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RIS-DP # 147



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January 2009



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India's Role in East Asia: Lessons from Cultural and Historical Linkages

Ellen L. Frost*

Abstract: India's presence in the East Asia Summit signals not only a victory for New Delhi's "Look East" policy but also an implicit "Look West" policy on the part of India's neighbors to the east. This convergence represents not only a major economic opportunity for India but also a long-term strategic shift in regional order. The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate that for historical, cultural, political as well as for substantial economic reasons India belongs to the East Asian table. It is time to "re-center" our notions of Asia so that maps and other geographic concepts reflect India's resurgent links with eastern neighbors. India's political role in the Asian integration movement underscores this need. One of the key opportunities for policy makers is to revive and build on India's historical and cultural legacy in Asia without appearing to be seeking hegemony or trumpeting a chauvinist vision.

Introduction

In December 2005, the East Asia Summit (EAS) was launched in Kuala Lumpur, with leaders of 10 ASEAN countries, Japan, China, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand besides India. India's presence in EAS signals not only a victory for New Delhi's "Look East" policy but also an implicit "Look West" policy on the part of India's neighbors to the east. This convergence represents not only a major economic opportunity for India but also a long-term strategic shift in regional order. The purpose

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of this essay is to demonstrate that for historical, cultural, political as well as for substantial economic reasons India belongs to the East Asian table.

Re-centering "Asia"

Skeptics wonder why India claims membership in an "East Asian" gathering. A better question is, "What took India (and its eastern neighbors) so long?" Answers to that question could arguably begin with the spread of Islam, the decline of Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms in Southeast Asia, repeatedinvasions of India from the northwest culminating in the Mughal conquest, and the Hindu dictum (found in 13th-century law digests) that crossing the "dark water" would cause upper-class Hindus to lose caste. This combination could have been overcome, but what followed was worse.

The twentieth century nurtured a thicket of barriers between India and its eastern neighbors: World War I, the Great Depression, protectionism, the Pacific War, war with China, the Cold War, and 50 years of inward-looking economic policies adopted in the name of socialism. Starting in 1947, India gradually slipped into economic self-exile and lingered there until the "Look East" policy was articulated in 1991. By that time India's share of world trade was lower than it was at the time of independence half a century earlier.

All of these barriers dividing India from East Asia have now melted away, liberating the forces of growth. But does that justify Indian membership in "East Asia?"

Answering that question requires mental "re-mapping." What is "East Asia" – anything east of "Central Asia," however that is defined? Delineating geographic divisions have never been an exact science. The boundaries of "Asia" and the definition of its various subdivisions have always been subject to interpretation and imagination. The term "Southeast Asia," for instance, did not come into common use until the Pacific War, when it was used to define Mountbatten's area of command.

Over the centuries, as Western European explorers and cartographers expanded their knowledge of the vast Eurasian landmass, the notion of

"Asia" rolled steadily eastward, starting with "Asia Minor" (Anatolia, in today's Turkey). By the second half of the twentieth century, the notion of "Asia" had arguably rolled too far east. In Western minds, at least, "Asia" meant primarily China and Japan; maps and organization charts tended to group India with the Middle East.

It is time to "re-center" our notions of Asia so that maps and other geographic concepts reflect India's resurgent links with eastern neighbors. India's political role in the Asian integration movement underscores this need. As Singapore's former prime minister Goh Chok Tong observes, the term "East Asia" has become a political construct. "A region is what we define it to be," says Goh, who has repeatedly made clear that he considers India, along with Australia and New Zealand, to be part of East Asia.¹ Since including India in "East Asia" pushes the limits of conventional geography, however, I prefer the term "Asia Major."²

India and East Asia: Culture and History

Now that India has turned outward again, it has regained a place corresponding more closely to its contributions to East Asian culture and history in pre-colonial times. Indian notions of religion, philosophy, cosmology, kingship, administration, law, art, and architecture blended with local cultures and enriched local civilizations. All of these contributions spread peacefully, not through invasion and occupation. This legacy can still be seen today.

Buddhism

Buddhism is India's greatest gift to East Asia, and indeed to the world. Blending with local traditions, it is the dominant religion in Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal, and Sikkim. It survives in one form or another in China, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, and Singapore, and it is one of the officially recognized religions in predominantly Muslim Indonesia.

Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha or "Enlightened One") was born to a wealthy Nepalese family at the end of the 5th century BC but left home in search of an end to human suffering. After trying and rejecting life as an ascetic, he preached widely in what is now Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and southern Nepal. He probably spoke Prakrit, a colloquial dialect of Sanskrit. In the third century BC, his teachings gained favor with Ashoka, the great Maurya emperor.

Nalanda University, a monastery complex located in Bihar, was a great Buddhist center of learning (The name "Bihar" is derived from a Sanskrit word for "temple"). Founded by Asoka, it lasted until it was sacked by the Mongols more than a thousand years later. The great 7th-century Chinese pilgrim, Xuan Zang, studied at Nalanda for ten years during his pilgrimage to Indian Buddhist sites. Scholars at Nalanda studied not just religion but also logic and metaphysics, astronomy, mathematics, philosophy, medicine, literature and other subjects.

Towards the end of the first millennium AD, Buddhism in India gradually melted into Hinduism. Hindu priests and philosophers, and indeed Hindu society at large, surrounded, absorbed, and digested it. The Buddha was said to be an incarnation of the god Shiva.

In China, however, Buddhism flowered. In the first few centuries A.D., monks and scholars from India and Central Asia carried Buddhism into China via overland routes and began adapting it to Chinese culture. As early as 191 AD, a local official built a Buddhist temple in northern Jiangsu and provided social services to the poorest members of the community. As the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. – 220 A.D.) began its slow decline, Buddhist scholars began the difficult process of translating the sutras into Chinese and finding "matching" concepts in Chinese thought, particularly Taoism. For example, The Taoist term *wu-wei*, "non-action," was used to express the Buddhist term *nirvana*, signifying ultimate release.

Meanwhile, Chinese monks and scholars made pilgrimages to India to visit holy sites associated with the life of the Buddha. In the fifth century AD the monk Fa-Xian spent six years in India, learning Sanskrit, studying Buddhist doctrines, and seeking original Buddhist texts. Two centuries later, another Chinese monk, Xuan-Zang, stayed in India for ten years, mostly as a student but also as a traveler.

Rulers of the rising Tang dynasty (618-907 AD) generally welcomed Buddhism. Describing the great capital at Ch'ang-an (Xian), historian Arthur Wright wrote that Buddhism was omnipresent:

The gilded finials of innumerable temples and pagodas, the tolling of temple bells, the muted chanting of sutras, the passing to and fro of solemn processions were the palpable signs of Buddhism's ramifying influence in the life of the empire.³

In Tibet, sustained exposure to Buddhism began in the eighth century AD, when Shantarakshita, a renowned Indian Buddhist scholar, was invited to Lhasa. Certain factions of the Tibetan aristocracy resisted the foreign faith, blaming it for a series of natural disasters. Shantarakshita was forced to return to Nepal, but before leaving he advised the king to invite a Tantric master to Tibet. According to Tibetan chronicles, this man converted the demons of Tibet to Buddhism and secured their promise to protect the adherents of the new religion. From that time forward, Tibetan Buddhists looked to India for inspiration as they developed their religion, not China.

Buddhism also spread from India by sea. Seafaring traders and missionaries from India carried Hindu-Buddhist ideas to the elites of Southeast Asia. Two concepts in particular found ready acceptance in the region: universal kingship and the fusion of kingship and notions of divinity. **

Mandalas* (circles of kings) corresponded to the overlapping kingdoms and diffuse political power characteristic of early Southeast Asia. **

Mandalas* found expression in sophisticated world maps depicting the entire cosmos and the terrestrial world through the prism of Buddhist thought.

Once Indian Buddhism disappeared as a separate religious movement, the center of Buddhist orthodoxy shifted to Sri Lanka, which remains devoutly Buddhist. In Japan, several schools of Buddhism, filtered mainly but not exclusively through China, flourished. The Zen sect in particular inspired uniquely Japanese forms of architecture, garden design, ink painting, poetry, the tea ceremony, and other expressions that are hallmarks of Japanese "high culture" even today.

Chart 1: Indian Culture Spreads to the Rest of Asia RNEO Mogaung Z GAUD EA Spread of Mahayana Buddhism Spread of Hinayana Buddhism Ö 0 INDIAN

Source: Nicholas Ostler, Empires of the World: A Language History of the World (New York and London: Harpes Perennial, 2005, p. 200.
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Even as Buddhism spread, authorities kept a watchful eye on Buddhist monasteries, fearing that they might challenge the power of the ruler. The periodic revival of Confucianism in China was designed to stave off rebellion and maintain the proper social discipline. In Japan, during times of civil strife, Japanese monks were known to rush down the slopes of Kyoto's Mount Heiei brandishing stout cudgels and engaging fiercely in battle.

Language

Along with Buddhism came the Sanskrit language. As Buddhist teaching spread beyond India to places as far away as Japan and Java, Sanskrit became a medium of sacred learning and scholarly dialogue (See Chart 1). A complicated and multi-syllabic language, Sanskrit has flowered in many forms of literature and features the most elaborate puns in the world.⁷

By 500 A.D., Sanskrit had become the hallmark of civilization in much of Southeast Asia and was frequently the official language of the court. It showed up in the names of both cities and rulers. The names of more than 30 Cambodian kings end with the suffix *varman*, "bastion," The great maritime kingdom in southern Sumatra, Srivijaya, was named after a king named *Vijaya*, "victorious" (cf. Jaipur, "City of Victory"). Another Indian legacy visible today is the Sanskrit element in many Southeast Asian languages, together with the Indian origin of the alphabets in which those languages are written. Even the order of the Japanese *kana* syllabary (*a*, *i*, *u*, *e*, *o*, etc.) is follows the Sanskrit pattern.

Once again, this form of Indian influence arrived in the form of culture and religion, not by the sword. Possibly for this reason, language expert Nicholas Ostler observes that nowhere did contact with Sanskrit lead to the loss or replacement of other linguistic traditions. This was not the case with the languages of what Ostler calls "large-scale campaigning civilizations," such as Greek, Latin, Arabic, Spanish, French, and English.⁸

Trade

Indian cultures and religions flowed to the rest of Asia along two great trade routes: the eastern leg of the Silk Road, which linked the eastern Mediterranean with China, and the maritime highway that that stretched from Venice to Japan and Indonesia. China was famous for silk, tea, and porcelain; the islands of Indonesia for spices; and India for pepper, textiles, perfumes, and gems.

Quick to see the advantage of being middlemen in luxury items, Indian merchants established trading stations and merchant colonies in Kashgar, Turfan, and other cities located in what is now China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. Buddhist missionaries quickly followed.⁹

Although India lay to the south of the Silk Road, it was at the center of maritime trade routes. Its southward-thrusting land mass was a destination in itself as well as a stopping point on the way to the places where seaborne merchants seeking the fabled riches of the East wanted to go.

Indian merchants were the first outsiders to seek out the wealth of Southeast Asia, known as the "land of gold" but more deservedly famous for spices. Trading contacts date back to at least the first centuries AD. Dravidian kingdoms on India's southeast coast, of which the Chola kingdom was most important, dominated shipping across the Bay of Bengal.¹⁰

As shipping technology advanced in the eleventh and twelfth centuries AD, trade in bulk goods began to supplement small shipments of luxury items. By the 13th century, Arabs and Persians had lost ground to Indians in the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. As the economy of north India began to recover from repeated invasions, great shipping families arose, particularly in Gujurat. In peninsular India, merchant castes took advantage of new trading opportunities caused by the decline of Srivijaya, which had previously controlled the Sunda Straits and the Strait of Malacca.

Meanwhile, China's Sung Dynasty had imposed widespread restrictions on trade, a pattern that was to repeat itself in later centuries. Writing about one of the few Chinese ports that was open to trade at that time, Marco Polo described a harbor whither all ships of India come, with much costly merchandise, quantities of precious stones of great value, and many fine large pearls...it is truly a wonderful sight.¹¹

Indian ships crisscrossed the ocean, navigating the Strait of Malacca and docking regularly in Vietnamese, Burmese, and Chinese ports. Their crews were familiar with the main islands of Indonesia, docked at the Kra peninsula in southern Thailand, and may have visited Indonesia. In an early example of what we now call the export of services, Indians hired themselves out to other fleets as "handlers" of ship owners' commercial needs while docked at various ports.¹²

"Farther India"

Thanks to these contacts, Indian influence fanned out across a huge region. "Farther India" or "Greater India," as this sphere was often called, was a realm created not by territorial conquest, but rather by peaceful religious and cultural teaching and example. As recently as the 1960s, the distinguished French scholar George Coedes wrote that Farther India consists of Indonesia and insular Southeast Asia (except for the Philippines) and the Indochinese and Malay peninsulas (except for northern Vietnam).¹³

Today, many modern place names and ceremonies preserve Indian names and symbols. The name "Singapore" comes from the Sanskrit *simha* (lion) and *pura* (city); according to legend, a 14th-century Sumatran Malay prince traveling there gave it that name because he spotted a beast that he assumed was a lion (since no lions ever lived there, the creature was probably a tiger). Names like *Indo*china and *Indo*nesia incorporate an Indian root. Indonesia's shadow-puppet theater features all-night performances of Indian epics, and its national airline is named for Garuda, the sacred bird that carried the god Vishnu.

Anyone who wanders through the great temple complexes of Asia sees carvings and inscriptions reflecting India's reach. Cave paintings and statues in western China are among the treasures of the Buddhist legacy. Panoramic battle scenes from the *Ramayana* enliven the walls of Cambodia's Angkor Thom. Vivid scenes from the life of the Buddha ring Indonesia's great spiraling temple, Borobudur. Sensuous Hindu sculpture can be found nearby. No mountain-temple complexes like Borobudur exist in India, and the architecture of Angkor Wat is distinctively Khmer, but India's cultural footprint is unmistakable.

Indian versus Chinese Cultural Influence in Southeast Asia

The Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms of Southeast Asia also maintained extensive contact with China through the China-centered tribute system. But the Confucian values that took root in Korea and northern Vietnam did not flourish further south. Indian cultural influences were more widespread, perhaps because they were more compatible with local norms and beliefs than China's rigorously ethical but less spiritual contributions. Cultures often spread as a result of war, but in this case Indian rulers made no effort to colonize Southeast Asia or to exercise indirect political control.

Whatever the reason, India's religious ideas proved to be durable. Scholars have speculated that the peaceful and moderate nature of Islam in Southeast Asia stems not from any inherent gentleness among Javanese, Sumatrans, Malays, and other converts to Islam, but rather from the peaceable nature of the Indian religions and cultures that preceded it. In today's Asia this legacy must surely be counted as a diplomatic asset.

India and East Asia Today

"Soft Power" and the Balance of Influence

No Indian diplomat today would dream of invoking religion or resurrecting the notion of "Farther India" in order to seek influence. At the same time, one of the key opportunities for today's Indian diplomats is to revive and build on India's historical and cultural legacy in Asia without appearing to be seeking hegemony or trumpeting a chauvinist vision.

In such a competition for influence, New Delhi must act with delicacy and nuance. Indian officials cannot afford to create even the appearance of engaging in a diplomatic war with China. China's low-profile, accommodating approach to the Asian integration movement is widely praised in the region, and Indian diplomats know they must follow suit. India's blue-water navy weighs heavily in the balance of power, but in the balance of influence – a more relevant index in today's Asia – India's residual protectionism and poor infrastructure mar India's appeal. India negotiated a framework agreement with ASEAN in record time, but when it came to a comprehensive trade agreement itself, Indian negotiators

initially put so many exceptions on the table that the talks almost failed. Fortunately, negotiators eventually reached agreement, but despite marked improvement, economic opportunities in India cannot yet compare with what China can offer.

Change is coming, but it is slow. The best that Indian statesmen can do – and Sudhir Devare has put it very well – is to pair the shared historical legacy between India and Southeast Asia with emerging economic cooperation and declining trade barriers in India as a backdrop for converging security interests.¹⁴

When it comes to educational outreach and other instruments of "soft power," India is also at a disadvantage vis-à-vis China. So-called "Confucian" institutes, funded by the Chinese government, can be found around the world. Just as studying Japanese was popular in the 1980s, so the draw of China's economy attracts many students interested in learning Chinese and studying Chinese culture.

Fortunately, India has many opportunities to capitalize on its extraordinary richness and variety. Facility in English is an enormous advantage. Ongoing measures to improve the woeful state of India's tourist industry, already a priority of the government, will attract many more visitors.

Another potential asset is the Nalanda project, endorsed by heads of state at the 2007 East Asian Summit. The new university, to be built near the ruins of the ancient Buddhist complex, will offer the modern equivalent of the same subjects, a center for religious study and interfaith understanding, and more. Chairing Nalanda's "Mentor Group" is Nobel laureate Amartya Sen.

The Nalanda project is an example of "soft power with Indian characteristics." It underscores India's great tradition of learning and scholarship and reminds the rest of Asia where Buddhism came from. It signifies that India is prepared to engage in the subtle diplomatic competition for influence in Asia. Not surprisingly, the governments of Japan and (to a

lesser extent) Singapore, both of which favored India's inclusion in the East Asian Summit, will provide the major funding for Nalanda. Along with Indonesia, these are the two governments keeping the most watchful eye on China's rise.

India's Goals at the East Asia Summit

As plans for the first East Asian Summit began to take shape, India's first goal was simply to be invited. If former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir had had his way, the East Asian Summit gathering would have been restricted to heads of state from "ASEAN + 3" – the ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) plus China, Japan, and South Korea. Along with Malaysia, China, South Korea, and Thailand supported this approach. Proponents of more inclusive membership were Japan, Singapore, and Indonesia.

As a partial compromise, the governments of ASEAN + 3 agreed that each new member country would have to satisfy three criteria: it had to be a "dialogue partner" of ASEAN, it had to have signed ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), and it had to have significant economic involvement with the region. India was already a "dialogue partner" and had eagerly signed the TAC, but qualifying as a significant economic player required some persuasion. In the end, proponents of wider membership won the day. Not only India but also Australia and New Zealand are full members of the East Asian Summit.

The Indian government hopes that closer engagement with ASEAN + 3 will provide a peaceful and constructive counterweight to China's growing influence in Asia. 15 Expanding trade and investment ties with the region is also a high priority. From an economic point of view, Indians live in an unpromising neighborhood. Their leaders hope to accelerate economic growth by participating in the fast-growing thicket of bilateral and subregional "free-trade agreements" that characterize the contemporary Asian integration movement. A more accurate description is "preferential trade agreements" (PTAs), most of which are studded with lots of protected sectors and exceptions, establish a long lead time before implementation, and lack enforcement provisions. These pacts have as much to do with geopolitics as

they do with economics, which is all the more reason why India must try to keep pace.

Far more important than PTAs has been the combination of marketoriented domestic economic reforms and the Look East policy, which began in the early 1990s. Southern and coastal regions have taken the most advantage of new opportunities and compete with each other for investment. The Indian government makes a special effort to entice highly educated *Pravasi Bharatiya* (overseas Indians) to bring their skills back home. ¹⁶ New Delhi is also seeking energy deals in Asia and has cultivated the regime in Myanmar for that reason.

Future Challenges

India has a long way to go before its economic performance catches up with its historical and cultural links with its "civilizational neighbors" and suitably complements its military assets. India's investment climate has improved substantially since the early 1990s, but it remains cluttered with obstacles. Investment from the rest of Asia is picking up but Asia's biggest investors – companies in Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Singapore – have still not added India to their list of preferred destinations. Is Japanese firms average about \$500 million a year, compared with \$40 billion globally. Sluggish investment in India is particularly serious because according to a UN agency, India needs \$200 billion a year in infrastructure investments alone.

Social, educational, and other indicators have been well publicized. India's literacy rate, especially for females, lags way behind China's despite the difficulty of memorizing Chinese characters. Whether measured by Transparency International's corruption index, AT Kearney's globalization index, or the International Finance Corporation's index of business-friendly environments, India is improving.

Nevertheless, signs are promising. Growth remains robust at seven percent and more. India's trade with ASEAN is less than one-fifth that of China, but it is growing by around 30 percent a year. Trade with China itself is growing rapidly. India's manufacturing sector is making substantial improvements in productivity. No longer is it assumed that China will

monopolize manufacturing while India will be confined to services. The mega-deal between Singapore's NatSteel Asia and India's Tata Steel is one of a number of new business tie-ups.¹⁹

Indian businessmen complain about what they call the "democracy tax." They seem to believe that the Chinese government can simply bulldoze people out of the way in order to make room for modernization, whereas India's democracy precludes actions of that sort. But India's democracy brings with it two crucial underpinnings of a successful economy: the fresh air of open information and the solidity of law. Partly as a consequence, India's financial system is healthier and more sophisticated than China's. This combination of a healthy financial system and relative insulation from the world economy is likely to shield India from the worst of the damage inflicted by the financial crisis of 2008.

Economist Yasheng Huang argues that China has much to learn from India. Citing numerous examples, he asserts that a high level of foreign investment is not a necessary precondition for growth. He points out that India's rapid growth stems largely from improvements in efficiency, whereas China's comes from the massive accumulation of resources and investment. China's domestic consumption as a driver of growth remains low. Small, private Chinese companies still face discrimination. India, Huang asserts, has the right priorities, whereas China does not.²⁰

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