

India's Civilizational Imagination of Southeast Asia

Written by Udayan Das

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UDAYAN DAS, MAR 12 2024

A substantial amount of India's international thought engages with the idea of the Indian civilization (Mawdsley, 2023). Statist perceptions and usage of civilization as a category need not overlap with the academic study of what constitutes a civilization. Rather statist imaginations of civilizations are contingent, constructed and deeply political. Civilizational imaginations are contingent as they change and evolve with time depending on who is constructing them. For instance, the state in India has so far oscillated between a *Nehruvian* and a *Hindutva* understanding of the Indian civilization (Chatterjee & Das, 2023). While both these imaginations agree on India's civilizational greatness reserving a rightful place in the world order, their understanding of what consists of the Indian civilization is different. It is precisely because they are constructed that they are termed to be imaginations. There is no one authoritative account of a civilizational past which is pure. Therefore, a civilizational past is refashioned and popularized selectively owing to the needs of the present. Statist usage of civilization is inherently political. It is curated and projected by political elites. It serves a political identity. It is the political calculation that propels civilizational projects to be created at certain junctures, in some cases, inflated and in other cases consciously toned down. Consider a counter proposition: if all civilizational arguments are predicated on a usable past, notwithstanding the prominence of a civilization, all states would have raised civilizational arguments. All states are historical entities and they are products of the past where they belong centrally to a civilization or attached to one. However, only some states raise civilizational arguments. The question beckons: what makes a state actively shape a past into civilizational imagery? It depends on the projected audience and the prevailing context. This is supplemented by the political will, capability and machinery that propels a civilizational imagination in public memory and imprinted into policy making.

Civilizational arguments of a state are projected at two levels – state actors and people, both domestic and international populace. For the domestic audience, civilizational underpinnings may invoke a sense of identity to relate to the community and the state. This may be enacted in multiple forms ranging from pedagogy to political campaigning. They are useful in creating a sense of national identity that is historical. They are easy to convey to the masses as they come in the language, metaphors and folklore that the people are well versed with. However, any project of mobilization runs the risk of including some and excluding others. While the boundaries of a civilization are more fluid than a nation-state, civilizational metaphors deploy similar tropes of the insider-outsider as the civilized and barbarian. Civilizational projects can be corrosive if the barbarians of the past are found within the territory of the present. For the international audience, civilizational arguments can be couched in terms of soft power to wield attraction. This can be carried out through modes of public diplomacy. The other state actors in the international system are another set of stakeholders. Civilizational arguments may be used to invoke respect, solidarity or hierarchy between states. This depends on how the civilizational arguments are conveyed by a state and how they are received by the other states in concern. Take, for instance, the objective of status and prestige that the Indian state seeks to achieve by using its civilizational past to create an image of a rule-abiding and responsible power. India's civilizational claims have contrarily also created fears of hierarchy and cultural hegemony through the expression of *Akhand Bharat* in South Asia since the ascendancy of the Hindu Right.

Within the domain of International Relations, the question of civilization and foreign policy can be broadly located within the constructivist understanding. Unlike the realist understandings that emphasize timeless models of state behaviour, constructivism emphasizes how ideas and identity have an imprint on state actors (Hurd, 2009). A good exposition of this is Priya Chacko's work where she highlights the linkages of India's foreign policy with the politics of the postcolonial identity. It shows how India's imagination of its civilizational exceptionalism along with its

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experiences of the colonial period shapes up its foreign policy (Chacko, 2014). The Indian Nuclear Doctrine is a case in point. It is drawn from the inherent desire for strength that results from a fading civilization facing colonial subjugation (Chatterjee & Das, 2021). The realists effectively can reverse the causal arrow. A plausible realist counter to this is that states projecting civilizational arguments intend to guarantee defence and secure power like any other state. While they do deploy civilizational arguments, they are more symbolic means than causal explanations of state behaviour. A constructivist reading sheds light on how civilization as a category shapes India's imagination of itself, its visions of the international and its international engagement. The underlying argument here is that what explains India's international behaviour cannot be reduced to generalizations of state behaviour without the historicization of its past (Bayly, 2022).

India's Civilizational and International Thought

Reading civilizational arguments in India's foreign policy opens up three themes. First, India's political elite has consistently argued that India's civilizational prowess deserves a rightful acknowledgement in the community of nations. Centuries of colonialism not only have materially drained India but legitimized the West as the sole representative of the international system. This modern international system marginalizes the non-Western states of which India is a vital representative owing to its civilizational greatness. This has been a constant thread in India's foreign relations. One can argue that the invocation of India's civilizational past was a product of its idealism in the immediate years post-independence where it sought to compensate for its lack of economic and military heft. This can be a less informed argument as civilizational rhetoric has been rather enhanced with a relative increase in India's material heft since post-liberalization. Second, while there are variations as to how Indian civilization is defined, borrowed and inherited civilizational attributes offer ways in which India can envision the world around it and conduct its foreign relations. India's former Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran in his work, *How India Sees the World*, points out how sources of India's worldview borrow from the past. A good illustration is how the Jambudvipa Mandala theory helps in understanding the geopolitical contiguity of South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region as a geostrategic and geoeconomic unit (Saran, 2017, 16-17). Amitav Acharya points out how India's civilizational discourses engage with both realism and idealism, combine rationalism and transcendentalism and view the world in both anarchic and hierarchic arrangements. Delving further into this, he shows how the civilizational reading offers an interpretation of an Indianized social contract theory and a doctrine of human rights (Acharya, 2023). Finally, India's civilizational arguments do not seek to structurally alter the international system. There is an inherent anti-Western strain in India's civilizational arguments but the Indian state has not challenged the Western categories that have become synonymous with the international political system. These include the ideas of sovereignty, territoriality and statehood that are cornerstones of the present international system. The Indian state's policies rule out any extra-territorial claims. It uses civilizational arguments for better positioning in the international system and not to overthrow it and return to an order where civilizations are units of the world order. A term that is often used in this regard by the political elite is 'civilizational state'. It is when a state is inherited from a civilization but it exercises political authority in the form of a modern state.

This article particularly looks at Southeast Asia in the Indian state's civilizational imagination. Southeast Asia prominently features as a recurrent theme in India's civilizational understanding. In many accounts, it is considered a part of India's civilizational expanse, whereas in some it is referred to as the extent to which Indian civilization has travelled. India's foreign policy consistently deploys a civilizational argument in this theatre as there is a credible history of Indian influences crafted in non-imperial ways. This is unlike China which finds it difficult to deploy and legitimize civilizational claims owing to its contested history of the tribute system that depicted the Southeast Asian region as vassal states arranged in a hierarchical structure. China carefully avoids the Belt and Road Initiative being branded as a revival of the tribute system (Hobson & Zhang, 2022). This comparatively allows India to counter the Chinese influence in Southeast Asia through civilizational narratives.

Tracking the Indian state's articulation of Southeast Asia exhibits how, as discussed above, civilizational imaginations can be contingent, constructed and political. It reveals how the articulations of Indian civilization have changed owing to the politics of the time. Its imagination is highly constructed as it gradually engages with the ideas of nationalism, territoriality and culture in the fast-changing Asian order (Raghavan et al., 2022). Its political character is visible as to how the state and its political elite authoritatively deploy these metaphors and factor them into its

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foreign policy. The first question that this article addresses is how and why the Indian state's civilizational understanding of Southeast Asia evolved since its independence. The second question that it deals with is how if at all, civilizational underpinnings shaped India's Southeast Asia policy.

India's Civilizational Imagination of Southeast Asia: Early Years

The initial understanding of the Indian political elite was that Southeast Asia was an extension of the Indian Civilization. Indian diplomatic and academic circles frequently used terms like 'Greater India', 'Further India', 'Serindia', and 'India Minor' to denote Southeast Asia. There is indeed undeniable evidence of the Indian influence in Southeast Asia. From antiquity to the present, these regions have witnessed the spread of religions, like Hinduism and Buddhism, to the flow of people, language, customs and ideas, that have created unmistakable imprints in their polity, economy and society (Coedes, 1968). India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru provides a thorough account of this civilizational expanse in his book, *The Discovery of India*. He narrates how the growing Indian influence in Southeast Asia since the first century graduated into the establishment of Indian colonies that captured several parts of Southeast Asia ranging across thirteen hundred years or more till the 15th Century (Nehru, 1989). The same historical account is prevalent in KM Panikkar's work, *The Future of India and Southeast Asia* (Panikkar, 1945).

This narrative largely corroborated their understanding from the historical and cultural scholarship that was led primarily by the Dutch and French historians at the time. As Amitav Acharya sums it up, three prominent theories explain Indian influence in Southeast Asia in this scholarship (Acharya, 2017). The first saw India's influence as a product of war and conquest. This directly relates to India's colonization of Southeast Asia (Majumdar, 1955). Interestingly, the words 'colonies' and 'colonization' do feature in Nehru's early writings in the context of Southeast Asia. However, there is always an emphasis on how India's colonization was in sharp contrast to the Western colonization as the former was peaceful and largely characterized by cultural infusion. The second interpretation was that the Indian influence was a result of trade. As trade flourished, the flow of people, commodities, ideas, art and culture accompanied (Mabbett, 1977). The third interpretation describes the rising Indian influence through the Brahmins who were part of the royal circles in Southeast Asia and led to the spread of rituals and customs that were later imbibed in the society (Van Leur, 1955).

Parallel to this existing scholarship was a homegrown attempt at writing and discovering India's civilizational presence in Southeast Asia. In 1926, historians in Calcutta began what came to be known as the 'Greater India Society'. The society included some of the leading Bengali historians of the time – UN Ghoshal, Kalidasa Nag, Ramesh Chandra Majumdar and KA Nilakanta Sastri. An affiliated journal by the society also began in 1934 (Das, 2022). While there was an earnestness to write a new history of faraway lands, the Greater India Society fell into the trap of looking like an imperial project in itself. It took further the approach of their Dutch and French counterparts in showing how Indianization made and unmade Southeast Asia (Bayly, 2004). This left little scope to understand the inherent cultures of Southeast Asia. It assumed that the Southeast Asian culture was barbarian and it was the Indian civilizing mission that transformed the region. As a result, it ruled out possibilities of identity formation through the interaction of civilizations. Greater India Society was a popular project not without its implicit objectives. It was instrumental in invoking the pride and prestige of a fading civilization amongst the members of its community. It had great nationalistic value as it provided a sense of a glorious and rich past for the people to connect to. Furthermore, it would mean a sense of historical rootedness for the Indian diaspora that was living in Southeast Asia. As nationalism was gathering steam in parts of Asia, Indian-origin people were at the receiving end of nativist upsurges in parts of Asia. A historical continuity of Indian influence, in some cases domination, was useful in making the point that Indian emigration is neither new nor unnatural. Secondly, these civilizational projects were cultural responses to Western colonialism. Apart from political and economic implications, colonization was also a cultural project that racially fractured people along the lines of civilized and barbarians. These counter-projects sought to rediscover and narrate the heritage of pre-colonial times. However, they could not avoid the same glaring pitfalls of divisiveness and racial arrogance of the discourse they wanted to counter. A good case in point is historian RC Majumdar's colonization thesis that claimed India to be a civilizing force against the primitive cultures of Southeast Asia (Majumdar, 1955).

India's Changing Civilizational Imagination of Southeast Asia

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India's civilizational understanding underwent significant changes in the years to come. Primarily, the changing political context meant that such a civilizational project was untenable. India found it contradictory to stand with Asian nations on decolonization and simultaneously argue for a civilizational superiority that smacked of cultural hegemony. The governing principle of politics in Asia had changed to sovereign equality. In such an order, civilizational understandings either had to be reconciled within legitimized state boundaries or they stand as remnants of the past colonial order. India heavily invested in the cause of pan-Asian unity for Nehru saw it as a counter to great power rivalry in Asia. India pitched itself as a potential leader in the new Asian order. It consistently deployed its weight behind organizing the Asian Relations Conference in 1947, the Asian-African Bandung Conference in 1955 along with the slew of Non-Alignment Summits. For India, leading the Asian region was a contested issue. Civilizational superiority was a lucrative argument to claim India's natural leadership in Asia. This claim was not naturally unanimous amongst the new sovereign equals. A segment of states like China and Japan saw India as a colonially subjugated state. Another segment of states in Southeast Asia was sceptical of India's hegemony replacing that of the colonial powers. The political elites of these states were wary of India's cultural arrogance displayed in bilateral and multilateral platforms. A deeper anxiety for the Indian state stemmed from the negative perceptions of the Indian-origin people in these states. Against the backdrop of the Great Depression and then decolonization, nativist struggles in South and Southeast Asia were breaking out that targeted the Indian-origin people. As political lines were drawn and the question of territorial citizenship was raised, Indians who had migrated earlier owing to the colonial economy and loose borders found themselves on the wrong side. In Burma, the Chettiar community owned a considerable amount of land resources that intimidated the natives. In Ceylon, Indian Tamils were seen as threats to the natives in the tea plantation job market. In several Southeast Asian states, Indian soldiers were used by the British to suppress nativist movements. As a result, India became increasingly careful of its civilizational rhetoric in the years following its independence. The high-handed civilizational claims were toned down in favour of a more non-hierarchical argument of Pan-Asianism and Asian Unity. References to India's colonizing expeditions were replaced by arguments about confluence and convergence of historical ties with Southeast and Far East Asia. This was also backed by a set of fresh perspectives in academic circles. While the Greater India Society was reflective of the historical scholarship of the 1920s and 1930s, new works on the history and culture of Southeast Asia started projecting different narratives. Increasingly, studies pointed out how Southeast Asian cultures adapted and localized the elements of Indian civilization rather than ceding to them (Wolters, 1999). It criticized the view that the Southeast Asian culture was purely a product branching out of the Indian civilization. There are deep imprints of Indian culture but to claim that as the sole influence is an act of cultural arrogance based on partial evidence. If Southeast Asia completely inherited Indian culture, then how is it that fundamental structures of Indian society, like the caste system, have no trace in this region? Southeast Asia's past could not be seen as a blank slate painted by only Indian influences as it has been significantly shaped by other civilizational flows. Two major influences in this case are the advent of Islam and the flow of Chinese civilizational influences from the East. Terms like 'Indo-China' are useful here as they show Southeast Asia as a meeting point of Indian and Chinese civilizations. However, they also run the risk of completely absolving inherent originality in Southeast Asian cultures.

The sovereign moment in Asia meant that nationalist histories took over civilizational histories. In India, writing history took a much more postcolonial and Marxist turn. Prominent professional historians, like Romila Thapar, Irfan Habib and DN Jha, focused on a more scientific assessment of the past, challenging homogeneity and exploring more nuanced perspectives that challenged the monolithic ideas of Indian civilization (Das, 2022). The Greater India Society ceased to exist by the end of the 1950s which was indicative of the shift that was following. Its historical credentials were put into question as hegemonizing and parochial. The Hindu Right was sympathetic to the idea of a greater Indian civilization because much of this history stands on the glory of the Hindu empires of the past. This was a good foundation for their political project that focused on Hindus being the preeminent natives of this territory before being cornered by the Muslim invaders and the British colonizers. However, the Hindu Right could not muster political clout in the newly independent India that sidestepped this narrative both politically and academically.

In the making of state policy, culture became a domestic issue. Nationalism reconciled with the borders. India's cultural claims beyond its borders have been eschewed, or at best subtle, at bilateral and multilateral levels with Southeast Asia. A possible argument is that owing to its secular thrust in post-independence years, India deliberately did not advertise religious elements as part of its diplomacy (Muni & Mishra, 2019, 10). There is another question as to how effective the deployment of predominantly Hindu civilizational metaphors is in a region with a considerable

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Muslim population. Two themes dominated India's engagement with Southeast Asia during the post-independent years that hardly engaged with the civilizational arguments. First, India unequivocally supported decolonization in Southeast Asia. This was a means to connect and establish good relations with the newly independent states. India had to make sure that it was not seen through the legacy of the hostile British system. The support for decolonization blended well with the Pan-Asian unity argument and minimum great power interference. The cause of Asian solidarity did not blend with civilizational claims. India's civilizational rhetoric shifted to an Asian scale where it argued about Asian civilization being marginalized by the West. There was an initial romanticism about India's centrality in that order which was taken back later. In the inaugural address of the 3rd Session of the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East, Nehru elaborates on this fear of Indian centrality as a possible hindrance to Asian solidarity. He mentions, "People vaguely talk of India's leadership in Asia. I depreciate such talk. (...) If any country pulls more than its weight, well and good, if it can serve the common cause more than its share necessitated, well, I have no doubt that it will be patted on the back and it will be a good thing, but this business of any country thinking of itself as a leader of others smacks too much of superiority complex which is not desirable in organisations working together for the common good" (Nehru, 1987). Secondly, India had to arduously work to settle the vexed citizenship question. It is here that India's cultural claims were considerably toned down. The Indian state separated nationality and culture. A person can be of Indian origin but a Burmese national. In that case, the Burmese government owes political rights to that person. They are also advised to claim no additional favour from India apart from a sense of cultural belonging. In the long run, it proved difficult to disassociate with cultural belonging for two reasons (Khan & Sherman, 2022). One, in several cases, many of such people were either deemed stateless or they were designated as Indian nationals by their host state owing to their origin. Second, India intruded in some cases where it felt that humanitarian standards were denied to these people. These intrusions happened directly through the state and outside it. However, the diaspora was advised to absorb the community they were living in.

Is India's Southeast Policy Shaped by Civilizational Discourses?

India's civilizational arguments largely serve as a prelude for its relations with Southeast Asia. Its civilizational rhetoric was considerably reduced after independence. It was reworked in more equitable terms. After the end of the Cold War, when India refashioned its policies through the 'Look East', the civilizational underpinnings provided a foundation that India was not new to the region. However, this had to be carefully deployed to avoid any form of cultural arrogance that was on display during the immediate independence years. India has taken up cultural projects in Southeast Asia that are closely linked with civilizational underpinnings. Recently, India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar made announcements that India would take up the project of restoring the Angkor Temple. He used the civilizational argument that the Indian civilization is not limited to India's borders. This also bodes well for the present regime because it emphasizes rediscovering India's past Hindu glories. Although the project of temple reconstruction has been grander, it is not a new policy by India. The restoration of Angkor Wat was first taken up by India in 1986 at the request of the Cambodian government. This shows that despite changes in articulations, civilizational arguments have always been in the background of India's Southeast Asia policy. There is also this temptation to project the civilizational argument as it serves regime legitimization. However, in shaping India's Southeast Asia policy, civilizational factors are largely been subservient to political and economic gains. The more dominant issues of engagement between India and Southeast Asia have not been civilizational but geostrategic and geoeconomic. During the Cold War, India's policy was configured by great power rivalry and questions of citizenship. Post-Cold War, economic and strategic incentives drove India's relations with Southeast Asia. India's policy shifts toward Southeast Asia were also not determined by civilizational factors. When India announced its Look East Policy, civilizational arguments were there in the background but it was primarily a shift owing to economic reasons. A later phase of the 'Look East' took into account strategic factors of developing security partnerships with Southeast Asian states (Chatterjee, 2007). A recurring concern for India in this region has been the rising clout of China. Over the years, China has established its heft in Southeast Asia and is aiming to become a residential power in South Asia.

Civilizational narratives are not the driving factors of India's Southeast Asia policy. They also have been recurring but not dominant themes in policy making. In other words, its policies are made to secure economic and strategic interests and not civilizational prestige. Civilizational underpinnings are useful in establishing a connection. However, those connections become fruitful when interests converge. Whereas when interests are divergent, these connections can carry the baggage of the past.

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