

**DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY**

**GAUHATI UNIVERSITY**

***International Seminar on***

***INDIA AND SOUTH EAST ASIA - MAPPING CONNECTIONS***

**CONCEPT NOTE**

**India and South East Asia have links that date back more than two thousand years.** In the early centuries of the Common Era merchants from India had travelled to the lands of South East Asia both by sea and land. In course of time along these trade routes developed cultural exchanges. These can be seen today in the art and architecture of Angkor Vat and Borobudur in Cambodia and Java respectively. In the field of religion Buddhist and Brahmannical belief systems greatly influenced these far off lands. Sanskrit literature also left its mark in the forms of inscriptions and manuscripts. The stories from the two Great Epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas* inspired literary compositions, theatre, dance forms and art in Thailand, Cambodia, Java, Sumatra and Bali. Many merchants and priests from India also founded kingdoms and acquired political authority in these far off lands. Their legacy remains to this day in the names of place names, temples, religion, art, literature and culture.

**But even before Indian merchants travelled to the lands termed “Greater India’ by R.C. Majumdar, India’s Northeast had witnessed waves of migration from these far off lands.** **Anthropological studies indicate that the Brahmaputra Valley lies in one of the great migration routes of the world**. The earliest settlers of the region were the Austro-Asiatic groups who migrated from South East Asia in the pre-historic period more than 10,000 years ago. They are represented in India today by the Khasis of Meghalaya, the Kol, Ho and Munda of Central India and the Nicobarese, all of who belong to the Mon-Khmer linguistic group. In other parts of South East Asia today they are represented by the Vietnamese and the Khmer speakers of Cambodia, besides many sub-groups in Java, etc.

**These early settlers were followed by the Tibeto-Burman linguistic groups that are today scattered over a wide area of both East and South East Asia, from the foothills of the Himalayas to Myanmar, and the lands beyond. In northeast India they are represented today by the Garos, Naga tribes, Mizos, Kukis, Bodo, Rabha, Kachari, Tiwa, Karbi, Dimasa etc. In the historical period, the Tai-Ahoms from Upper Burma (Myanmar) entered the Brahmaputra valley and they were followed at a later date by the Aitoniyas, Turungs, Tai-Phakials, etc.**

**The discovery of pre-historic stone jars in northeast India in the region of Dima-Hasao that bear great similarity with the stone jars from Laos stand mute testimony to ancient migration routes. Most of these routes of migration were originally trade routes, some connected with the Silk Route, others to the regions of South East Asia. Besides silk and horses, salt was also a major item of trade.**

**Literary records and inscriptions refer to Brahmans of the Kaundiny *gotra* establishing political authority in many regions of South East Asia in the first millennium of the Common Era. Besides the port of Tamralipti in the Bay of Bengal, Kaundinya Brahmans from Kundilnagar in Northeast India may have also travelled to South East Asia and established their rule there. Hiuen-Tsang’s testimony refers to the eastern sea route being under the jurisdiction of Bhaskarvarman, a seventh century ruler of Assam. These records open up fresh avenues for research.**

**In the thirteenth century with the coming of the Tai-Ahoms to Assam through the Patkai Hills political, cultural and commercial relations with present Myanmar received a fillip**. In the **colonial period** in India the British by occupying **Ava (Myanmar)** opened up not only political but also commercial relations with the region of Southeast Asia. **In the twentieth century with the onset of the Second World War the construction of the Stilwell Road to facilitate transportation of men and goods also gave a boost to trade and commerce after the end of the war**.

In the recent past, the Government of India with a view to renew age-old trade and cultural links with the nations to our east had pronounced the “Look East” Policy. This was followed by the Act East Policy. This aims at improving economic, cultural and political relations with the Southeast Asian region which has had close contacts with India for centuries and is linked culturally and geographically with it.

India today has emerged as a major player in the political and economic arena of Asia, attempting to challenge the predominant role of the People’s Republic of China *vis-à-vis* the nations that form ASEAN while continuing to pursue the policy of Non-alignment. India now seeks to engage more vigorously with the lands of South East Asia. In view of this, it is imperative to understand the different dimensions of India’s relations with the countries of South East Asia. The region of South and South East Asia has a rich and diverse cultural heritage. Culture can play a major role in promoting good relations and understanding among the nations. This can become possible by finding common meeting ground among nations. It is contended that people and nations can come closer when they discover the “familiar” in “the other”. India and the nations of South East Asia have many common cultural roots. Discovering these roots can make us realize that in spite of ethnic, religious, linguistic, sectarian and regional differences nations can find a common ground, a shared heritage. This in turn will facilitate trade and commerce. Hence, it is proposed to organize an international seminar to facilitate a dialogue between India and her South East Asian neighbours, namely - Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia. Scholars are invited to present research papers and deliberate on issues related to the following broad areas of study:

1. Ethnic communities and migration routes
2. Trade and trade routes
3. Language, literature and culture
4. Religions and culture
5. Art and architecture
6. India and ASEAN
7. Any other subject broadly related to the theme of the seminar

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