Close cultural interaction of India with Southeast Asia began from prehistoric times and continued until the beginning of colonial rule. India’s relations with Southeast Asia passed through many vicissitudes. In the new millennium, India is trying its best to be major power in the region with its "Look East" policy.

**Ancient and medieval period**

From prehistoric days, India had trade and cultural relations with West Asia, Rome, China and Southeast Asia. India sent its traders and missionaries to these regions and in some places these persons also settled. During the reign of Darius the Great of Persia, Greece and India had their earliest contact in about 510 BCE. After the discovery of the monsoon by Hippalus in first century CE, Roman vessels played directly across the Indian Ocean. The port of Palura on the eastern coast of India had an important role. The ships came here from Arikamedu, crossed the Bay of Bengal and went to the delta of the Irrawaddy, whence they proceeded to the Malay Peninsula. Demand for Eastern goods had the effect of stimulating Indian trading along the Malay Peninsula. It is not surprising that Roman coins, pottery, amphora and other trade goods have been found in the Malay Peninsula originating from coastal regions of eastern India. Indo-Roman contact declined during the third and fourth centuries CE, but India’s relationship with Southeast Asia continued.

Historically, 'Indianization' was the term generally used for Indian cultural influence upon Southeast Asia. Earlier scholars had regarded the process of 'Indianization' as an Indian initiative with large-scale migrants establishing colonies in Southeast Asia. According to these scholars, the latter region was at the receiving end and played a passive role. The arrival of large number of Indians would have made significant social changes, but the people of Southeast
Asia did not adopt the caste system, nor even the dietary habits of the Indians like curry powder or milk products. Politically, none of the supposed Southeast Asia 'colonies' showed any allegiance to India. Economically speaking, the states of Southeast Asia were not colonies as there was no scope of economic exploitation. India also did not enjoy monopoly in the field of foreign trade.

The absence of concrete evidence regarding Indian cultural expansion has resulted in the postulation of various theories regarding the motives and the process of the transfer of Indian cultural elements to Southeast Asia. In this article, the flow of Indian cultural elements is shown in the context of Southeast Asian initiative or 'indigenization'. The consensus is that the process of Indian cultural expansion in Southeast Asia was accomplished by peaceful means and it was non-political in character. There is first the kshatriya (warrior class) theory, which presupposes that Indian cultural expansion was due to the seminal influence of the Indian warriors and conquerors, who migrated in large numbers to Southeast Asia. The vaisya (merchant class) theory postulates that Indian cultural penetration began with traders, who intermarried with local women and impressed the indigenous population with their goods and culture. The third theory, commonly known as brahma (priestly class) theory accorded primacy to local initiative: indigenous port patricians and rulers enlisted the service of brahmans to buttress their political authority through Hindu ceremonies and rituals. Rather than being the result of a single factor, most likely the whole process of Indian cultural expansion was the outcome of endeavors of warriors, traders and priests along with the indigenous initiative. Most probably all four groups of people were involved in the process.

One of the significant factors in the spread of Indian cultural influence in Southeast Asia is geographical proximity between two regions. The fabulous wealth of Southeast Asia was an attraction for the Indians. The type of names given to different regions of Southeast Asia is recognition of this desire for economic gain. The Ramayana, Pali Nidesa and other works refer to Suvarnabhumi (land of gold), Suvarnadvipa (island of gold), Narikeladvipa (island of coconuts), Karpuradvipa (island of camphor), and Yavodvipa (island of barley). In respect of kingdom of Pan-p'an, it has been said that the numerous brahmans of that kingdom came from India in search of wealth. Inscriptions attest to the arrival of Indian brahmans to Cambodia and settling there after marrying in royal families. The missionary activities of Buddhists also resulted in large number of Indians settling in the region.

Although the most intensive cultural contact between India and Southeast Asia came in later centuries, initial contact between the two regions dates to prehistoric times. There was racial and linguistic affinity between certain groups of people of eastern India with Southeast Asians. Archaeological excavations are also a testimony of the interaction between the two regions. In the Korat plateau of Thailand, glass and stone beads have been found, which was an indicator of trade contact with India. Ban Chiang in Thailand had yielded bimetallic spearheads belonging to first millennium BCE. The same types of artifacts have been reported from places like Mahurijhari in Madhya Pradesh, Gilmanuk in Bali, Prajekan in Java and Dongson in Vietnam. The Buni complex in Java had
yielded Indian rouletted ware of the first and second centuries CE. Sembrian in Bali is another site, whose finds include sherds of pottery of types found at Arikamedu, an important Indo-Roman trading center. An Indian type of gold foil funerary eye cover had been recovered from the site of Gilimanuk. In Oc Eo in Vietnam, which was an entrepôt from the second century CE onwards, finds have included items like beads, intaglios and seals with Sanskrit inscriptions. Therefore, the early centuries of the common era saw a greater impetus in the direction of Indo-Southeast Asian relations.

In the spread of Indian culture, the sea played an important role. There was intensification of sea-borne commerce in the early centuries of Common Era. Along with traders, missionaries, priests, literati, adventurers and fortune seekers went to Southeast Asia. The ancient port of Tamralipti at the mouth of Ganga was one of the earliest places of embarkation. From there, ships proceeded to the Malay Peninsula either along the coasts of Bengal and Myanmar or through the Bay of Bengal. Chinese texts of the third century CE attest to this fact. A trader from western India reached what the Chinese called Funan in the second century CE, and the Funanese king Fan Chen, after learning from the trade about India, sent one of his relations there. The latter embarked at Teu-ki-li, reached the mouth of Ganga and proceeded further. Ships from the Mediterranean visited this port of Tamralipti, which was situated at the extremity of Orissa's domain. From there, vessels then sailed to Southeast Asia and China. After the decline of Indo-Roman trade, the route from India to China through Southeast Asia did not cease. Ptolemy had referred the port of Palura as an apheterion, where the ships ceased to follow the coastal littoral and entered the high seas. Palura was the port of departure for Roman ships before sailing to Southeast Asia and, afterwards, to China. The ships reached Aden from Egypt and arrived at the coast of India. From Arikamedu the ships sailed to Palura and reached Arakan through Bay of Bengal. They went south along the coast to the delta of Irrawaddy and then turned into the Gulf of Martaban. The ships reached the port of Oc Eo after passing through Takkola, Klang and Pattani. Final destination was the port of Kattigara. The traders avoided the risky sea route round the coast of Malay Peninsula. They went to Thailand through Kedah and took the land route to Campa after crossing Laos and Cambodia.

During the early centuries of common era, trade with China through Southeast Asia followed two routes. The first was from the Andhra and Kalinga coast, from where the ships went to Irrawaddy valley of Myanmar after crossing the Bay of Bengal. From the valley, the traders went to the upper Yangtze basin through Salween and Mekong rivers. The second route started from Tamralipti, reached Sri Lanka and sailed directly through the Nicobar islands either to the Sunda straits or straits of Malacca. From places like lower end of Sumatra or western end of Java, it was easy to go up the Malay coast past Pattani, Singora and Ligor to the port of Oc Eo. The voyage then covered the coast past Campa to Chio-Chi port in Vietnam or on to Canton. After reaching the ports of Malay, the Indian sailors went either through the pirate-infested straits of Melaka (Malacca) or safer land route to the east coast. Across the narrow Isthmus of Kra, from Takupa on the western side to Chaiya on the eastern, there was a short cut. Another route was from Tavoy over the three pagodas pass and then by Kanburi river to the
valley of Menam. Still there was another passage connecting the Menam region to the Mekong by way of the Korat plateau via Sri Tep and the Mon valley. It is not surprising that some of the places mentioned above are archaeological sites and places of Indian influence. The monsoon wind played a major role in determining the maritime operations on the Bay of Bengal. As the southwest monsoon during April to October caused adverse weather conditions in the straits, sailors preferred northeast monsoon at the time of October to April for starting their journey from India. The ships sailing from China would come to the straits on the northeast monsoon and up the straits in time for the next northeast monsoon to sail to India.

Apart from Arikamedu, Palura and Tamralipti, there were other ports on the eastern coast of India: Masulipatnam (Machlipatna), Kamana (Kalapattana), Poduke (Pondicherry), Supatana (near Chennai), and Puhar (Kaveripattanam). On the west, following the nomenclature of Periplus, there were, on the mouth of Narmada, Barygaza (Broach), Suppara (Sopara), Calliena (Kalyan), Semylla (Chaul), and Naura (Cannanore). Another work, the Milindapanha (Questions of King Milinda) of the first century CE refers to the name of places in India and Southeast Asia and mentions the name of important ports like Sovira (lower Indus valley), Suratta (Gujrat), Cola Pattana (Coromandel Coast), Vanga (Bengal), and Suvarnabhumi (lower Myanmar). The ports also played an important role as diffusion centers for Indian art elements to Southeast Asia. The port of Amaravati at the lower reaches of Krishna River was not far from Palura. Sailing from the ports of Palura-apheterion complex, the early Buddhist missionaries and migrants carried with them the sculptures of Amaravati school of art. The images of this school have been found in various places in Southeast Asia: Palembang, east Java, West Celebes, Korat, and Dong Duong. Spots from where these sculptures have been found are situated on the sea-route taken by Su-wu in the middle of the third century CE.

In the whole gamut of Indo-Southeast Asian relations, both Indians and Southeast Asians played an active role. Apart from movement of people and racial and linguistic affinity, there were also trading relations. Along with traders, brahmans (priests) from India came to Southeast Asia, who acquainted the local elite with Indian rituals, scriptures, and literature. They became counselors in the affairs of the courts and provided political support to the rulers by giving them a sort of investiture and genealogical list, which legitimized the position of rulers. Indian elements like Sanskrit language, the Hindu-Buddhist cults, Dharmashastras, and the Indian concept of royalty became essential features of the early states of Southeast Asia. The common people, too, were influenced by Indian elements like the stories of the Ramayana, and Indian deities became popular. The Rama legend was prevalent in Southeast Asia with local variations. In the process of adoption, the stories of Ramayana have been transformed. Campa even has a Valmiki temple, which is very rare in India. The Ramayana tradition affected the life, custom, belief, geography and history of Southeast Asia. Performing arts like shadow play and puppet shows had continuous interaction with Rama story. In the bas-relief of temples, there are representations from the Ramayana stories. Indian culture was diffused through the autochthonous societies of Southeast Asia, whose material base was of such a
standard that it could assimilate elements of that culture. The people of Southeast Asia had knowledge of metal industry, long-established contact with outside world, acquaintance with marine technology, and a developed agriculture. By a process of selection, the people of Southeast Asia accepted certain elements of Indian culture. In art and architecture, concepts were Indian, but indigenous genius was at work. The stories from Indian classics were changed according to local taste. The Indian-influenced states of Southeast Asia like Funan, Sri Kshetra, Champa, Khmer, Sri Vijaya, and Majapahit existed until medieval times. This period was when Hindu-Buddhist features were dominant. The coming of Islam to Southeast Asia changed this situation. The spice and pepper trade to the Mediterranean by Gujarati traders resulted in establishment of Muslim settlements in Southeast Asia. From Gujarat and Coromandel Coast, where contact with Southeast Asia was there from earlier times, the traders visited the region and helped in spreading Islam. As Indian Muslims brought the religion, Islam in Southeast Asia was not like the orthodox Islam of Arabia. A new religious and cultural force was emerging in the archipelago. Indian and Arab traders had established themselves in scattered pockets. It was mainly the Indian traders from Gujarat, Malabar, Tamil Nadu and Bengal, who brought a liberal brand of Islam. Indian Muslims before coming of the Portuguese dominated the trade in Indian Ocean and there was a connection between India and Indonesia in the maritime trade of the region. International ports like Melaka and Aceh had large settlements of Indian traders. Moreover, it was the Hindu-Buddhist kings and princes who were converted to Islam and spread the doctrine. Consequently, Islam in Indonesia was not of an orthodox variety and retained earlier traditions in a compromising spirit. Beginning from the conversion of the north Sumatra town of Perlak in 1290, Islam percolated through north Sumatra, northeast Java and Maluku. Aceh and Melaka were among the first local rulers who embraced the new faith in the beginning of fifteenth century. The rebel prince, Parameshvara of Majapahit, carved out a small principality at Melaka in 1411 and styled himself as Megat Iskander Shah after conversion. It not only occupied a central position in international commerce replacing the Majapahit, but also the rulers of small kingdoms got converted to the new faith by marrying daughters of wealthy Indian merchants or of the royal house of Melaka. The port became the guiding force in spread of Islam, and the Southeast Asians preserved some Hindu-Buddhist characteristics long acquired by their contact with India—there was no break with the pre-Islamic past.

Another approach towards studying Indian cultural influence is in the context of indigenization. Scholars with this viewpoint went to the extent of replacing the term 'Indic' with classical. The attempt to give importance to a greater role for Indians or a purely indigenous initiative may result in a semantic one. Rather than focus on only one facet, the interaction between Indian and local cultures should be emphasized. Southeast Asia had already reached a high level of civilization before Indian contact, and it chose those elements of Indian culture which were either consistent with or could be molded to its own beliefs. Vishnu's consort Lakshmi became a goddess promoting fertility in rice fields in west Java. Shiva was transformed into the tradition of a cult of earth god in Campa. At Ba Phanom, in Cambodia, the goddess receiving sacrificial rituals was an amalgamation of earlier Me Sa (white mother) with the Indian goddess
Mahishasuramardini. The stories of Ramayana were changed in the Thai, Lao or Indonesian versions. In the cult, there was blending of Hindu concepts with Southeast Asian mountain cult. The Southeast Asian peoples absorbed into their indigenous cultural patterns the Indian elements after adapting them to their own necessities. An attempt to assign a greater role either to India or to Southeast Asia would be futile. Moreover, giving importance to terminology like Indic, Indianization, Classical or Indigenization would result in a semantic controversy. The whole process of Indian cultural influence was a collective interaction between the cultures of India and Southeast Asia.

Modern Period

In the colonial period, Indian immigrants went to Southeast Asian countries to work in plantation fields, where they led a miserable life. Some also migrated to set up business in textiles, spice trade and retailing. Indian moneylenders did a fine business. The colonial bureaucracy and army had also sizable number of Indians. In the British colonies of Malay, Singapore and Myanmar, Indians worked in rubber, coffee and tea plantations. The British brought to Singapore indentured laborers, mainly from southern India for construction work. The cheap and unskilled labor in rice mills and plantations was provided by Indian labor. In the French colony of Indochina, there were Indian textile merchants and moneylenders. Indians also worked for the government as clerks, technicians, teachers, and traders. Colonial governments saw Indians as advancing the interest of colonial masters. Although they have contributed to economic life of Southeast Asia, Indians faced (and continue to face) many difficulties with citizenship rights and ethnic hostility after the end of colonial rule. Many came back to India. They also took part in India’s freedom struggle, when they joined the Indian National Army (INA) of Subhas Chandra Bose during the Second World War. The INA recruited Indian personnel from Myanmar and Singapore. Southeast Asia was the theatre of operation against the British colonial rule by the INA and it has remained an important landmark in India’s struggle for independence. In spite of European dominance in inter-Asian trade in colonial period, traders from India acted in collaboration with the trading organizations of Europe. This trade was, however, on a much-reduced scale. The Chettis in Myanmar, Tamils in Sumatra, and Gujaratis in Indonesian ports acted as collaborators of the Europeans. One of the consequences of this partnership was the stunted growth of middle class in Southeast Asia.

The Indian independence movement provided a stimulant to the anti-colonial struggle in Southeast Asia. Southeast Asian leaders, such as Sukarno, Norodom Sihanouk, Aung San, and Ho Chi Minh admired Indian personalities like Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, and Jawaharlal Nehru. Many Southeast Asians also attended the sessions of the Indian National Congress and met Indian leaders. In the framework of the freedom struggle, the Indian leaders mooted the concept of Asianism and emphasized the spiritualism of Asia over materialistic west. They called upon a common Asian identity in opposition to the West. After India gained independence in 1947, it pursued a dynamic policy towards
Southeast Asia. Aspiring for a meaningful role in Asia, it convened the Asian Relations Conference of twenty-five nations. Two hundred and fifty delegates attended it. India played a mediatory role and contributed to lessening of tension in the region by hosting the Conference on Indonesia in 1949. The Indian Premier Nehru vehemently criticized the Dutch action in Indonesia. The Conference urged the United Nations Security Council for an immediate cease-fire. The Bandung Conference was the high watermark in Indian diplomacy. Nehru, who was the architect of basic principles of Indian foreign policy like anti-colonialism and non-alignment, was also of the strong belief that India could play a meaningful role in the cold war period. India also was in favor of a peaceful solution to the problem in Indochina. It had given a six-point proposal such as, complete independence of the countries, non-intervention by outside powers and the end of First Indochina War (1946-1954) to bring end to the conflict. India became the Chairman of the peacekeeping machinery, the International Control Commission, after the war.

India’s relations with Southeast Asian countries, however, lost its momentum after the humiliating defeat of India in Sino-Indian War of 1962. Its position was weakened on the diplomatic front. India’s good offices were not sought by the nations of Southeast Asia. Non-alignment had lost its effectiveness to an extent. Foreign policy makers of India also neglected the region. Closeness with the erstwhile Soviet bloc resulted in Friendship Treaty of 1971 with the then USSR, an inward looking economy, and deep commitment to the cause of Arabs, and a subsequent neglect of Southeast Asia. India was also viewed with suspicion by the governments of Southeast Asia after its 1974 nuclear test. The naval capabilities of India and its build-up in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands worried the ASEAN countries. New Delhi was viewed as posing a danger to regional security. Its wholehearted support to the Indochinese Communists in the Vietnamese conflict resulted in aloofness from the rest of the Southeast Asian countries. India did not take part in a dialogue with the ASEAN nations despite overtures from the member states in 1970s. India was cut off from the region for decades. However, its closeness with communist regimes of Indochina helped in reviving relations after a policy change in 1990s. The end of cold war, the onset of the economic liberalization process and other economic imperatives resulted in a reorientation of India-Southeast Asian relations.

**Contemporary India-Southeast Asian Relations**

Free from ideological rhetoric and the bogey of the cold war, India moved closer towards Southeast Asian countries. The collapse of the Soviet Union and India’s economic woes resulting from centralized planning forced the leadership to think anew. It liberalized its economy and decided to keep in tune with the globalization process. The ‘tiger economy’ of the Asia-Pacific Rim was taken into consideration. India adopted two-pronged strategy to have closer contact with Southeast Asia. It made diplomatic moves to have close interaction with a multilateral ASEAN as well as endeavored to have close bilateral ties with the countries of Southeast Asia. India’s perception was that the volume of trade
would increase and investment opportunities would increase by becoming closer to ASEAN. There would be increasing South-South cooperation and India’s relations with Southeast Asia would improve. ASEAN members were hesitant in the beginning as India was supporting the Heng Samrin regime in Cambodia. The end of the bipolar world in international politics, a peace settlement in Cambodia, and India’s economic reforms changed the scenario. At the Fourth ASEAN Summit in Singapore in January 1992, member countries of ASEAN decided to make India a sectoral dialogue partner as far as tourism, commerce, science and technology were concerned. The ASEAN-India Joint Sectoral Cooperation Committee (AIJSCC) was established to look into these matters. This period resulted in many high level visits. The Indian prime minister visited Indonesia Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore and Malaysia in the first half 1990s. India wanted to have closer ties with Southeast Asia and the visits were accompanied by high-level delegation of businessmen. There was a reciprocal visit by Southeast Asian leaders, particularly from Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. Leaders stressed Asian values during the visits and gradually business relations developed. Companies from Southeast Asia began to invest more in India after 1991, and capital from Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia flowed.

India, along with China and Russia, became a full dialogue partner of ASEAN in December 1995 at the Fifth ASEAN Summit in Bangkok. It was the manifestation of a India’s "Look East" policy. India attended the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference in Jakarta in July 1996. All parties agreed to work closely for a better future. India also became a member of the body dealing with security issues of ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). China’s nuclear explosion, military assertion in the Taiwan straits, and its claim over the Spratly Islands were matter of great concern for the ASEAN countries. India could be a balancing factor in this matter. In spite of criticism of India’s nuclear tests in 1998 by a section of the ARF, India could prevent the raising of bilateral issues. Pakistan could not become a member of ARF and its lobbying of certain members for raising Kashmir issue had been to no avail. New Delhi’s concern regarding cross-border terrorism found mention in the Singapore session of the ARF in July 1999. The ARF facilitated greater strategic engagement for India with countries of the region, which was an ongoing process since 1990s. There were joint naval exercises and defense cooperation. Indonesia and Malaysia had started the joint military exercises in 1991. Singapore followed suit in 1993. The 1993 Memorandum of Understanding between Malaysia and India led to defense cooperation between the two in matters like the latter supplying spare parts and training of MIG-29 pilots. By an agreement in 1996, Singapore got the facility to test missiles at the Indian naval base at Chandipur. There was cooperation between India and Indonesia on aerospace matters. Strategic partnership with Southeast Asia was to the advantage of India. It looked forward to arms exports to the large market of the region.

Along with political and strategic improvement of relations, India also tried to strengthen economic partnerships on a bilateral level. Vietnam is the largest market for India in the Indochinese region. India is the 14th largest overseas investor in Thailand at present. India’s trade with the ASEAN nations in 1999-2000 reached up to US$7.4 billion, with Indian imports accounting for US$5.1
billion. Whereas, the value of India’s ASEAN exports and imports in 1993-1994 was US$1.7 billion and US$1.1 billion, respectively; it was US$2.2 billion and US$4.9 billion, respectively, in 1999-2000. Indian companies like Birla, Kirloskar, BHEL, Sarabhai Chemicals, Ranbaxy, Tata and others have invested in Southeast Asia and India has invited capital from Thailand and Singapore. To date, India has fifty-eight joint venture projects in Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore. India and Thailand have signed agreements pertaining to seabed boundary, scientific collaboration and cultural exchanges. About three hundred Indian joint ventures are operating in Thailand including 16 joint ventures with Indian equity participation. The Aditya Birla Group is the largest investor from India with three joint ventures. Indian and Vietnam have strong commercial ties. The ITC-Global Trading Corporation is working in agricultural sector in Vietnam since 1992. The R. P. Goenka Group has set up an automobile tire unit. In 1990s, host of agreements were signed such as the Civil Aviation Agreement, 1993; Bilateral Investment Protection Agreement, 1997; a memorandum of understanding on cooperation in environment and forestry, 1997; a Trade Agreement, 1997; and a Cultural Exchange Program (CEP). Relations with Myanmar have evolved as the centerpiece of the "Look East" policy to establish close links with its eastern neighbors. Both have agreed to base their relations on the Panchashila or Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (mutual respect for each other’s territorial integrity and sovereignty; non-aggression; non-interference in each other’s internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence). The November 2000 visit of Maung Aye, Vice Chairman of the SPDC marked a new beginning in relations. Both decided to curb the activities of extremist groups and drug traffickers along the Indo-Myanmar border. New Delhi extended a $15 million credit to Myanmar for the purchase of industrial and electrical equipment from India. It was one of only four International Labor Organization (ILO) Governing Body members opposing strict ILO action against Myanmar for alleged forced labor practices. India’s relations with Indonesia are in upward swing from 1990s. There are fourteen joint ventures in sectors like steel, textiles and cement. Bilateral trade, which was US$103 million in 1988, had increased five times since then. India imports from Indonesia items like petroleum, tin, and rubber. It exports cotton and vehicle components. With thirteen joint ventures in Singapore in 1992, the economic collaboration of India is increasing. It is one of the biggest export markets for India and also one of the largest foreign investors. Tata and Singapore Airlines are going to collaborate in aviation. Singapore is going to develop an information technology park in Indian City of Bangalore.

Although trade presently is tilted in favor of ASEAN, the military cooperation with individual countries and January 2001 agreement with ASEAN will redress the balance to an extent. India is heading the working group on education and information technology. Both sides also agreed for increasing cooperation in sectors like tourism, culture, transport and communication. India’s "Look East" policy is not satisfied with becoming a member of ARF only. It is also trying to become member of the ASEAN. It is very much eager to have at least the status enjoyed by China, Japan and South Korea under the ASEAN-plus-three mechanism. Malaysia as the coordinating country of ASEAN’s dealing with India holds an essential position. The Indian prime minister’s May 2001 visit to
Kuala Lumpur tried hard to achieve this new status for India. Although it did not succeed, groundwork has been laid. Both the countries signed commercial agreements: the most important were a US$1.5 billion rail line construction by India, and the export of palm oil by Malaysia. India has taken initiative to have multilateral cooperation apart from the ASEAN. Along with South Asian countries like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, the BIMSTEC (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand Economic Cooperation) aims at close cooperation among member countries. The MGC (Mekong-Ganga Cooperation), an Indian initiative was floated on 10 November 2000 in Vientiane for better understanding and close relations among member countries like India, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. A Mekong-Ganga Tourism Investment Guide would facilitate travel in the region, promote package tours and develop transport networks such as the East-West Corridor and the Trans-Asian Highway. The promotion of air services, development of information technology infrastructure, promotion of research in performing arts, protection of heritage and empowerment of women are also items on the agenda of the organization.

India's size, population, educated middle class, industrial base, military strength, technical capability, ancient cultural relations with Southeast Asia, and presence of non-resident Indians (NRIs) are factors in India’s favor. New Delhi’s neglect of the region from late 1960s, and the low priority accorded to it by the non-Indochinese countries of Southeast Asia changed after the end of cold war. Both are looking at each other in a positive light. Their needs are mutual also. The political, commercial and strategic interaction of both the regions from 1990s is going to usher in a new era. In the new millennium, India is going to play a prominent role in Southeast Asia.

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**Select Bibliography**


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