exchange program such as the Fulbright and the American Field Service have military significance for the U.S.A. (Kim, 2011; Zamorano, 2016). These are the attempts to maintain cultural hegemony.

Nonetheless, the benevolence of cultural diplomacy lies in bringing the two ideological rivals, the U.S.A. and the former Soviet Union interact during the Cold War. The two countries signed the U.S.A.-Soviet Cultural Exchange Agreement of 1958-1960. It is reflected in the 11 September 1956 speech of President Eisenhower at the People-to-People Conference:

> If we are going to take advantage of the assumption that all people want peace, then the problem is for people to get together and to leap governments – if necessary to evade governments – to work out not one method but thousands of methods by which people can gradually learn a little bit more of each other (Eisenhower, 1956).

The American Exhibition in Moscow in 1959 was the start of a series of exchanges that followed in the next three decades. Although these were of limited success, yet it provided the way for engagement of two hostile countries in a non-threatening way among all possible foreign policy options. Another historical example is that of the "Ping-Pong" diplomacy of the early 1970s between the U.S.A. and China that established normal relations between the two countries when Cold War gripped the world with horror and hopelessness.

India's Look East has been focusing its aspect of cultural diplomacy from the liberal perspective which sees cultural diplomacy as 'unidirectional' flow of cultural products which are to be consumed by the receiving nations. This belief of one-way flow of culture in the International Relations comes from Nye's liberal concept of 'soft power', which already assumed the primacy of the cultural 'producer' in influencing the 'consumer' country in favour of the former. This notion carries cultural hegemony. This denies the 'consumer' country the status of 'equality' that it can have in the creation of shared identity or values, or 'collective identities' (Clarke, 2016). Clarke argues for a constructivist notion of creating shared identities rather than others' consuming exported cultural products. From this analysis, we can say that the Look East missed, in its cultural diplomacy, the valuable insight of treating equally the nations, in general, and individuals, in particular, who are treated as the 'consumers' of Indian cultural products. The literature on Look East policy discusses cultural linkage only from the vantage point of India's cultural gifts to the Southeast Asian countries. The belief is so strong that it spans across ideologies, liberal or right. This is well exemplified in the intention of the religious tour made by the Jana Sangh founder, Shyam Prasad Mookherji in the early 1950s carrying remnants of the two main students of the Buddha, first in Thailand, followed by Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Mookherji stated that India assumed the role of 'spiritual mother' for many Southeast Asian countries which desire to trace the finest Buddhist religious and cultural

teachings in their post-independence era (Jeffrelot, 2003). Jeffrelot further argues that this statement was guided by nationalist aspiration driven by the idea of 'Greater India'. He said that this notion of Greater India also expressed by J.N. Nehru and the Indian National Congress was 'big uncle'-like attitude which irked the Southeast countries.

Kim (2011) argues that globalization has had a tremendous impact on values and beliefs. Along with it, the effect of mass media like the Internet, cable TV, and mobile phones, modern society now has an amalgamation of identities. Although some of the small economies of Southeast Asia lack any substantial resources in power politics, yet they can exercise their unique cultural identity in International Relations as it can internationalize it without necessarily becoming a hegemony. As we have already discussed above that, although, these countries have assimilated Indian cultural values, they also have created a unique syncretic regional identity, which eased them to cooperate for deeper integration into the ASEAN economy. This process of regionalization is particularly known as the ASEAN way. This is something India and its neighbours need to learn for resolving the South Asian cooperation problems.

The term 'Indianisation' is "used to describe the impact and historical transmission of Indian cultural influence in Southeast Asia" (Ooi, 2004). The process of 'Indianisation' was not associated with the historical imposition of Indian cultural values upon this region, unlike in Europe, where cultural values are set by the powerful winning side of conflicts (Kouri, 2014). This European example serves as a lesson for India's foreign policy-making to avoid making mistakes in conceptualizing 'culture' in its Act East Policy. Kouri (2014)) further takes note of Shore's (1993) argument that 'European culture', thus, is the symbol of power at the centre at the expense of the margins.

It is equally important to render the right tone and meaning in its cultural policy. India should not consider itself as the 'Father India' (termed by Singapore art historian, T.K. Sabapathy) as the provider of Southeast Asian identity for it is not the only source of the latter's civilization which will attract 'cultural competition' with China (the West, up to a limited extent, also has contributed to Christianity and its values to this identity). China, another ancient civilization with its religions (Confucianism and Taoism), writing system and language, has a significant contribution to the region's civilization. Flores (2012) refutes any type of cultural appropriation saying "Southeast Asia is neither India nor China". Then, he further argues that "George Coedes would reduce Southeast Asia to the process of Indianisation or Sanskritization which reduces theorizing a colonial doctrine."

However, India once hosted an art exhibition during the Cold War in 1968 in Delhi which appreciated the importance of the arts in the region. The theme of the event was 'Triennale India', which was "one of the first occasions when artists from Southeast Asia were exhibited alongside international contemporary artists as equals, outside a colonial exhibition" (Taylor, 2011). At the individual level analysis, artists from this region have asserted themselves to represent their own identity by creating a "third space…away from the current market monopoly that tends to benefit artists from China and India" (Taylor, 2011). Having said that, Southeast Asian nations have pride in Sanskrit civilization. For example, Thailand has its International Airport in Bangkok named 'Suvarnabhumi Airport'. Suvarnabhumi is Sanskrit word meaning "Land of Gold". Inside the airport lies the scene of *Samudra Manthan* from Hindu mythology. Also, Thailand has one of the famous water parks named 'Ramayana Water Park' in Pattaya (named after Indian epic – *Ramayana*).

'Cultural consumption' (Clarke, 2016) calls for the blurry boundary between cultural 'producers' and 'consumers'. Thus, the attempt is to 'blend-in' the identities of the two cultures of the countries involved. In this context, India's Look East policy eyes on Buddhism which is at the centre of India-Southeast Asian relations. Bodh Gaya, where Lord Buddha got enlightenment, is a sacred place for Southeast Asians Buddhist pilgrims. Then, Nalanda University, the ancient seat of Buddhist learning where Buddha himself visited several times, was revived in 2014 after formal efforts began in 2007 to rebuild the cultural and spiritual connections that India has with these countries and the world. Its establishment was a joint effort in which India signed Memorandum of Agreements with many Southeast Asian countries including Brunei, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, New Zealand, and Singapore for the revival project. Moreover, it is worth noting that the Look East policy has successfully created the shared identities of past civilization, peace, understanding, cooperation and as partners of the "Asia Century".

LOOKING FORWARD

For centuries, India was the source of inspiration politically, religiously, culturally for Southeast Asian countries. Nonetheless, these countries take pride in their cultural assimilation, yet retaining their past cultures. After coming here, any religion whether Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam could never retain their original forms. Cultural diplomacy has a profound impact on India's construction of nation-state which creates a narrative of India's progressive cultural past and its willingness to share it with the world.

Among many cultural programs, India can follow Japan's way of cultural diplomacy in promoting popular cultures such as anime, which is animated films, and manga, which is comics in the region by removing any sort of political ambiguity. Along similar lines, India can use its epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in a more or less comic or anime form. India though has an added advantage as these epics flow as folklores into the hearts and minds of the peoples of the mainland Southeast Asian nations for centuries. Likewise, India has already promoted yoga, a pre-Vedic cultural product of the 'Indus Saraswati Civilization' around 2700 B.C. (before first religion was born) which could bring humanity's material and spiritual well-being (FrontPage Africa, 2016). The science of *yoga* and its teachings are spread all over the world. The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) honoured June 21st as the International Day of Yoga, the resolution of which was co-sponsored by 177 countries, the highest number ever for any UNGA Resolution.

Another factor that needs attention is the inclusion of the culture of North East Region (NER) in the cultural diplomacy. Culturally, India's North East Region has little commonality with the mainstream Hindu culture, except for the influence in Manipur (mix of *Vaishnavism* and *Sanamahi* cultures is predominant) and Tripura (Bengali culture is predominant). Even here, Manipur has contributed to the Hindu civilization a locally unique cultural feature of *Ras Lila* (classical dance of Radha and Krishna). The region is ethnically different from the rest of India. Its Mongolian race and tribal culture of animism present a closer historical and ethnic connections with the Southeast Asian states. Moreover, the food culture and dressing habits of NER bear similarity to its eastern cousins. Linguistically, the languages and dialects spoken in states of NER belong to Tibeto-Burman family.

However, lacking financial capacity the region risks culture marginalization in implementing the recently rechristened Act East policy. It is essential to move away from the state-centred construction of a cultural policy of homogenizing culture when the idea is to develop NER through the Look East policy. This is not to discredit India's cultural connections and efforts in enhancing ties with the eastern neighbours but to point out the limitation of the Look East policy. Including the peculiar cultures of NER in it would further reinforce India's pride in possessing one of the most diverse cultures in the world. Sumitra Mahajan, the Lok Sabha Speaker, in a two-day conference of the 16th North East Region Commonwealth Parliamentary Association in June 2017, in Imphal, Manipur, declared that the government has marked the 'Act East' policy the top-most priority for the nation.

Moreover, while admitting that "all cultural diplomacy approaches to culture respond to power relations," Zamorano (2016: 179-182) gives a constructivist call for a decentralized process of cultural diplomacy demanding less governmental regulations on the artistic works. There is further a need for including local actors in the formulation and conduct of foreign policy so as to also bring about the actual development in their territory. This is particularly relevant in the wake of development deficit NER even after 25 years of LEP. New Delhi's approach of cultural protection of NER was triggered by the fear of losing an endangered cultural space which proved to be a failure as could be seen in the change in this approach toward a focus on development as intended in formulating the Shukla Commission on 'Tackling Backlogs in Basic Minimum Services and Infrastructural Needs' in 1997. Then came the 'Northeastern Region Vision 2020' document of 2008 which was brought out together by the Ministry of Development of Northeastern Region (MDONER) and the Northeastern Council (NEC). The document envisages a bigger role of NER in its LEP.

Culture has enabled India to enter into difficult waters of diplomacy and served her in its image of a tolerant and peaceful power. However, when it was associated with the idea of "Greater India" by Indian Nationalists, it generated 'detrimental' effects for India's relations with Southeast Asia after independence (Das, 2013). India was once called a Southeast Asian state precisely because of its close proximity not only geographically but also culturally (both mainstream and local aspects) and enjoys a deep historical connection with Southeast

Asia. Thus, a reappraisal of its Act East policy could push its dream of a greater role in Indo-Pacific region.

Therefore, the Act East policy should justify from the Vedic civilisational connection with Southeast Asia as well as from local perspective. It, then, should balance this with the cultural aspirations of Southeast Asian people to celebrate their 'unique identity' of its own. The cultural diplomacy that focuses on 'two-way traffic', the one that does not focus only on the Indianisation aspects of Southeast Asian civilization but also learns and receives from the unique cultural values both in tangible and intangible forms from the latter, will give India's 'Act East' policy a push for its foreign policy goals of integrating its economy with the region. Culture provides the platform to learn the 'way of life' from each other in non-confrontational ways. Values such as equality, reciprocity and mutual respect should form the basis of the foreign relations. Thus, culture cannot be static, but active engagement in various international exchange programs. India is seen as a 'cultural exporter' to the world but also it has always been a 'cultural importer' in the past. For example, the coming of Sufism helped in reforming Indian society alongside the Bhakti movement. Similarly, Christianity and Islam were also foreign religions bringing their religious and cultural values into the Indian society. There is one similarity that India shares with the Southeast Asian region, that is, the unique ability to assimilate foreign cultures and reform further peacefully and harmoniously.

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