



**Between the Ganga and the Mekong:
understanding of India's historical links
towards regional cooperation**

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From the Director's Desk

It gives me great pleasure to announce the launch of the AsCon monograph series from the Asian Confluence. Born in 2012 as an initiative of Divyajeevan Foundation, the Asian Confluence initiates, stimulates and accelerates revival of the shared civilizational values between the peoples of India and our Eastern neighbourhood. The Asian Confluence initiative promotes research, advocacy and training programs that promote people to people contact between the various countries of the region at an academic and cultural level, fostering better understanding on environmental, educational and socio political issues of the region, complementing similar efforts already underway.

In a landmark conference titled the “Shillong Dialogue“ in 2014, held in collaboration with the Indian Council for World Affairs, the Asian Confluence launched a flagship concept, “The Intelligent Third Space”. Complementing the first “first” and “second” spaces of government and large commercial consideration respectively, the “third space” is of people for their own engagement as well as with other sectors. The space is vibrant and intelligent daring stakeholders for innovative and out of the box solutions. The Asian Confluence has aimed to provide an institutional framework to this space promoting an open space for cultural and intellectual exchanges beyond borders, encouraging people to people contact and advocacy for policy frameworks that support the vision.

The role of academia in providing thought leadership to this space is key. Our peoples are bound by a common geography and history and yet separated by borders. The AsCon monographs authored by senior and established academics and policy makers aims to provide thought leadership, and providing stimulus and trigger points for the academic and strategic communities to take forward the discourse.

The Asian Confluence invites scholars and experts to contribute to this ongoing series as a collective and joint mission. We will be looking forward to receiving such proposals in our commitment to enrich the “Third Space” further.

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When New Delhi began to 'Look East' some three decades ago its one outcome was a revival of interest in the countries of Southeast Asia. The development of North Eastern India was the defined objective of the new domestic and foreign policies. This region was not very long ago reorganised into seven states, four of them former districts of the old colonial province of Assam, and its relative isolation caused by Partition had been recognised or the overriding factor for its remaining far behind the other states of the Union in economic development and industrialization. Its geographical proximity to Southeast Asia, seen as a key to its fuller and speedier progress, gave that policy, Look East, its broader dimension. Already there is an increasing tendency among scholars to view the vast region between the Ganga, or more precisely its lower reaches in Bengal, and the Mekong River, more in terms of similarities or commonalities rather than of differences. That process began with the movement and settlement of peoples of Indian origin in Southeast Asia, induced by trade or to spread a faith, since the early centuries of the Christian era, and even before that. Even before that there had been prehistoric tribal movements from the south, into India's north east.

This part of the country, it needs to be emphasised, is a frontier area. The reference to Kamarupa (or the valley) as such in the fourth century (c350CE) Allahabad Pillar Inscription of the Imperial Guptas is perhaps its earliest expression. The historical development of the region and the diversity of its population had been determined to a large extent by this fact – "geography behind history", as one historian aptly put it. The mountain fringe in the north and south, and the rivers in the west, notably the Karatoya (now merged in the Teesta,) was never barriers to human movement. The Brahmaputra valley opens out at its western end to the Indo-Gangetic plains. From here Brahmanical influence, that is Aryanisation or Sanskritic Culture, spread eastwards. The recent discovery of inscribed *brahmi* characters at Doyang in the Doyang - Dhansiri valley Assam's Golaghat, is taken to indicate the definite presence of Indo-Aryans in the Doyang - Dhansiri Valley in about 200-300 CE. Under this influence the Brahmaputra valley and the valleys of its tributaries underwent a gradual social, religious and economic transformation. It was quite rapid during the time of the Guptas and at the end of the millennium had sufficiently advanced to recognise Kamarupa, or early Assam in characteristic Indian idioms.

But Sanskritisation was never quite complete. The indigenous people, at least a large section of them, retained their identity, in speech and culture, and followed their own tribal rituals. Rather, they in turn influenced the Aryan way of life.

Who then were the people among whom large numbers were ‘Sanskritised’? The autochthones are said to be the Kiratas, with whom some identify the Bodo - Kacharis. They are said to have formed part of the army of Bhagadatta of pre Kamarupa Pragjyotishpur, mentioned in the *Mahabharata*. But the picture still remains hazy. The migrations from the south have been through the mountains that today separate the North East, and India, from Myanmar, or Myanmar as it is now called. The discovery of Neolithic tools in the Naga Hills, North Cachar Hills and in the Brahmaputra valley, bearing Southeast Asian Neolithic tradition, as a recent study points out, shows prehistoric human migration possibly through these hills from Southeast Asian countries into the Brahmaputra valley. The same study also suggests on the basis of ‘Austro-Asiatic’ language elements, that the Austriacs migrated into the region in the ‘distant past’. Most striking, however, are finds from excavation in the Assam - Garo Hills border, dated to 1000 BCE, that show a culture closely linked with Southeast Asia. The Austric speaking matrilineal Khasis are among the earliest of these to have moved into the region. The Tibeto Myanmar speaking people were relatively late comers. Professor A L Basham, best known for his stimulating, *The Wonder that was India* thus sums up the result of those human movements:

“Ethnically, the people of Assam form a mixed race and cultural and physiological features linking them with Southeast Asia, Tibet and China are still obvious, but the upper classes of the Brahmaputra valley, the region in ancient times known as Kamarupa, have adopted Sanskritic Culture since early in the Christian era, at the latest, and their kings have left numerous important inscriptions, many of them in beautiful verse, and all of them important for the light they throw on the history and culture of the times.”

More precise information is available on the Ahoms, not the least because they maintained written dynastic records from their earliest days in Assam. They arrived in the early thirteenth century from Mong Mao in the Upper Myanmar - Yunnan border. Dependent upon wet - rice cultivation, the main stay of their economy, they found the riverine areas between the rivers Dehing and Dikhou in Upper Assam a convenient place to settle in. They brought with them their distinct Tai culture, which underwent considerable transformation as the Ahoms moved towards “Assamisation”. This change was accelerated with the loss around 1400 CE of Khamjang situated in Myanmar’s Nongyang Lake area north of the Hu Kawng valley, as a result of the conflict between the reigning Ahom monarch and his kindred, the ruler of Mong Kawng (Mogaung). Khamjang was a *mong*, or small state, established by the founder of the Ahom state as a link between himself and his patrimony Upper Myanmar. Interestingly, the ceremony connected with the peace treaty between the two was to give these ranges (till then known as DaiKaorang = nine hills/ranges), the scene of their meeting, the name by which they are known today – the *Patkai*, derived from the Tai expression, *patkai- shengkan*, meaning to take an oath by the sacrifice of fowls (*pat* = to cut + *kai* = fowl).

Ahom administrative terminology, and nomenclatures, which outlived their state, still finds their parallels in Myanmar, *Myosa*, for instance, an official who “eats” or appropriates revenue of a place or city, finds its Assamese equivalent in such titles in current use as Rajkhowa and Hatkhowa; *Khowa* being the term to eat. There were of course the Assamese diversions of the Ahom or Tai titles, after the Ahoms adopted that language. The name of the State, Assam too is derived from the Myanmar connection: the Myanmar refer to the Tai speaking peoples as *Shan*, while the Kachins and other use the term *Sham*. It is the latter expression that was carried over to become “Assam”. So also is the name ‘Naga’, derived from *kha*, the term still used by the Tai speaking people for hill men in much of mainland Southeast Asia? The Ahom / Tai languages *buranjis* referred to the tribes of the Patkai hill they came into contact with as *Kha*, which when these chronicles came to be translated into Assamese in the seventeenth century was rendered as *NaKha* and Naga. (The Assamese pronunciation is of course Noga).*

The mountain passes of the Indo - Myanmar borderland through which pre-historic tribal movements into North East India took place were also the routes taken by Indian traders on their way to Southeast Asia and China. There was a regular trade route traversed for several centuries since the 2nd Century BCE between India and China through Upper Myanmar and Yunnan. These centuries saw the beginnings of India's contact with China and the introduction of Indian culture in Southeast Asia. Goods of Chinese origin, as borne out by their Chinese names also made their way into India through these routes. However, much of India's early trade with their countries was sea-borne. The network of roads constructed by the Mauryas helped a wider circulation of goods, and the road from Pataliputra to Tamralipti led to an appreciation of the sea routes to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asian ports. Travel and trade was cheaper and less hazardous though not entirely without risks than the long land journeys.

The impetus to trade with Southeast Asia initially came from the lucrative Roman trade. Many of the essential commodities especially, spices and semi-precious stones that were in demand in Rome were found in Southeast Asia, and Indian merchant ships sought out their ports for these items. From the coastal regions, trade moved into the interior through the rivers- the Irrawaddy and Salween or the Mekong. And some of the settlements on the banks of these rivers show the Indian connection. When the Roman trade declined Indian traders, both Buddhist and Hindu, turned to Southeast Asia with greater enthusiasm, in what can be said to be the earliest expression of the mainland's Look East Policy. The old trade links were further developed, and thus continued through the millennium and well into the medieval centuries.

Trade led to settlement of Indians in these countries and a close interaction developed with the local cultures. Indian terms entered the local pattern of life, especially in Thailand, Cambodia and Java. Shards with *brahmi* characters, carnelian beads and Indian or Indian style pottery, found in the Irrawaddy delta, the Malay Peninsula and in the island of Bali, show a definite presence of Indians in places accessible to Indian ships. The settlers in the Irrawaddy delta were said to be traders from Kalinga. Those closer to India such as Shrikshetra near Prome in Myanmar and Ports in the Gulf of Siam naturally had a stronger presence. Chinese sources, the chronicles of the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE) speak of the Mekong Delta as

one of the first area of Indian activity. Stories abound of Indian “contribution” to the development of local polity in these countries. An Indian Brahman, one Kaundinya, reportedly married a Cambodian Princess and introduced Indian culture to that country. The whole process of state formation in the Southeast Asian countries, from chiefdoms to centralised states, has been attributed to Indian presence.

The connection between India and Southeast Asia had been mutually gratifying. Indian coastal settlements connected with that trade became prosperous. The ship building industry in Bengal received a filling and some of the finest sea-going vessels were built in what is now Sylhet district of Bangladesh. The description of Java, Sumatra and Bali as Suvarnadvipa, or the Golden Isles, suggestive of a profitable trade, entered their lexicon.

“Religion found an ally in commerce to carry Indian way of life outside India”, says one of India’s leading historians, Romila Thapar. The establishment of Buddhism (particularly of the Theravada School) and the impact of India on literature and arts and architecture in virtually all countries of Southeast Asia, has already been much written about and so fairly well known. Summed up by Professor Thapar, her words bear quoting:

“Sanskrit influenced the languages of elite cultures, probably because it was the language of the formal rituals introduced by Indian functionaries. Some of the finest Sanskrit inscriptions came from these areas. Geographical place-names associated with Indian cultural tradition were adopted; for example, Ayuthia the ancient capital of Thailand, was named after Ayodhya, the capital of the kingdom of Rama, this being one among many instances of the popularity of the Indian epics. Indian iconographic norms were fused with local forms in the images. The particular style of intertwining Buddhism and the Puranic religion, so representative of sites in Southeast Asia, evolved later in its most creative forms at Angkor Vat and the Bayon in Cambodia, and the stepped stupa at Borabudur and the Prambanan temple, both in Java.”

This has led many scholars to write, erroneously of “Greater India”, or use the term Indian “colonies”. The Southeast Asian society’s retained much of their indigenous culture. The Indian impact is understandable, Thapar explains, “in terms of certain advanced technologies arriving in the area and the local elite adopting new patterns. The presence of Indian traders also assisted the change, introducing an exchange economy that benefited them and allowed them to participate at various levels of power. The local culture was visible in all aspects of life.” In later centuries Indian traders and missionaries facilitated the spread of Islam.

The India-Southeast Asia connection, dominated perhaps by trade, in the traditional items, continued well into the seventeenth century. A recent study, *Southeast Asian Warfare 1300-1900* by Michael Charney, suggests that rudimentary gun powder technologies spread there both from India and China. He cites Ma Huan, the Chinese pilgrim writing in 1406 who claims to have found a kind of “firearm”, the *ban* that was an export from Bengal. The Burmese chronicler, U Kala, claimed that Indian mercenaries used early

pyrotechnic devices, possibly the ban in Bassein in 1404. Though gunpowder propelled, the *ban* was not a firearm, but a primitive rocket. And their use in Myanmar is more than a hundred years before Babar in his *Memoirs* describes them as forming an important component of the Sultan of Gaur, Nusrat Shah's army. This requires further investigation. But Indians and captured Portuguese were freely employed in the artillery of several states.*

With the arrival of the Europeans on the scene India's connections and trade with Southeast Asia sharply declined. The activities of Portuguese pirates in the eastern littoral in the sixteenth century adversely affected trade; and through the Mughals in Bengal effectively dealt with this menace they were never able to revive the old trade. Rather trade was, as it were, outsourced to the Europeans. It finally passed into the hands of the European East India Trading Companies from the eight century onwards.

Mainland Southeast Asia was not affected by these developments until imperialism and colonialism led these Companies into the interior. Till then movement of peoples, and interaction and trade between the states were uninterrupted. Often large transfers of people took as spoils of War. At the end of the eighteenth century we find a large body of Khamtis from Khamti Long in the Putao district in north east Myanmar moving across the Patkai into Upper Assam, and finally settling in the Sadiya area after dispossessing the local Ahom governor, The Sadiya Khowa Gohain, and usurping his title. Other smaller Tai speaking groups, the Aitons, Khamjangs and Turungs followed and as expected settled in the riverine areas. The more important migrants were the Singphos, of the Tesan branch of the Kachins of upper Myanmar. The lands on which they settled, in Tengapani, was traditionally a wet rice cultivation area, and the new comers accustomed only to slash and burn or *yi* methods, forced thousands of Assamese peasants, referred to in colonial records as slaves, to work their fields. A similar development took place in Myanmar where the Kachins from the hills drove the Shans out of the Hukawng valley. Unable themselves to take to settled agriculture they brought in Assamese peasants, purchased and captured from Upper Assam, which was then in the grip of extensive disturbances. Between 1926 and 1935 when India became a signatory to the League of Nations Slavery Convention more than four thousand of these "Assamese Chingpaws" as they were called were "liberated". They soon merged with the local population. Some Assamese had also settled in Bhamo which was a *jagir* of an Ahom princess to a Burmese monarch.

From the early eighteenth century onwards there were extensive tribal movements north and north westwards from the Chindwin area into Manipur and into present Mizoram, and as far west as the Arakan and Chittagong Hill Tracts. The report of the military officer, who led an expedition into the hills south of Cachar during 1850-51, and for the first time brought out the existence of the "Lushais" as a distinct tribe, gives a fair idea of how these movements occurred:

“It would appear that the tribes to the south have been gradually driving one another in a northerly direction; for, first, some Nagas that were located in the Boobun Hills and in Southern Cachar were obliged by the Tangune (?) Kookies to flit and take up their abode in the hills north of the Borak, when the Tangunes took possession of their ground, and they having in their turn been driven up by the Chansen and Tadoe tribes, the Tangunes were also afterwards obliged to vacate and move on into the northern hills, and after them the Chansens were obliged to do so likewise; and the Tadoes, who had been driven up by the Luchyes, a very powerful tribe, first settled about seven years since within eight or ten miles south of this Station (Silchar) and became Company’s ryots, and made themselves useful by cutting timber, bamboos, cane, etc., which they used to bring to market, but after having been located there for some four years, the Luchye Kookies in November 1849 attacked them, burnt three of their villages, killed several of the inhabitants, and took away several of them into slavery, and then the whole of the Tadoe tribe flitted, left the south and settled down in the northern hills.”

These extensive movements had their origin in distant places, yet to be fully ascertained. Almost all tribal groups of the Indo-Myanmar borderlands have traditions of migrating into the area from somewhere in South-west China: a large number speak of Chinlung or Sinlung in the Szechuan province as the place they came from. With the British occupation of the Lushai Hills, now Mizoram, and the adjoining Chin hills of Myanmar in the late nineteenth century such human tran’s frontier movements, except for small groups at the level of clan and family, came to an abrupt halt. Boundaries were imposed upon these people, who call themselves Mizo in Mizoram and Zomis in the Chin state even as they were on the move. This resulted in the breakup of tribes of common origin, ethnicity and cultural traditions, and their dispersal under different countries or administrations. Even to name these tribes with their innumerable clans and sub-clans is difficult enough. One district officer in the Lushai hills, found in the southern part of his charge, “in addition to the purely Lakher villages, there are certain villages in Haka (in the Chin Hills) and also in the Lushai Hills the inhabitants of which are halfway between Pais and the Lakhers, and it is difficult to say exactly, what they are.”

Worse still, no effort was made by the colonial rulers to develop these lands and trade their chief concern, followed the classic exploitative pattern. This was not conducted by a network of roads but advantage was taken of the rivers: for instance, the Karnaphuli in Eastern Bengal and the Chittagong Hill Tracts or the Dhaleswari from Cachar to Changsil in the Lushai Hills. In Upper Assam, the Dibru, Dehing and the Dikhou and other large tributaries of the Brahmaputra became the principal channels for moving out Assam’s tea (until later supplemented by railways).

In Myanmar this role was performed by the Salween and more particularly by the Irrawaddy and its tributary, the Chindwin. The steam navigation lobby in Calcutta actually prevented North East India’s trade with and through Myanmar, so that the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company (established in 1864) could continue its monopoly of the river. Its steamers plied up to Bhamo, the terminus of the China-Yunnan

trade. In fact, it was to control this trade that the Kachin hills were brought under British control and the Upper Myanmar-Yunnan borders were arbitrarily fixed. Further east, in what was called Indo-China, the French built railways but the Mekong River remained the main artery for local and colonial trade.*

A close study of the archaeological past of the Doiyang – Dhansiri river valley had led one scholar to enthusiastically declare that “although (the valley) form part of India, geographically, historically, racially, linguistically form a part of Southeast Asia.” India’s historical relations with the Southeast Asian countries and North East India’s distinct and obvious links with it in the remote past have been recognised by archaeologists and historians of Ancient India. This connection had, however, been obscured by disruptions during colonial rule. In the years after independence India made no effort to revive these ties since its interest and its priorities lay elsewhere. Nor did the internal condition in several of these countries encourage hopes of closer relations.

It was after the end of the Cold War that the threads came to be picked up. It was at the same time realised that, looking west to the almost total exclusion of the east was not to the country’s interest and her security concerns. Thus, began India’s belated connection with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), culminating in her becoming a “summit level partner”. India’s involvement in Southeast Asia was at two levels: in playing a vital role in regional or multilateral organisations for regional cooperation such as BIMSTEC (covering Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Bhutan, Myanmar and Nepal), the IORARC (Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation) and the MGC (Mekong-Ganga Cooperation), and the IBM-SRC (India-Bangladesh-Myanmar Sub-regional Cooperation among others. The other is bilateral agreements with individual countries, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore etc. To these initiatives the Prime Minister Narendra Modi has given a new push and a practical dimension, turning “Look East” into “Act East”.

A fundamental feature of the new outlook is the development of the North Eastern region, especially in terms of infrastructure, and connectivity with its neighbouring countries. This recognises its strategic importance as well as a point of departure for Southeast Asia not only for itself but also for land locked Bhutan or even Nepal. Assistance to the neighbouring countries for their infrastructure development is part of that policy. Already in place is the border town of Moreh, for Indo-Myanmarese trade, though report from there is not at present encouraging. The reopening of the Wartime Stilwell Road for access to upper Myanmar and the Yunnan – China is still being talked and if carried out will, among other things, provide a closer market for the products of Dibrugarh’s new and old industries. It is, however, with Tripura’s connection with Bangladesh where the Act East policy has shown immediate results. The revised “Inland Water Transit and Trade Protocol” signed by the Prime Minister on 15 June 2015, has opened the river port of Ashuganj on the Meghna River in Bangladesh to the transit of goods from West Bengal through that country for the North Eastern states. Ship carrying steel for construction purposes in Agartala has already arrived at the port and is being carried to the Indian check post at Akhaura and thence to Agartala. The Protocol gives India and Bangladesh the right to use each other’s territory for transiting

goods to third countries. Bangladesh can thus use Indian Territory to transit goods to Nepal and Bhutan while India can access Myanmar via Bangladesh.

How does the historical connection between India, and the North-East, her neighbouring countries and Southeast Asia briefly sketched above, impact upon the Act East policy. In the first place the existence in the borderlands of India of people with so much in common, includes in some places of language, and a shared historical experience that can lead to better appreciation of each other. Taking the borderlands of Northeast India and Southeast Asia together, historical and cultural commonalities will provide the emotional underpinnings of policies of governmental and relations between governments. The importance of the human elements in these circumstances cannot be denied.

Nor can geography and the physical environment be ignored. What brought these peoples together and led to their settlement in places where they have settled have been determined by the lie of the land, its forests, the flora and fauna, and access to water? The fact that the settlements have been in river valleys illustrate their vital role in the social, cultural and political evolution of these diverse people's. Rivers continue to play that role. The Protocol signed by the Prime Minister with Bangladesh is all about that reality; and Asian Confluence's *Nadi* 2016 is intended to give expression to that fact.

TAGS - North Eastern India | Southeast Asia | the Ganga | the Mekong River | Allahabad Pillar | Indo - Gangetic Plains | Mahabharata | Neolithic tools | Prehistoric Human Migration | Austro-Asiatic Language | Garo Hills | Khasis | Professor A L Basham, The Wonder that was India | Southeast Asian Ports | Romila Thapar | Sanskrit | Indian Cultural Tradition | Southeast Asian Warfare 1300-1900 by Michael Charney | the Mughals | League of Nations Slavery Convention | Ancient India | Cold War | Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) | BIMSTEC | IORARC (Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation) | the MGC (Mekong-Ganga Cooperation) | the IBM-SRC (India-Bangladesh-Myanmar Sub-regional Cooperation | Prime Minister Narendra Modi | Look East Policy | Act East Policy | Wartime Stilwell Road | Water Transit and Trade Protocol | Indian Territory |

BRIEF PROFILE

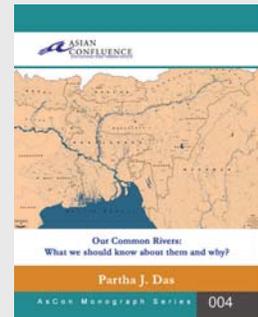
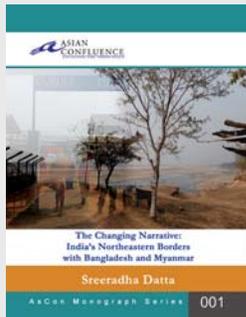


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