

News from Asia *continued*

India looked East or the East looked India

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INDIA'S 'LOOK-EAST' POLICY, contrary to popular assumption, neither started in 1991 nor was it confined only to economic engagement with its easterly neighbourhood. As a civilisation of sun worshippers, India has always looked towards, and engaged with the East, in many varied ways. One can easily identify four phases or waves of India's eastward *yo ho*. The first is historical (pre-colonial), the second is during British Imperialism, the third since independence (1947 onwards) and, most recently, since 1991. Enough attention is being paid these days to the last two phases, while there are only scanty, and hazy narratives to unravel the first two.

The knowledge gap of the first two phases is gradually drawing scholarly attention. The smallest country of India's eastern neighbourhood, Singapore, had made a significant contribution by publishing three studies within the past two years to energize academic discourse on India's engagement with the East during the historical period.¹ All three studies underscore the predominantly peaceful nature of this engagement that was based on flourishing trade and cultural links. The only contestations to this assumption come from Balaji and Geoff Wade, who wrote the 'Foreword' (pp.vii-xv) in Acharya's book. Both writers mention the aggressive missions of the Cholas Empire during the early 11th Century CE, but no authentic and reliable evidence is provided on the military nature of the Cholas' forays into the East. Balaji clearly states that "There are no contemporary records to explain the nature or reason for the hostile Chola naval expedition" (p.129).

Chong-Guan's volume contains a chapter by R.C. Majumdar on 'The Struggle between the Shailendras and the Cholas' (pp.119-133) where Chola's "great naval power" and "aggressive imperialism" are noted, but Majumdar also acknowledges the existence of friendly and commercial relations between the Chola Kings and Shailendra rulers. Majumdar's narrative also suggests strong commercial links between the Cholas and China. The possibility of the Cholas using naval power to secure their trade with China from disruptions caused by the Shailendra rulers cannot be ruled out. In that case, Chola's use of naval power was more for the protection of their commercial interests than for territorial expansion or imperial aggression. This is, however, an area that calls for further archaeological and academic research. Even if Chola aggression can be substantiated, it is only one example so far, contrary to the otherwise peaceful and mutually beneficial contacts between India and the civilisations to its east, spanning almost a millennia.

All the three studies underscore the impact of Indian culture and civilisation on the Southeast Asian countries. Indian presence was predominant not only in art and architecture, religion, social structures and language, but also in political organisations, legal systems and forms of governance. The footprints of that presence are visible even today in monuments such as Angkor Wat in Cambodia and Borobudur Temple in Indonesia. The main question at stake is how this Indian influence travelled East. Chong-Guan's volume, being based on the *Journal of the Greater India Society*, clearly supports the thesis that the "Indianisation" of Southeast Asia was primarily an Indian enterprise spanning more than twelve centuries. One of the chapters in this volume ('India and the Pacific World' by U.N. Ghoshal), quoting Kalidas Nag's study,

takes the discourse on Indian cultural influence even beyond Southeast Asia deep into the Pacific, linking it to "Oceania and Polynesia" and "aboriginal American cultures" (p.51). According to Kalidas Nag, "What parts of this cultural complex would reach the Eastern Pacific basin and the New World are problems of future anthropologists and antiquarians..." (p.52).

Acharya, on the basis of various studies on the subject, rejects the thesis of Indian initiative and enterprise. He makes two strong arguments. He notes that the East Asian societies had their own respective cultural identities and there was no question of "passive acceptance" of the Indian influences. They were in fact "active borrowers", not only seeking selective and desired Indian influences, but also adjusting and adopting them to their own requirements. Thus the process of Indian influence was not Indianisation, but a regional localisation of Indian best practices. This is illustrated, for example, by referring to the "differences in the practice of Theravada Buddhism between Thailand and Burma" (p.25). He also brings in the flow of Chinese influence, particularly in Vietnam, in support of his 'localisation' argument (p.27). Acharya finally supports the view taken by Hermann Kulke that Indian impact on Southeast Asia must be seen neither as Indianisation nor localisation, but as a "convergence" of cultures and their evolution. India and Southeast Asia had a lot in common and evolved on the basis of "give and take". The resilience of Hinduism and the use of the Sanskrit language are referred to, to buttress the 'convergence' proposition (p.35).

Chong Guan's volume presents rich and diverse perspectives on the so-called 'Indianisation' of Southeast Asia, which does not fully submit itself to the charges of being a process of "colonial and imperial expansion". Acharya admits to a 'hint' in Majumdar's writings, otherwise branded as an Indian nationalist Indianisation proponent, "that the Indian cultural interactions with Southeast Asians might have been a two-way street of mutual influence" (p.14). Chong-Guan in his masterly introduction to the anthology, quotes Majumdar as saying "there was a complete cultural fusion between the two races". He extensively refers to Rabindranath Tagore, the moving spirit of the Greater India Society, to show that historians were driven not by narrow nationalism but were fired by "international humanism". In Chong-Guan's assessment, "in contrast to the violence of European colonialism" the "Indian colonisation of the Far East was peaceful, humane, benign and welcomed by the pre-literate natives". The legacy of the Greater India Society is being continued, in the words of Chong-Guan, by "a new generation of Indian Institutions and scholars", who also distance themselves from any nationalist or India dominated view of scholars like "Majumdar and Coedès". He quotes G.C. Pandey, the editor of *Interaction with Southeast Asia*, saying that "the development of common and parallel civilisational trails in India and Southeast Asia" came "through a long process of interchange". This cannot be denied, as cultures are inherently porous, evolutionary and transnational.

Historiography is not a fundamental science. It depends upon available data and their considerable subjective interpretations. Subjectivity in historical explorations creeps in, not only because of the nationalities of the scholars but also because of the political, economic and strategic contexts



of regional and international affairs of particular times. If it is assumed that the Indian scholars were driven by their nationalistic and emotional impulses, surely, the European and East Asian historians also cannot be taken as free from theirs'. The confusion created by such impulses can only be reduced if not completely removed, by further scholarly explorations based on hard and authentic evidence. The message of the studies by both Acharya and Chong-Guan is that the field of studying linkages between India and East Asia is still in its infancy and more archaeological findings, discovery of, and discourse on historical evidences and taking a fresh look at the available sources are needed. Until that is done in sufficient strength, firm conclusions like 'Indianisation' or 'convergence' must wait.

Even currently available evidences have not yet been properly organised and interpreted. For instance, the studies under review are based largely on Indonesian and Malay cultures, but say so little about evidences from countries such as Laos and Thailand. Laos has pre-Angkor archaeological findings and living evidences in its Mekong basin area of strong Shaivite Hindu culture, which linked itself with Khmer in Cambodia and Champa in Vietnam. There is hardly any scholarly study of these linkages. Cambodia has also just discovered a whole new city further north of Angkor Wat.

There is greater need to support such studies, not only in Singapore, but also in Indonesia, Malaysia and of course, above all, in India. The Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies has set out to do pioneering work in this field. The new Nalanda University must have a special mission to explore the pasts of India and Southeast Asia that continue to thrive in their 'presents' and have a great promise for their 'futures'. Studies like that of Kalidas Nag on 'India and the Pacific World' may provide a thrust to new concepts such as 'Indo-Pacific', at a time when the Asia-Pacific region is unfolding its new strategic contours.

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Notes

- Acharya, A. 2013. *Civilizations in Embrace: The Spread of Ideas and the Transformation of Power, India and Southeast Asia in the Classical Age*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, ISEAS Nalanda-Sriwijaya Research Series.
- Balaji, S. 2011. *The Dancing Girl: A History of Early India*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
- Kwa Chong-Guan (ed.) 2013. *Early Southeast Asia Viewed from India: An Anthology of Articles from the Journal of the Greater India Society*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, ISEAS Nalanda-Sriwijaya Series.

SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia



SINCE ITS LAUNCH IN 1986, SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia (<http://www.iseas.edu.sg/sojourn.cfm>) has served as the flagship periodical of ISEAS's Regional Social and Cultural Studies Programme. Appearing semi-annually, the journal achieved during its first twenty-seven years of publication a unique position as an outlet for interdisciplinary scholarship on social change in Southeast Asia.

Starting in 2013, SOJOURN will appear three times a year - in March, July, and November. This increase in frequency reflects ISEAS's renewed commitment to publishing in the journal the best work of the ever-larger contingent of scholars focused on processes of social, cultural and intellectual transformation in Southeast Asia.

As the leading interdisciplinary journal edited and published in the region, SOJOURN has always drawn contributions from specialists both in Southeast Asia and in the major centres of Southeast Asian studies in Australia, North America, Japan, and Europe. Articles appearing in SOJOURN combine strong empirical work with theoretical and disciplinary rigor. Many of these articles fall in the fields of sociology and anthropology. At the same time, the range of topical foci that has marked work published in SOJOURN - ethnicity, nationalism, urbanization, migration, gender, religious change, education, tourism and social and cultural history - makes clear that, in the journal's effort to publish scholarship of the greatest relevance to

changing social dynamics in Southeast Asia, it welcomes work from across the social sciences and humanities. This may include work in economics and politics that highlights sociological or cultural issues, as well as historical scholarship intended to speak to contemporary developments in the region.

As part of its ongoing renewal, SOJOURN has initiated a number of regular new features. In the first issue of every year, and to expose readers to the scholarship of younger Southeast Asianists, it will publish work first presented at the annual graduate student conference held by Cornell University's Southeast Asia Program. Even as it continues to publish occasional unrefereed research notes, it will also inaugurate a "Symposium" section featuring paired reviews of important new books on the region. SOJOURN has also applied for inclusion in the Social Sciences Citation Index.

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