

ROLE OF INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION IN STRENGTHENING RELATIONS WITH SOUTHEAST ASIA

Nikhil Kumar* & Dr. Saumya Sisodia**

Abstract

The origins of the educational exchange between India and Southeast Asia can be found in the ancient past when scholars and monks travelled between different regions to spread religion, culture, and knowledge. This interaction has advanced in the modern era, supported by institutional collaborations, governmental initiatives, and shared cultural heritage. Through partnerships with Southeast Asian educational institutions, regional educational initiatives, and international student scholarships, higher education institutions (HEIs) are an important part of India's educational diplomacy in line with the "Act East Policy." This paper examines HEI's initiatives to support student exchanges, host cultural gatherings, and foster cooperative research initiatives in fields like technology and sustainable development. Along with discussing opportunities to improve digital education and regional partnerships, it also highlights challenges like limited global visibility and language barriers. By analysing the role of HEIs of India as a bridge connecting India and Southeast Asia, this paper emphasizes the potential of educational institutions in strengthening regional ties, promoting mutual understanding, and addressing shared developmental goals. In order to better understand the development of educational and cultural ties between India and Southeast Asia, this study included a case study of Gautam Buddha University, India. GBU serves as a modern hub for international learning and

* PG student, Department of Political Science & IR, Gautam Buddha University, nikhilkumar986880@gmail.com

** Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science & IR, Gautam Buddha University, saumya_sisodia@yahoo.co.in

cooperation, taking inspiration from Buddhist teachings and India's long history of Buddhist education.

Keywords: *Higher education institutions, India-Southeast Asia relations, educational diplomacy, regional partnerships.*

Introduction

Southeast Asia is the region of Asia that is south of China, east of India, and north of Australia. It comprises 11 countries, made up of the 10 ASEAN countries plus East Timor. The 10 member countries of ASEAN are Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar (formerly Burma), the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Such a situation presents implementation challenges for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in southeast Asia given the enormous capacity gaps, heterogeneous socio-economic contexts and recessionary gaps in average net worth (per capita). Examples include newly industrialised countries, such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. In contrast, Cambodia, Lao PDR and Viet Nam are transitional economies (from, e.g., traditional agriculture to industrialised economies). The per capita GDPs across the region are extremely unequal, with Cambodia at US\$1,100, while Brunei and Singapore report similar figures as high as US\$41,000 and US\$56,300, respectively (UN-ESCAP, 2017). Higher education has an increasingly important and creative role which needs a robust infrastructure and sharp fluctuations in its Gross Enrolment Ratios (GER). In addition, there is a growing awareness that higher education can be a driver of competitiveness and economic development (Asian Development Bank, 2012). Within a region a harmonised system of higher education can contribute to realising the yet unfulfilled potential for intra-region trade and thus generate employment, create an environment of peace and congeniality for development and minimise the hard diplomatic interests of larger powers. To raise the quality of higher education and raise efficiency in higher education, this has to be achievable by gathering all of the above through good networking that helps the higher education institution to identify common challenges and share and

use common and available resources. Against this backdrop, regional cooperation and cross-border collaborations have emerged as a strategic framework for higher education institutions.

India shares a long history of cultural and economic ties with Southeast Asia, and the region has traditionally fallen within India's sphere of influence.

- **Historical background of ties:** India's relationship with Southeast Asia dates back to ancient times when Indian traders and scholars established cultural, religious and commercial links with the region.
- **Colonial period:** India and Southeast Asia came under European colonial rule in the 19th and early 20th centuries.
 - India's struggle for independence inspired Southeast Asian nationalist movements, and India supported the anti-colonial struggles of countries like Indonesia, Vietnam, and Myanmar.
- **Cold war era:** India pursued a policy of non-alignment but maintained close relations with several Southeast Asian countries.
- **Growth in ties since economic reforms of 1991:** India's economic ties with Southeast Asia have grown significantly since the 1990s, with the adoption of economic liberalization policies and the "Look East" policy.
- **Contemporary times:** In contemporary times, India's relations with Southeast Asia have evolved from Look East Policy to act east policy, regaining the influence that India had during historical times.

Look East policy and Act East policy

	Look East Policy	Act East Policy
Origin	It was first announced in the early 1990s.	The policy was announced in 2014 by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It builds upon the earlier Look East policy.
Scope	Focused on increasing economic, political, and cultural ties between India and Southeast Asian countries.	Broader focus on economic, political, and security ties with Southeast Asian countries, as well as other countries in the region, such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia .
Goals	Increase trade and investment with Southeast Asian countries, and promote regional economic integration.	Enhance economic, political, and security cooperation with Southeast Asian countries and other countries in the region, strengthening infrastructure and connectivity between India and the region.
Implications	Increased economic and cultural ties with Southeast Asian countries.	Expanded engagement with Southeast Asian countries and other countries in the region, increased influence and presence in the region.
Initiatives	• Establishment of a dedicated Ministry of External Affairs division for East Asia • Creation of a special economic zone in the Northeast region of India to encourage investment from Southeast Asian countries. • The signing of free trade agreements with several Southeast Asian countries.	• Development of transportation and infrastructure projects and the expansion of air, sea, and land links to improve connectivity. • Increased engagement with regional organizations such as the ASEAN and the East Asia Summit (EAS).

The world has been closely monitoring the Southeast Asia region, where numerous major powers have attempted both soft and hard diplomatic interventions. In addition, this region also has unique sensitivities to climate change, as many of its countries possess large coastlines. The region itself must take due cognisance of its current political dynamics, explore available areas of cooperation in sectors like health, economy and trade, share information and experience, and build increasingly soft diplomatic relations with one another and like-minded countries of the region. Other countries are also able to show their culture, language or lifestyle, and it will definitely bring a helping hand to grow ASEAN's collective identity. ASEAN as a regional grouping will be in the strategic interest of all these states and hence serves as an important platform for undertaking such efforts.

In a research paper published by the British Council Report, “The shape of global higher education: Understanding the ASEAN region” (British Council, 2018), the researchers point out that higher education is one of the pathways to international relations, diplomatic, unintegrated, and aligned South East Asian countries. BRITISH COUNCIL (2018).

Strengthening Educational Diplomacy between India and Southeast Asia: Role of Higher Education Institutions

India has its own prestigious institutions that can serve as an entry point for cooperation by way of academic and intellectual collaboration. ‘Study in India’ is an initiative of the Indian government to encourage foreign students to pursue their studies in India (PIB, 2018). An effort called 'Destination India' is aimed at making it easier to attract foreign students (Sharma, 2020). Both these initiatives are aimed at making India a potential hub for foreign students. With a view to providing Indian traditional knowledge and attracting foreign students, India had earlier introduced short-term courses on Buddhism, yoga, and Ayurveda under the Study in India program.

People-to-people ties can be fostered through joint collaboration between Indian and ASEAN universities and student exchange programmes. ICCR also offers scholarships for Asian students. ICCR maintains a chair on Buddhist studies and Sanskrit at Preah Sihanouk Raja Buddhist University, Cambodia, and a full-time Indian professor on Sanskrit and Buddhist studies is deployed by the Government of India at the university (MEA, 2020a).

India has emerged as a viable and lucrative destination for students in Southeast Asia seeking higher education. There are many Malaysian students who come to India to study. Around thirty thousand students from Malaysia were at institutions in India in the 1960s and the 1970s. This also resulted in collaborative academic programmes between India and Malaysia. In 2010, India and Malaysia signed an MoU on Higher Education (MEA, 2020b). Twinning programmes were offered by Vinayaka Mission Research Foundation, a deemed university in Tamil, in association with the Penang

International Dental College. Similarly, it is a twinning programme between India and Malaysia at the Melaka Manipal College. The National University of Singapore established a South Asian Institute in 2004 to house Indian specialists on regional issues in South Asia. Also, there are an estimated 2000 Indian students currently studying in Malaysia and about 4000 Malaysian students studying in India, mostly in medicine.

India is providing assistance to build primary schools under the Quick Impact Project scheme launched under the Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) Initiative, which was established in 2000 to promote the partnership between the two regions in a range of areas, including education. Two school buildings for children called Wat Portisat Primary School/children studying from Grade A1 to Grade G have been constructed according to the aid from New Delhi (MEA 2022, p. It has also helped in establishing software development and training centres conducting online IT training courses on data communications, networking and Java programming. Likewise, Singapore's Institute of Technical Education and Delhi's Government's Training and Technical Education have joined to build skill centres in Delhi. For example, in 2015, an MoU was signed between India and Singapore for artificial intelligence, machine learning, cognitive computing, big data analysis, smart energy systems, e-governance research partnership and joint PhD and research with IITs, IISC and IIST and setting up an endowment for Indian researchers to come to Singapore. A Vietnamese Centre for Studies was established in New Delhi in 2018. vn, 2019) and has performed various activities related to the understanding of Vietnam in India through both language classes and conferences and public diplomacy (Nga & Quang 2021, p. 298). Vietnam signed an MoU in 2021 to award scholarships to Vietnamese students at three private Indian universities, namely, Integral University, Lucknow, KIIT Bhubaneswar and Rishi Hood University, Sonapat (News18, 2021). The Vietnamese Ambassador to India, Pham Sanh Chau, has outlined reasons that prevent Vietnamese students from applying to India, which include safety, pollution, availability of food and the lengthy application process (Agrawal, 2021). India also announced a research fellowship for 1000 ASEAN students to do PhD studies for three years in the 23 IITs in 2018. The scheme aimed at

bringing in 250 ASEAN fellows in the first year, out of which only 42 students were inducted (Nanda, 2020).

India has a rich culture and traditions, and the same is also reflected in our education system. The school has a strict curriculum based on hard work and discipline. India's education system caters to a multitude of learners from different cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. This inclusion promotes a valuable learning experience and open-mindedness when students are surrounded by students coming from various backgrounds in life.

Many of the prominent higher educational institutions in India, such as the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) and other universities. These institutions are among the finest in education and research. Those graduating from these institutions are in great demand worldwide due to their foundation, technical and managerial competencies and flexibility in adapting to the atmosphere.

The relationship between India and the Southeast Asia region goes back decades and has been rooted in trade, cultural interaction and intellectual discourse. This historical link is today a basis for strengthening education via cooperation between India and the ASEAN Member States. Under the ASEAN-India Framework, India provides scholarships to students from ASEAN Member States for Masters, PhD and PG Diploma programmes at Nalanda University. Nalanda today seeks to create a similar new ecosystem of knowledge in which all of these seemingly contradictory ideals find permanence as global ideals of sustainability. It also gathered momentum after the leaders at the East Asia Summit endorsed this vision in 2007, which saw Nalanda play a significant role in revitalising the networks of ancient knowledge, besides fostering peace in the ASEAN region.

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020: A Foundation for International Engagement

Through its higher education institutions, the highest goal for India is not to just invite global institutions to have campuses in India but to develop the concept of internationalisation at home in its institutions and look forward to the establishment of a connected education system across the globe. This step is more than simply attracting students or emigration of domestic students overseas. You get to experience the real local life, culture, language and traditions. NEP 2020 provides a genuine cultural immersion experience along with enriching their academic experience with this aspiration in mind. At the same time, this gives them pluriform perspectives on the world, developing international and intercultural competencies.

India's international alumni network has gained another boost as students and faculty continue to expand the country's feet through strong, deep, and lasting cultural, economic, and educational ties that well extend beyond their tenure of studies. In effect, the network is the transnational cooperation instrument, enhancing Indian standing in educational diplomacy whilst improving the bilateral partnership with respective states. Such institutional infrastructure, as mentioned in the NEP 2020, encompasses diversified and internationalised curricula and need-based student support services and collectively provides an inclusive academic environment that attracts both domestic and international students. NEP 2020 strengthens the domestic reform aspect and internationalisation in improving Indian academia by this composite approach and provides a continuum that is required for a globally responsive educational ecosystem.

Promoting India as a Study Destination: Attracting International Students

Launched on April 18, 2018, the Study in India (SII) programme by the then Ministry of Education enables admission of international students in over 160 premier institutes (IITs, NITs, IISc, etc.) in the country. Offering 2600+ courses spanning all disciplines and financial assistance via the Study In India

Scholarship (\$3200 scholarship, to be secured on passing the PRAGATII Exam), and tuition waiver from participating host institutions. It has facilitated intercultural relationships as well as enriched the academic environment in India, while also supporting the economic and soft power growth of India.

Scholarships and Exchange Programs: Strengthening Diplomatic Ties

In addition, India shapes its educational diplomacy through scholarship and exchange programs. The scholarships are offered by India under the General Cultural Scholarship Scheme for students from developing countries, with emphasis on the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation region and Africa. It helps the student to be able to study in Indian institutions where one may undergo a level of professional and personal development, help cultural exchange, and bring in empathy and understanding. These scholarships enable India to build key diplomatic bridges while enabling students from developing countries that are part of its neighbourhood policy to pursue higher studies, which would influence a future generation of people contributing to sustainable development in their countries.

One of the most renowned programmes is Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC). ITEC is an innovative, responsive, and demand-driven technological cooperation programme with developing countries, which justifies its inclusion in the Indian Tech Corp. The Ministry of External Affairs, which manages ITEC, significantly enhances its soft power bilateralism. Unlike student scholarships, ITEC refers to more specialised professions in IT, engineering, agriculture, and health-related fields in nearly 160 countries. The ITEC Programme not only enhances human connectivity and cooperation among the member countries but also highlights the spirit of mutual learning and exchange between the nations.

Through Regional and International Cooperation

In addition to that, regional and international cooperation in education diplomacy also encompassed the ASEAN (Association of southeast Asian nations) India Research Training Fellowships for joint scientific and

technological research on studies and environmental challenges with member states in ASEAN in an effort to collaborate with Indian institutions. In fact, these efforts are enhanced with the additional Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) Scholarships that reinforce India as a knowledge partner in a globalised world by inviting a larger student population to Indian educational Universities. The General Cultural Scholarship Scheme (GCSS) provides budding students from developing nations, mainly the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and African region, with a chance to study in the various institutes across India, which, in turn, helps to promote deeper understanding between India and the developing world.

International Partnerships and Collaborations

Expanding Global Reach as emphasised in the NEP 2020, will allow borderless pathways in international engagement for students with foreign universities through collaboration. These collaborations include joint degree programs, credit transfer, dual degrees, and collaborative research opportunities in foreign institutions. This will expose Indian students to world perspectives, academic systems, and resources, and it will familiarise international students with India's educational, social, and cultural landscape. More inclusive, globally concerned education systems contribute significantly to a generation of students who are equipped with international competencies, making Indian higher education prominent globally.

Shri Dharmendra Pradhan meets Singapore's Prime Minister H.E. Lawrence Wong in October 2024 discussed and focussed on strengthening India and Singapore partnership through 'Talent, Resource & Market'. Shri Pradhan emphasized that India views Singapore as a trusted knowledge partner, particularly in advancing deep tech, startups, and innovation ecosystems.

Gautam Buddha University: A Case Study Highlighting Major Reasons to Study in India

Southeast Asian students are mostly attracted to Gautam Buddha university in India as it focuses on Buddhist studies which are very popular and similar to

the traditions in countries they come from, so if they want truth and deep understanding of their religion they go to India, which boasts a glorious history of Buddhism due to India being the birthplace of Buddhism.

The Gautam Buddha University has planned to attract a large number of International students for not only Undergraduate and Post Graduate courses, but also for M.Phil. and Ph.D. programs. This Cell will facilitate the international student community in acquiring information, arranges for their admission, and looks after their welfare. Since its inception in August 2008, the Gautam Buddha University has striven to live up to these ideals. We believe that the University is responsible not just for imparting knowledge, but for locating knowledge in society; so as to build a better future. Besides looking after admissions, eligibility, and other related issues, the Centre coordinates with ICCR, Ministry of External Affairs, different embassies and consulates for various purposes including the scholarships. Gautam Buddha



University model for Internationalization of Higher Education has these unique features:

- Single Window

- Networking
- Interfacing
- Wireless connectivity
- Interaction
- Multi / Interdisciplinary
- Competitive and Affordable

In the age of globalization, Gautam Buddha University has set out to make its presence felt globally through internationalization of its programmes and opening new avenues of association for international student community.

Through the short survey among the international students in GBU, following are the major reasons to study in India.

a. Quality Education Beyond the Classroom

As the world is evolving, so are the traditional teaching methodologies. Gone are the days when imparting education was limited to classrooms. Now, the institutes have expanded their wings to incorporate blended learning methods wherein, equal focus is given on the theoretical and practical aspects of education. The colleges regularly organize industry visits, seminars with subject matter experts and meet-ups with esteemed alumni. Furthermore, the teaching style followed in the institutions is curated in a way that helps students develop logical and analytical thinking. Finally, the international students coming to study in India will receive quality higher education making them ready for the professional world.

b. Diversity in Courses Offered

In India, the diversity is just not limited to languages, festivals, food and culture but it extends to the education sector as well. From STEM fields like Engineering, Technology and Artificial Intelligence - Machine

Learning to non-STEM disciplines such as Commerce, Nursing, Business Management, Humanities, Arts, Optometry, Veterinary, Architecture, Nursing Indian institutions offer an extensive range of courses. Indian Institutes also offer niche courses like Yoga, Buddhist Studies, Indian Music, Vocational & Certificate courses etc.

c. English as the Primary Language

English serves as the global medium of communication in the professional world, making proficiency in the language crucial for students. Indian institutions use English as the primary language of instruction, allowing international students to enhance their communication skills while pursuing their education.

d. Affordable Quality Education

Study in India offers not only top-notch higher education but also affordability, making it an attractive option for students worldwide. Many partner institutions provide fee concessions and scholarships, enabling students to overcome financial hurdles and access exceptional education at budget-friendly costs.

Conclusion: A Vision for Inclusive Global Education

Therefore, India's education diplomacy is significantly influenced by its strategic policies, such as NEP 2020, liberal scholarship programs, and collective branding toward a connected world. This could elevate its global status as a benevolent and progressive power. In this way, India is on its way towards fulfilling its aspiration to become a Vishwaguru – an international teacher committed to learning, exchanging and sharing knowledge with its peers. By committing to building a more inclusive, knowledge-driven global community, India could actualise the shared vision for education while at the same time reinforcing its national character that underlines the transformative power of education in achieving local and global success. In doing so, India can assume to be one of the leaders in the global educational landscape, sharing its rich heritage and academic excellence with the world.

The higher education development trends of South-East Asia and elsewhere in the world will increasingly converge in the future. These will feature ongoing growth, funding models that will need to change, and broader variety in higher education institutions. Within higher education, there will be further calls for institutional independence, financial diversification and quality control, but also legitimate demand from various social sectors about accessibility. There will be increased demand for relevance and responsiveness in the curriculum – and the need to be responsive to social and workplace change. Third, universities have a place in the promotion of inclusive multiculturalism and universal values. This has become more important than ever as communities and religions have become more polarised throughout the region and globally. Enhanced student and academic mobility and exchange can help spread a greater sense of cross-cultural understanding and tolerance.

Various challenges faced by South-East Asian higher education institutions are similar to those in other regions of the world. The reconstruction and reinvention in accordance with the needs of the society at the time of globalisation is a decisive determinant of their development and future.

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