

Role of Diaspora in India-Indonesia Relations

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Abstract

India's engagement with the Southeast Asian countries started in the year 1991 with the 'Look East Policy' in 1991. But historical evidence—both oral and written—suggests that India has been engaged with the East for the past two millennia. It is rightly said and believed that the diaspora of any country supplies and adds a human aspect to the connection between the two countries.¹ They have a distinct and incomparable role in international relationships / links because they are advantageously placed between the two countries, they have something in common with both the cultures, they have invested emotionally in both the countries and they diligently preserve social links with both the societies.² Since the 'diaspora' has the potential to have impact on a country's foreign policy without the use of a tough hand or an oppressive force, it automatically becomes a vital instrument in the hands of policy makers. In the case of Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, ethnic Indians have for a long period been an inseparable part of their societies. These sections have served the purpose of a link / bridge between the two countries. However, the use of the 'diaspora' as an instrument of Indian foreign policy is rather a novel feature. This paper has critically analysed the role of the Indian Diaspora in India-Indonesia relations.

Keywords: India-Indonesia relations, Southeast Asia, Cultural Interactions, Diaspora and Soft Power Diplomacy

I. Introduction

India's engagement with the Southeast Asian countries started with the 'Look East Policy' in 1991. But historical evidence—both oral and written—has suggested that India has been engaged with the East for the last two millennia. Cultural interactions as well as trade ties have formed the bedrock of this relationship. Although India has enjoyed strong and sound cultural linkage with these countries in the past, this connection had particularly got prominence in the case of Indonesia.

"The diaspora of any country supplies and adds a human aspect between the two countries".¹ They have a distinct and incomparable links in international relations because they find themselves placed between the two countries, having something in common with both the cultures, they have invested heavily and emotionally in both the countries and they arduously maintain social links with both the societies.² It is a well known fact that the 'diaspora' has the potential to have an impact on a country's foreign policy without the use of a firm hand or any specific oppressive power, it automatically becomes a vital instrument in the hands of policy makers. In case of Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, ethnic Indians have for a long time been an inseparable part of their societies. These communities have served the purpose of a link / bridge between the two countries. However, the function of diaspora as an instrument of Indian foreign policy is rather a novel feature. This paper has critically analysed the role of the Indian Diaspora in India-Indonesia relations.

Historical Background

Historically, Southeast Asia has been hugely influenced by India in the realms of art, culture, architecture, court etiquettes, religion and many other things. The region has been intertwined with Indian culture to such an extent that Europeans used to refer to it as "Further India"³ or "East Indies"⁴. Funan (Cambodia), Khmer (Cambodia), Pagan (Myanmar), Champa (Vietnam), Sri Vijaya (Sumatra, Indonesia), Sailendra (Java, Indonesia), Majapahit (Java, Indonesia) were some of the "Indianized"⁵ states of Southeast Asia. Thus, Indian civilisation had, with the passage of time, naturally extended to the territories of modern era's Southeast Asia. Indian culture was received with open arms in Southeast Asia because it came without political pressures and linkages.⁶ Moreover; these kingdoms were not politically dependent on Indian Kingdoms. There was only one exception of a short-lived conquest of Malaya by the Chola Kingdom of Southern Part of India in the 11th century.

It is interesting to note that India and Southeast Asia more or less have the same climate. Monsoon is of great importance and relevance to both the regions. Thus it has always been substantially vital common bonding factor and has played a remarkable role in increasing and strengthening ties between the residents of both the regions of India and Southeast Asia. Indian businessmen would set forth on their sea journeys to Southeast Asia

when the climatic conditions would be favourable for voyages. These have geographically been termed as silk and spice routes, because the traders would often carry silk and spice for commercial exchanges. The exchange was not limited to these goods that were popularly much in demand but it also extended to opening the door to welcome new ideas, to have mutual appreciation for each others' cultural heritage as well as behaviours and habits of the natives of both the zones. This led to enhancement in the number of sea voyagers and traders carrying their merchandise to Southern Asia. Besides these mercantile transactions, the region's learned wise persons would invite the people of Uppermost Caste i.e. the Brahmins to perform the prestigious task of priesthood at their courts. Furthermore they would rely on the predictions of astrologers and seek advice of the knowledgeable people. All these activities encouraged the influential, healthy and wealthy persons to gain from healthy exchange of ideas. Thus, during the pre-colonial era, Indians were not considered as aliens/ foreigners/ 'outsiders'.

Towards the end of the 15th century, the colonial supremacy in the region changed the cordial relations between Indians and Southeast Asians. Besides this, the Treaty of Westphalia signed in 1648 made territory and sovereignty the basic principles of the development of nation states. Sadly, in the case of Southeast Asian countries, as in the case of all other places, patriotism and nationalism surfaced within the boundaries formed by the colonial masters for their administrative motives. This led to the rising of the modern state nations in Southeast Asia which hindered the natural movement of Indians across the region. Now people permanently transferring from India were regarded as "outsiders" i.e. aliens; messengers / tools in the hands of their colonial masters, because they became instrumental in reinforcing colonial exploitation. Indians from various walks of life sought migration during this period including bonded plantation labour, business men, clerks, officials, professionals along with the Indian service immigrants and Indian convict immigrants.

There are not two views on the matter that countries and civilisations across the world have evolved as a result of cultures intermingling over thousands of years. Depending on the existing socio-political dynamics of a particular country, however, there have been different situations of mutational changes as well. As H.B. Sarkar has argued a culture is not born, Minerva-like, armed at all points from the start: it is a complex phenomenon fed by streams from different lands at various points of time in manifold ways through various agencies. The process is a continuous one and is transmitted from one generation to another.⁷

India's case in this regard is curious. An amalgam of various cultures, India also has the distinction of being a major influence in the evolution of the complex culture of South East Asia. Indo-Aryan culture manifested itself in Southeast Asia, sometimes in a gush, sometimes in a trickle, for nearly sixteen hundred years, adding newer nuances and meaning in different centuries, but never losing its idiom.⁸

The cities blending of cultural specific cities also took place as well because Southeast Asia itself has been a tremendously diverse, yet culturally flexible and accommodative region in terms of its social and cultural milieu, thus furthering assimilation. Highly impressed by the Indian influence in the region, historian George Coedes termed Southeast Asian states as *les tats hindouise*- 'the Hinduised states of Southeast Asia'.⁹

There are various modes through which cultural bond are strengthened. As mentioned earlier, architecture of a country truly represents its culture and growth and the designs of buildings are invariably copied. Performing arts e.g. drama etc. also carries a strong similarity and these impact other countries' art namely painting sculptures and music also bear the mark of a country. There is remarkable similarity in both the countries in all these fields. The cultural bridge between India and Indonesia that has been in existence since the Neolithic period has been operating at several levels: art, architecture, popular drama and literature assemblage of Indian communities in Indonesia, and even the societal configuration of Indonesia and their struggle for freedom from colonialism. This speaks volumes about the historic linkages between the two countries. Today, both countries have the distinction of being termed 'Mosaics of Cultures'.

The commodities produced by a country greatly determine its place in the world, and Indonesia is no exception in that regard. Java and Sumatra have been major trade hubs for long. In fact, from the beginning Indonesia and Southeast Asia were renowned for their monopoly over the world's spice trade. Classic texts have repeatedly mentioned them as great trading places. Ptolemy, the Alexandrian astronomer who wrote his geography about the middle of the 2nd century AD, had referred to Java as Jabadieu (Yavadvipa) - a name which he himself translates as the 'island of barley'.¹⁰ Java has also found its mention in ancient Indian literature. The Ramayana describes Java and probably also Sumatra (known as the *Suvarna-dvipa*) as being rich in gold mines. Fa-hien had found it necessary to pay a visit to these islands in the early 5th century because they were important centres of the Mula- *Sarvastivadins* sect of Buddhism.¹¹ The Malay peninsula and the Indian archipelago saw the rise and fall of two major Hindu empires. The first, founded by the Sailendra dynasty in the eighth century AD, comprised almost of the entire archipelago including the islands of Sumatra, Java, Bali and Borneo. The Arabs, who traded in these parts, described in rapturous terms the power, wealth and magnificence of the grand monarch who had a powerful navy and exercised supreme sway, and styled him 'maharaja'. The Sailendras were followers of Mahayana Buddhism and had strong ties with India.

Indian Diaspora as a Soft Power Diplomacy

Indian migration to Indonesia can be divided in four major groups. First are those who went to Indonesia in early history, settled there and transformed themselves beyond recognition. They are Indonesians in true sense of the word and do not bear any resemblance with the residents of their native land. Moreover, Indians have been migrating to places like Java and Sumatra right from the dawn of the first century. By the 5th century AD, Buddhism is believed to have reached Sumatra. Evidences of the settlements of Indian traders in the archipelago are found from the 16th century onwards and Indian missionaries in Southeast Asia were integral to the spread of Islam in Indonesia.

The second group consisted of those who arrived during the colonial era as labourers. This group too is no longer Indian and rightly considers itself to be Indonesian. Even the second group also can't be distinguished from the Indonesians; they have fully imbibed their culture. The third set of Indians reached Indonesia during the pre- and post-war years. Their ability to assimilate into Indonesian culture by learning the dialects and through inter group marriages cemented their place in Indonesian society. An area that is marked for Indians is Pasar Baru - otherwise referred to as 'little India'. Along with the business sector, the entertainment industry has witnessed the rise of firms owned by Indonesian Indians. Another success story of Indian community in Indonesia is that of steel tycoon Lakshmi Mittal, who owns Ispat Indo, which has emerged as Indonesia's largest privately owned steel company. In politics, the emergence of H.S. Dhillon has been pivotal. The fourth lot of Indians in Indonesia is the present generation of professionals settled there. Most of them are academicians, business consultants, and IT professionals.

There are several institutions run by Indians in Indonesia that could help to disseminate knowledge about India, Indians and Indian culture to Indonesians. These include the India Club, the Economic Council of Indonesia and India (ECII), Amar Jyoti, and the Jawaharlal Nehru Cultural Centre.

"Indian policy towards Diaspora has varied from colonial times to the early years of independence and on to the present time."¹² Immediately after independence, "Prime Minister Nehru made it clear that either overseas Indians should accept Indian citizenship and expect nothing other than "favourable alien treatment" abroad, or they should accept the nationality of the countries they lived in and avoid looking to the Indian government for preservation of their position and rights."¹³ It took decades for India to realise the role that the diaspora could play in furthering either country's interest. "The relationship between India and Indian diaspora started changing in a dramatic manner from the later half of the 1990s."¹⁴

General expectations of any country from a diaspora are "diaspora's overseas network; their role as credibility-enhancing agents for economic actors back home; and their impact through financial flows, especially foreign direct investment and remittances are important for home country."¹⁵ In the backdrop of these expectations, it can be observed that the Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia is numerically very small and does not enjoy the economic clout that may change the state policies to India's advantage. Foreign Direct Investments from these countries is meagre. Same is the case with remittances when compared with those from Gulf or Western countries.

In the political realm, except for Singapore, Indians are not well represented politically in these states. The presence and participation of Indians in administrative machinery is negligible. Therefore, the Indian diaspora has no utility whatsoever for lobbying on the part of the home government. In addition to this, the region varies extensively from the angle of politics. Very few countries are genuine democracies which again is an obstacle in the task of lobbying. Moreover, there are very few influential Indians who can influence public opinion at large through various avenues such as ownership of media.

Therefore, it can be concluded that diaspora is not a powerful 'soft power' tool in the hands of Indian policy makers with respect to Southeast Asia. That implies that Indian Government has somehow missed taking full advantage of the diaspora. However, India needs to cultivate its relationship with the Indian diaspora in these countries. The Indian community is neither looked down upon nor loathed like some of the other communities in Southeast Asia which is a big positive for India. The scope and potential of banking upon this acceptable community to strengthen the bond between both the countries is very much there. It needs to be intelligently tapped by the politicians. Overall, public opinion towards Indians is positive. As Southeast Asia is inching towards democracy, public opinion is becoming more important in the decision making of the government.

On the part of Indian Government it is important to create a conducive environment to ensure that the diasporic community always remembers its relationship with the homeland. Government initiatives such as Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas, Pravasi Bharatiya Sammelan, and Trade Facilitation Centres for overseas Indians are all steps in the right direction. The government must also see to it that interests of the Indian community are preserved while negotiating through mega trade agreements such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Given the economic potential of the region, the flow of Indian professionals in the region and general goodwill towards the Indian community, a diaspora has the potential to play an important role in the future.

II. Conclusion:

To conclude, historically India has shared a very strong bond with the eastern countries, even though it is believed to have originated from the Look East policy in the year 1991. The diaspora of any country indisputably adds the human aspect to the bilateral relations between the two countries. Having their roots and sense of belonging in their native land, they look for prosperity and greener pastures in the migrated land. Thus they wish both the countries well because mutual cordial and amicable ties are beneficial for all. Their native country expects from them expansion of economic dimension. Numerically they are not in a position to impact and transform the migrated state policies. Sadly Indian government has not taken full advantage of the diaspora. There is a dire need to tap their potential. Indian Government must be watchful enough not to snap their bond with their homeland. Certain initiatives have definitely been taken but these are not amply powerful to bring desirable rewards.

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