

Workshop Lecture

India-South East Asia Relations in context of North East India & Bay of Bengal: Pre-colonial Connectivity and Contemporary Convergence

Inter-Asian linkages and connectivity are important subjects for modern day research. While we talk of India- South East Asia connectivity, we take into consideration two dimensions, i.e. land and maritime connectivities. This presentation talks of India- South East Asia land and maritime connectivities in pre-colonial historical past taking in purview their contemporary utilities. Relations between India and the western parts of Southeast Asia go back to ancient times. India's cultural influence on Burma, Siam, Malaya, Cambodia and Java is quite evident. Both the land and the sea were the obvious ways to travel between India and the Southeast Asian archipelago and social and religious contacts have also thrived because of these land and sea borne trading links.

In this India South East Asia land linkages, North East India's route linkages with Myanmar and Thailand are significant factors. Northeast India stands as the bridge of connectivity between India, Myanmar & Thailand. In the annals of Indian foreign policy, Northeast India has always remained a strategic linking point and used to be referred as the frontier between India and its neighbours. Ethnically, this region is distinct from the rest of India and has strong ethnic and cultural ties with Southeast Asia. As a region, the northeast is demarcated by India's international boundaries with China, Myanmar (formerly Burma), Bhutan and Bangladesh, and internally by the boundary between Assam and a very narrow strip of northern West Bengal known as the "chicken's neck." During the British rule in India, this region acted an eastern buffer zone for India between Burma and China. During the Cold War years, New Delhi's lack of any definite East Asia policy made this region totally isolated in its economic and foreign policy domain. This situation has been drastically altered in the context of New Global Order, following India's proclamation of its Look East policy. Presently, this region can be considered as a 'Gateway to Southeast Asia', on account of its geo-strategic and economic importance. My presentation talks on the projects of roadway and railway linkages between Northeast India and South East Asia.

That being the issue of land linkages, it appears from the writings of historians that in the pre-colonial era Myanmar and Thailand maintained a significant range of trade in their western edge of the Bay of Bengal which was eventually linked to the Indian Ocean. It is argued in recent researches that India's maritime contact with Southeast Asia can be dated as far back the 4th century B.C. It was these trade networks which not only marked trade and exchanges but also characterized the trajectory of the culture of the region.

This presentation refers to pre-colonial and colonial literature and identifies the trade route between the IO/ Bay of Bengal littorals. In contemporary context, we see that Bay of Bengal still plays a major role. Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project signed between India and

Myanmar is an important parametre of discussion. The project involves a major upgradation of infrastructure at Sittwe, located about 250km from the Mizoram border on the north-western coast of Myanmar where the Kaladan river joins the Bay of Bengal. On the other hand for Thailand, we can identify three historical sea route linkages. After Ashokan conquest in Kalinga war, many Indians migrated from the eastern part or Orissa via the Bay of Bengal, to Burma and to the land of Siam for political asylum and hope of a new settlement. Another route is related to international trade and commerce. Mainland Southeast Asia was recognized by Indian merchants as the land of gold or *Suwana Bhumi*. About 14-20 B.E. in the Chola period, a lot of Indian merchants and also Brahmins who wanted to promote Hinduism and Brahmanism came to mainland Southeast Asia via the sea route supported by the monsoon which brought them directly to the southern part of Thailand. They migrated from the Tamil domain in the South via the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago and stopped at Takola (Takuypa in Panggha). The third route is relevant to the military and commercial expansionist policy of the Javanese empire towards mainland Southeast Asia. In the middle ages, i.e eight century, the kingdom of Java invaded and attacked the kingdom of Jenla. This war was the main factor that caused the Brahmins' migration from insular regions to mainland Southeast Asia. That being the historical situation contemporary maritime connectivities are still very limited. Thus my opinion pertains to the view that India's relations with South East Asia was a continuous process delimited by any time-frame. Here the context of Land routes as well Bay of Bengal is eternal and deep rooted, continuing from ancient past to contemporary convergence.