The Palgrave Handbook of Indian Migrants to South East Asia

Edited by
S. Irudaya Rajan

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India ASEAN Relations and Emerging Migration and Diaspora Issues in Southeast Asia

Amba Pande

India–Southeast Asia associations have existed together for centuries. Evidence of precise interactions can also be found since the early centuries of the common era or even before that. An overwhelming Indian civilisational influence can be found all over Southeast Asia regarding political systems, socio-cultural traditions, trade and agriculture, and the growth of urban centres and imperial kingdoms across the region. Religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam reached Southeast Asia from India. Indian court rituals, food, textiles, dress codes, and languages (Sanskrit and Pali) were assimilated into local culture to produce a fascinating synthesis of cultures. Indian influence continues to be significant in contemporary Southeast Asia serving as a bridge and a source of pride for India and ASEAN countries.

Such a tremendous influence could not have been possible without the migration and settlement of people from the Indian subcontinent (Pande, 2017). Nevertheless, there have been rare instances of Indian communities existing in the region since the ancient or medieval times, as scholars point out because the early migrations were mostly rotational or significant amounts of intermixing of populations (Coedes, 1968: 11; Tinker, 1977: 1–2). Piya Changmai of the University of Ostrava, Czech Republic, in her research, has presented detailed genetic evidence of Indian ancestry in various Southeast

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Asian populations like Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam (between 2–16%), identifying the migration patterns of people from the Indian sub-continent South East Asia (Ray, 2022).

Indians in Southeast Asia: An Overview

British colonisation of India introduced contractual migration systems including the Indenture, Kangani, and Maistry for labour recruitment to Overseas plantation colonies. Under such systems, Southeast Asia witnessed a heavy flow of migrants after the 1870s, with the majority of whom were labourers. Still, there were other sections, such as clerks, semi-skilled workers, traders, Chettyars, and many others. Southeast Asia, a region neighbouring India, witnessed a large circulation of migrants, unlike the indentured migrants who had travelled to far-off colonies. However, the economic depression of the 1930s and World War II brought restrictions on the movement of people. This was a significant reason for the decline in rotational migration, which led to permanent settlements. S.D. Muni (2013: 1) writes that "The British Empire in India eroded most of the hitherto- prevailing commercial links between the two Asian regions. Instead, strong components of Indian diasporas and security initiatives for protecting imperial stakes were added, extending as far as Hong Kong". The permanent settlement of the Indian communities led to the beginning of diasporic consciousness. The intermingling of ideas and cultural practices with the local populations happened. At the same time, specific issues of citizenship, migrants' rights, and political participation emerged with the local governments.

In the case of Southeast Asia, the geographical proximity resulted in the migration of an extensive variety of people and communities (in terms of languages, culture, region, caste, religion, and occupation) from the Indian subcontinent. The colonial migration to Southeast Asia constituted of Gujarati, Marwari, Tamil, and Sindhi traders and businesses, as well as labourers mainly from Tamil Nādu or Bihar, and subordinate officers and clerks, mostly comprising Parsis and Bengalis who arrived to help the colonial administration. There were also semi-skilled and skilled service providers like guards, police officers, and drivers, mostly Pathans and Sikhs. The heterogeneity also emerges out of the phases and patterns of migration. Southeast Asia also has people of mixed Indian lineage, especially Muslims, like Indo-Vietnamese, Indo-Khmer, or Javi-Pekan. In the post-independence era, migrations from India to Southeast Asia continued albeit in lesser numbers. Some of the significant groups of migrants included blue-collar workers, construction workers, skilled migrants, and a new wave of highly skilled professionals, entrepreneurs, managers, and investors. This section significantly altered the face of the Indian population in the region. It led to a significant upsurge in the Indian consciousness, almost lost in several Indian communities. The growing India–Southeast Asia relations further gave this a fillip. The recent

migrants are closely connected to India, frequently visiting and sending their children to study there(Pande, 2017).

The existence of various kinds of diversities among the Indian communities in Southeast Asia often results in divisions (based on class, caste, linguistic, urban–rural, and regional differences) and contesting identities and interests. They maintain a distance from each other with little interaction. Marred by this, they have failed to emerge as a united force in the Southeast Asian political landscape (Pande, 2017). While a large section of Indians has made significant progress and have managed to carve out a niche for themselves, many lag behind economically and educationally, particularly in Malaysia and Myanmar. In terms of political participation, while Indians in Singapore have generally been well- represented, in Malaysia and Myanmar, they are politically active. However, in the rest of the countries, they keep a low profile. It was during the anti-colonial movement led by the Indian National Army that all the Indian communities present in Southeast Asia came under a common umbrella united under the leadership of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. The INA movement galvanised all sections of Indians, including women, youth, and the marginalised, drastically boosting the Indian consciousness and identity (Pande, 2016).

ASEAN's Approach Towards Migration

Migration (international, intra-regional, and internal) in the countries of Southeast Asia has thrived in the recent past. The reasons are mostly the same as seen the world over. Economic disparities, wage differentials between countries and employment opportunities, the increasing population dependency ratio in some countries, and the larger youth population in others within the region make the conventional push and pull factors work conventionally in the region. Other factors related to migration, such as the presence of migration/diaspora networks, socio-cultural and religious connectedness and costs of mobility, as well as migration as a family livelihood decision, are also evident among Southeast Asian countries (Fong & Shibuya, 2020; Jajri & Ismail, 2014; Sanglaoid et al., 2014). The legacy of the colonial past also plays a significant role in shaping the nature of migration and diasporas in the region. In addition, political instability and persecution are additional factors in Southeast Asia that stimulate large migrations. Some countries that attract immigrants are Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. In contrast, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam are migrant-sending countries (mainly International), whereas countries like Myanmar send large numbers of migrants across borders. Within the migrant-receiving countries also, there are variations. Singapore receives highly skilled migrants from all over Asia, whereas Thailand primarily receives low-skilled migrants from within the region. As far as the main migration corridors are concerned Thailand—sub-Mekong region (Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar) corridor; the Singapore corridor leading from Indonesia and Malaysia; the Malaysian corridor for migration

from Indonesia, Myanmar, Singapore, and Vietnam; and the Filipino corridor for stepwise migrations from the region to East Asia and further afield to North America, Europe, and the oil-rich countries of the Gulf (ASEAN, 2022).

The importance of migration for Southeast Asia can be gauged by the fact that ASEAN has it on its agenda and comes out with the ASEAN Migration Outlook annually. Nevertheless, multiple challenges exist as governments endeavour to create productive jobs in slow-growth economies and high unemployment (IOM, 2020). Governments have been responsive to migration issues and emergencies like the pandemic. The reintegration of migrants has been a priority area throughout ASEAN countries. According to the IOM (2020), sustainable reintegration is achieved when "returnees have reached levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability, and psychosocial well-being that make their further migration decisions a matter of choice, rather than necessity". Different ASEAN countries have adopted various strategies to absorb returnees, such as offering job-placement services, expanding skills training programmes, providing low-interest loans for self-employment, and redeploying foreign workers from sectors that suffered massive layoffs to sectors that still report labour shortages, as well as finding alternative markets for overseas workers. More significantly, during the pandemic or the Asian Financial Crisis (1997–1998) (Koser, 2009) and the Global Financial Crisis (2008–2009) (Abella, 2009), the ASEAN countries took serious note of the situation. They proposed several policy initiatives (ASEAN, 2022: 59). The main focus areas, as suggested by IOM are Promoting Migration Regular Channels, The Argument for More Inclusive Social Protection, The Protection offered at the Origin, Towards an ASEAN Agreement on Social Security for Migrant Workers, Establishing an ASEAN Protocol on Return and Reintegration, Digitise and Share Information on Migrant Workers, Evaluation and Assessment of the Effectiveness of Reintegration Programme, Fund for Emergency Repatriation, Sharing Lessons and Best Practices, and Tailor Reintegration Policies to Meet the Specific Needs of Women Migrant Returnees. (ASEAN, 2022).

Diaspora as a Factor in the Act East Policy

As mentioned earlier, India and Southeast Asia had close interaction during the pre-colonial and colonial periods. However, to quote Pande, "The 1990s marked the watershed period, as India embarked on liberalising its economy, started its eastward engagement under the LEP, and opened its door for the diaspora. These interrelated and seismic shifts in policy brought New Delhi closer to the region and also revived its long-lost ties with the Indian communities living in the region (Pande, 2017). There is little doubt that India has made significant strides in both these areas. India's partnership with ASEAN countries has seen significant successes. To quote the MEA website, "India's search for economic space resulted in the 'Look East Policy'. The Look East

Policy has today matured into a dynamic and action-oriented 'Act East Policy', initiated by PM Shri Narendra Modi, at the 12th ASEAN India Summit and the 9th East Asia Summit held in Myanmar, in November 2014" (MEA, 2018). India became a sectoral partner of the ASEAN in 1992, a dialogue partner in 1996, and a summit-level partner in 2002. There are, in total, 30 Dialogue Mechanisms between India and ASEAN, cutting across various sectors. The major trajectories of cooperation are Political Security Cooperation, Economic Cooperation, Socio-Cultural Cooperation, and Connectivity. India's endeavour towards building trade relations with ASEAN resulted in the establishment of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between India and ASEAN in 2010. However, As Aarti Garg puts it, "India's growing trade deficit with all ASEAN nations has become a significant concern for Indian policymakers. AFTA has caused the trade to divert from nations outside the agreement to FTA's member nations, leading to trade diversion rather than trade creation. A dominant exporter of light manufacturing products, ASEAN has competitive tariff rates, making it difficult for India to gain access to the industry market in ASEAN countries." However, India is also focusing on the sub-region CLMV (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam) to correct this imbalance in trade. It eslablished a Project Development Fund to assist Indian companies set up manufacturing bases in the CLMV sub-region (Marjani, 2023).

Cultural and economic cooperation as well as people-to-people contact, are essential in this proactive engagement with the ASEAN countries. The significant trajectories of the Act East Policy have opened numerous avenues for engagement and interaction for the Indian communities of the region. India's growing presence helped Indian communities to revive and strengthen their social, religious, and cultural bonds with the motherland. The role of diasporas has increased in furthering economic and soft power contributions as well as foreign policy goals due to transnational connectivity, a phenomenon that has been reiterated by scholars and recognised by governments. India's approach towards Indian communities in Southeast Asia is closely linked to its larger policy framework towards the overseas Indian communities (the diaspora) and its policy priorities vis-à-vis Southeast Asia. The relaxed visa regime for Indian professionals, under the newly signed trading arrangement, has opened further avenues for the circulation of people, especially the skilled and highly skilled categories. The establishment of Indian heritage centres can prove valuable in reviving the ties. K.S. Nathan, an eminent Indian Scholar, states, "Since India has developed a dynamic relation with the ASEAN and has become an essential factor in the Balance of power in Southeast Asia, the position of Indians in the region has been strengthened" (based on interaction with the scholar). On the other hand, the movement of highly skilled professionals to the region and many Indian−origin people taking essential positions in ASEAN countries have bolstered India's position in the Southeast Asian region. It has been a win–win situation for India and its Southeast Asian Diaspora (Pande, 2017). There are some common platforms of cooperation as India and ASEAN are confronted with human security issues on account of the Rohingya situation,

extremism, and the frequency of regional natural disasters. This area of cooperation can help build goodwill and deepen existing relations between the governments and the people on both sides (Singh, 2022: 5).

Nevertheless, there are several tricky situations, like the one in Myanmar, where a large number of Indian–origin people are still stateless, or some of the issues of ethnic riots, like in Malaysia, persist in the bilateral relations between India and ASEAN countries. One of the growing fields about the movement of people is the tourism sector which is a high-potential area. According to preliminary data, the number of visitors arriving from India to ASEAN in 2022 was 2,38 million, a significant increase from 81,131 in 2021. India is a crucial collaborative platform for ASEAN National Tourism Organisations (NTOs) to market Southeast Asia to Indian consumers (Temjenmeren, 2020).

The second concern is that trade in services should be liberalised in tandem with trade in goods (Singh, 2022: 4). India is a global leader in software development and other IT services. At the same time, the ASEAN region is a net importer of telecommunications, computer, and information services, providing an opportunity for greater cooperation. Further, with the signing of the ASEAN-India Agreement on Investment and Trade in Services on November 13, 2014, there is immense scope for collaboration. The agreement on services and investment, which came into effect on July 1, 2015, also provides access to financial services, which has yet to realise its full potential. These sectors need to be explored since they would be crucial to the ASEAN-India economic integration process (Temjenmeren, 2020). The two sides can also develop an ecosystem like that in Silicon Valley to promote new ideas, new technologies, and businesses, which can encourage the free movement of people (Singh, 2022). ASEAN is responsive towards migration issues within the region. Yet, the agreement on trade in services between ASEAN and India, where the latter has a comparative advantage, has to reach its full potential and must be revised. Establishing a robust network of mechanisms to deal with the movement of people would encourage greater cooperation between India and Southeast Asia.

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