Interpreting the Narratives on Southeast Asia

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	In the last few decades, Southeast Asia (SEA) has many success stories in many fields including economy, polity, and regional institutional cooperation. The region's growing exposure to the major international economic powers has also produced newer aspects of its regionality. At this context, the introduction of several centres for studies on Southeast Asia in several universities testifies to its emergent significance. Though, the way SEA is interpreted in academic discourses lack clarity and often used as a compact cultural identity, at this backdrop this article argued that there is a cultural as well as socio-geographical diversity in SEA. From the geographical point of view, the conventional perception that consider SEA as consisting of two broad areas - mainland and maritime - is extensively untenable. The article argues that the Southeast Asian identity is a modern construct and it is associated with the formation of ASEAN.
	Key Words: *Indic Civilization, Mandala, Negrara, Annales Historiography, and Social Constructivism*

Introduction

The Southeast Asia (SEA hereafter) has become an important area of study. It has its success stories in many fields including economy, polity, and regional institutional cooperation. The ever-growing exposure to the major international economic powers has also produced newer aspects of its regionality. The introduction of several centers for studies on Southeast Asia in several universities testifies to its emergent significance. A homogenous definition of the SEA is uncalled for due to its complex cultural and political identity as a region. The constructs over the identity of the region and people have left more questions than answers as the term is rather loosely referred to as homogenous. Any uncritical rubric identification of SEA as homogenous requires a revisit. Colonially, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century the European ethnographers started to oversimply the SEA cultures as derivative relics of the Sinic and Indic civilizations. Towards the first half of the twentieth century, particularly during Second World War, SEA was predominantly looked upon as a geo–military space that led to the ignoring of the region's cultural diversity. Subsequently, the region became a theatre of ideological struggles amongst the major international powers during the Cold War era.

Scholarly Perspectives on SEA

The uncritical cultural grouping of SEA has not only come from the colonial European historiography. The construction of SEA within a limited frame of race and culture has also come from the neighbouring Asiatic societies. Similar inferences can be drawn from many academia and policy planners as it normalizes a homogenized identity of SEA and India – Myanmar borderlands. A coercive search for a cultural affinity reproduces ambiguity as SEA perceivably and experientially is not one singular cultural and historical entity. For instance, drawing an oversimplified corollary between Northeast India and Philippines would be incongruent in many ways. The oversimplification of an otherwise complex identity called SEA would amount to essentialization of coercive perspectives. For instance, the erstwhile kingdoms of Manipur and Assam had centuries of relations with the Shans, the Tais, Avas and Southeast Asian societies.

To start with the geography, one needs to re-look at the two broadly accepted idea of territorialities in SEA – mainland and maritime. The mainland consists of the Indo–China countries, Thailand and Myanmar which can also include parts of South and Southwest China and the Northeast India. And, maritime SEA includes Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Brunei, and East Timor. The conventional assumptions and categorization of geographies as *mainland* and *maritime* equally finds a significant number of detractors. In

the works of James C. Scott, it is suggested that for millennia there are vast traces of hill and mountain zones that runs across southwest China, NE India, and parts of five Southeast Asian countries. Scott offers a history of about 100 million people in the region that he prefers to call *Zomia*. To him, the Zomia's are characterised by fugitive populations as they fled into the hills to escape the organised state systems (Scott 2009).

Scott provides a fresh insight while pointing out two significant accounts. The first account studies the nature of Kingdom and state formation in the valleys. And second, it looks at the socio–geographical and political identity of the uplands. To him, the *uplands* are marked by geographical distinctiveness and distinct socio-political structure. An interesting aspect of Scott's work is that it deconstructs the general territorial viewing of SEA as constituted of a mainland and maritime. Culturally speaking, SEA is varied, and has several religious, cultural and value systems. For instance, the synthesis of Confucius and Buddhist values in Vietnam, Theravada Buddhism in Thailand and Myanmar, absorption of Sanskrit traditions in many parts of the region, and Islam in Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei, and Christianity in the Philippines can be mentioned. The current paper makes no claim that religion is to be the sole factor of defining cultural identities. Undoubtedly, it has played a significant role in defining cultures and social systems in the region.

Historically speaking, the region had been ruled by different European powers namely the British in Malaya (later Malaysia and Singapore) and erstwhile Burma, French in Indo – China, the Dutch in Indonesia, the Spanish and American in the Philippines, and the Portuguese in East Timor. The scramble amongst the major colonial powers and its impact on the region has left varied institutional systems. The impact of the colonial administrative system makes it difficult for the region to build up a symmetric regional identity. In the pre–modern times (it is loosely used here as the pre-European era of administration) as well, it was difficult to find homogeneity in politics and culture. There are several historical and anthropological works in the region, such as the one that is introduced by O. W. Wolters. Wolters's concept of *Mandala* covers both maritime and mainland SEA. *Mandala* is a system of overlapping circles of kings, where the king is identified as the divine being exercising influence and hegemony over his allies and vassals. Each *mandala* is constituted of *concentric circles*, often three in number, describing *centre-periphery* relations. Other prominent models are *Tambiah's* construction of 'galactic polity' based on several kingdoms such as Pegu, Pagan, Chiangmai, Sukhothai, Ayutthya, Lao, and Cambodia. The rulers were revered as the 'King of Kings' resembling the concept of *chakravartin* in Sanskrit. The King, however, was not perceived to be an absolute monarch. Clifford Geertz's 'theatre state' which is known as *Negara,* suggests that no single state possessed the power to exercise hegemony over others. Instead, there were many independent and semi-independent rulers (Acharya 2000, 21-22). Regarding the above models of pre-modern state systems in SEA, Craig J. Reynolds suggests,

An indigenous, culturally oriented model that is mobilised against Marxian and Weberian notion of the state with fixed boundaries and the rule of law over a given territory, the Negara has affinities with the *mandala*, a formulation favored by Wolters. Both models play down the role of warfare and violence had in the exercise of royal authority, and in doing so, they perpetuate an exotic, idealist, orientalist construction of the Southeast Asian past....... Even in the face of the modernity and Eurocentrism of Weberian meanings or the presumptions in Chinese sources, early historians have sometimes locked themselves into a formal and mechanical conceptual framework. What they want to understand is the persistence of a type of state, a type that is seen to be fragile and to have inherent structural weakness. It is almost as if the evidence of so-called fragility and weakness disqualifies these entities from proper historical inquiry (Reynolds 1995, 426-427).

A study of the models of state systems can help in understanding the contemporary SEA's identity. It is the hunch of the paper that the region has struggled to construe a common identity largely due to the colonial distortions and infusion of varied political cultures. It has also failed to do so because of the varied experiences of state formation and introduction of colonial cartographies. The modern political history of erstwhile *Siam* is a case in point. The 'geo-body' of Siam has largely revolved around the terms and conditions of treaties and agreements with the European powers. In this regard, Thongchai Winichakul affirms that the 'geo-body' and history are powerful technologies that can build up nationhood. The most powerful effect is their operation in the identification of We – Self, as opposed to otherness. Along the frontiers of *Siam*, there are many ethnics who are considered as *Thai* nationals as different from the Burmese, Laotian, Cambodian, or Malaysian – or in fact as opposed to being Mon, Karen, Kayah, Shan, Lao, Hmong, Lu, Lua, Phuan, Khmer, or Malay. Yet by the same power of 'geo-body', today it is equally evident that ethnic people find it eminently desirable to have a political entity whose boundary defines their identity (Winichakul 1994, 164). Winichakul underscores the importance of modern political boundaries not merely limiting to ethnic, cultural, or regionalised identities. If such national identity based on political boundary is so strong, the pertinent question is does it give way to construct a regional SE Asian identity beyond the frame of national boundaries? So far, several studies have been made to find a framework which would be able to explain and fit in all the pre–modern state structures to conclude for a common civilisational SEA.

Indianised Kingdoms in SEA

There are debates on Indianised kingdoms in SEA, and proposition of Greater India is often made by a certain section of nationalists, there are also narratives of great Chinese cultural influence in SEA. There were many dynasties which ruled over many parts of the world and had cultural interactions. The Mongols in China, Turks in parts of South Asia and Chinese in Vietnam can be mentioned. Qutub Minar or Angkor Wat,

are the fine examples of it. Now, should we consider that present India is a part of Greater Turkey or Persia or India as culturally a part of Saudi Arabia or Iran because of its Muslim populations and civilisational remnants, which are found today? The answer is no. Because, it is difficult to equate cultural boundary with the idea of modern political boundary.

The term *Indianized* has been using extensively by some scholars since colonial days in SEA without proper historical inquiry, instead of *Hinduized*. As for modern Indian nation, it is came into being in 1947, and its boundary has continued to shift until 1970s. As far as British India is concerned, it had different connotation and geographical extent, even though there were many similarities in the two India(s). In the pre-European South Asia, there were many dynasties. The rulers of these dynasties professed different religions. For example, religion of great rulers like Ashoka or Akbar were not Hindus. Secular historians on South Asia have agreed to bring out a framework to extricate a particular religion to define its past. But the problem is, most Indian nationalists both secularists and spiritual ideologues traced back present India's past mostly based on Hindu mythology. Before the partition (India-Pakistan partition), Nehru had traced back India's existence as a nation to *Indica* in his book *Discovery of India*. For Nehru *Indica* was a nation (Desai 2000, 111). Such assertion is reflected in many spheres of present India's social and political life as the nationalist eulogisation of Bharat is enshrined in the Constitution of India.

The simplified but dominant understanding of history as eulogised by the dominant nationalists' narrative of an Indianising concern produces 'Indianised kingdoms' in SEA. Historian *R. C. Majumdar* was one of the pioneers to hold this view. Many scholars working on the region also used the term uncritically because the term had begun to be used loosely and ignorantly by the European ethnographers during the colonial era in the region. Instead of Indianising narrativization of ancient SEA, Paul Wheatley employed the term Hinduisation and the relevance of geography and its interconnectedness with South Asia and SEA in understanding of the progress of Hinduization in the region. In cultural realm too, he stresses that
formerly western Southeast Asia was treated simply as a cultural extension of India; now increasing emphasis is being placed on the continuity of indigenous cultural traditions from prehistoric through historic time. Symbolic and organizational patterns once regarded as purely South Asian are now, with fuller knowledge, not infrequently seen to be merely redefinitions of indigenous institutions. Ian Mabbett, for instance, has done much to convince us that in Angkor Kampuchea varna were not, as in India, divisions of the population at large but elite groups attached to the royal court; and it is becoming increasingly evident that brahman status in ancient Kampuchea was relatively less exalted than in India, the majesty of the divine monarch overshadowing the religiosity of the priest (Wheatley 1982, 27).

The close historical interface between South Asia and SEA is well known. The Southeast Asian region was able to preserve its indigeneity in the face of the onslaught from foreign religions and cultures.

Making of a Southeast Asian Identity
Not much attempts have been made to define SEA as a collective identity. Some of the scholarly works which have made significant attempts in this regard include Annales School of historiography and social constructivism. In the writing of Annales, the emphasis given more on geography, economics, and anthropology. They focused on material and cultural linkages both at the regional or supra-national level. The sensitivity to the local and personal, and their refusal to the privilege state, were very appealing to postwar historians seeking new paradigms (Sutherland 2003, 2). This school of history writing attempts to loosely construct an integral history of SEA based on its economic, social, and cultural life. According to Fernand Braudel, culture means different aspects of life linked with the seas, say the Mediterranean regions and its derivative linkage with the Mediterranean Sea. As for Braudel, Mediterranean Sea is not just a sea, rather it is vast, complex expanse of space, where people conducted travel, fish, fight wars and experience various contexts. There was no national, religious or class boundaries, but it is a place of variety of interactions and produce many civilizations – Islam, Christian, *etc.*, (Braudel 1996).
For Braudel, Mediterranean is a nexus of seas, but just as important, it is also the desert and the mountains. The desert creates a nomadic form of social organization where the whole community moves; mountain life is sedentary, and there is movement from the mountain to the plain, or *vice versa* in a given season. So, Braudel has attempted to give a holistic view of understanding history beyond the framework of national boundaries. Owing to the Annales arguments, Sutherland further describes the geographical location of SEA with reference to how it interacted with its vicinities and other part of the world. He states that SEA's west is the solid thrust of the Indian sub-continent, to the east the bulk of China, while it straggles in between, with its ragged coasts, elongated peninsula, and scattered islands. The primary arena for much of Southeast Asia is the South China Sea, together with the smaller Sulu, Celebes, Banda and Java Seas which flow into it. These waters connect the east coast of the Malay Peninsula, Vietnam, southern China, and the Philippines. The other great marine focus of the region is the Bay of Bengal, which not only links Sri Lanka, the Coromandel Coast and Bengal to Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, the western Malay Peninsula and northern Sumatra, but also offers indirect access to other rich markets further west. Around the tip of India lies the Arabian Sea, leading to the harbors of the Gulfs of Persia and Oman, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean (Sutherland op. cit.).

Southeast Asians were involved in both long-distance and local networks as it is in the Mediterranean region. So, reinforcing identities to modern political borders were utterly irrelevant. The density of connections and strength of economic or cultural orientation could be more decisive. Such narrative constructs on SEA are not simply a conglomeration of nations; rather it is a space where several kinds of economic and cultural interactions take place. In cultural realm too, geography is important, and it has also been influenced by perceptions of the dominance of specific religions within each group. The Buddhism and Confucianism of the mainland linked these territories to neighboring countries further north and west, while the Islam and Christianity characteristic of the islands were more remote in origin. The contrast between the two zones is conventionally reinforced by emphasising differences in economic focus, with intensive rice cultivation seen as typifying the former, and trade the latter. The disparity in resource mobilisation reflected and influenced the dynamics of power, and diverging political trends seemed to reinforce variation. Major states emerged on the mainland, while maritime polities tended to be fragmented. Java is usually presented as the exception that proves the rule.

It is worth noting that the 'maritime' societies typically faced the South China Sea, while the 'mainland' was more oriented towards the Bay of Bengal. Historians had little knowledge of the important overland traffic linking communities in mainland Southeast Asia, Yunnan, and Assam, and may well have underestimated both land and sea commerce. Annales school has been able to give a perspective on the context of a broader historical perspective, which is based on human activities and their relations with the surrounding geography. The interaction between the geographies and societies produced integral relationship and interconnection almost producing a collective Southeast Asian identity.

Another way to understand Southeast Asian identity is offered by social constructivism. As a theory, it focuses on the changing nature of identity. From the perspective of constructivists, an attempt is made to define how the SE Asian identity evolved as a novel phenomenon. Paul A. Boghossian explains that saying something which is socially constructed is to emphasise its dependence on contingent aspects of our social interface. Moreover, he makes two claims - the metaphysical and epistemic claim. The metaphysical claim is associated with something that is real and self-created. The epistemic claim is associated with the correct explanation of why we have some specific beliefs. Such beliefs play significant role in our social lives. Each type of claim is interesting in its own way (Boghossian 2001). He further argues that money, citizenship and newspapers are transparent social constructions because they obviously could not have existed without societies.

Based on the Boghossian argument on the agencies that help social construction, such as money, newspapers, *etc.*, which provides the ground for a shared common knowledge and value system. For instance, since the establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), 1967 and its continued expansion (10 countries), and the process of making rules and norms, it resulted in the creation of certain common values abided by shared norms. For instance, 4th paragraph of 'ASEAN Community' declare,

the ASEAN Community is comprised of three pillars, namely the ASEAN Political-Security Community, ASEAN Economic Community and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. Each pillar has its own Blueprint, and, together with the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) Strategic Framework and IAI Work Plan Phase II (2009-2015), they form the roadmap for and ASEAN Community 2009-2015. (http://www.asean.org/64.htm).

Within such frameworks, there consisted of several collective concerns such as the student exchange programmes, free movement of its citizens and commodities within ASEAN, *etc*. So, these mediums of sharing resource have increased belongingness of a 'social self.' Amitav Acharya is one such scholar who writes about the Southeast Asian identity by employing Benedict Anderson's 'imagined communities' in the regional context. He illustrates the development of regional international relations within the local environment, explaining the regional trends in terms of broad historical forces. It also asserts the 'identity' of Southeast Asia   particularly in terms of the development of regional institutions such as ASEAN (Acharya 2000). In this context, ASEAN is not only an institution to strengthen and integrate economic, security and political interactions. Rather, it helps to build up a new regional identity based on both materials and epistemic social set-up which the social constructivists call the 'epistemic community.'

Southeast Asia and Beyond

SEA is largely entangled in geo-political interfaces and influences. The issue of South China Sea, aggressive strategies of the United States (U.S.) such as the rise of the concept of 'Asia pivot' (Krupakar 2015) or Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Varadarajan 2007) which is popularly known as QUAD revolves around the issue of containing China in the 'Indo-Pacific' region. The Strait of Malacca is also one of the most important waterways in the world which is located at the heart of SEA. It connects the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. It is estimated that more than sixty thousand ships pass through annually constituting a huge trade volume. The strait conducts over 25 percent of the world's commerce and over one-half of the world's oil shipping which is second only to the Strait of Hormuz in the amount of oil that passes through its waters (Hamid and Sein, 2006). This economic importance of the Strait has increased manifold in the recent decades due to the rise of East Asia economically mainly led by India, China and other countries. Moreover, the Strait of Malacca has emerged virtually as a lifeline because it provides an interface for some of the world's most dynamic regions such as East Asia, South Asia, West Asia. Moreover, it stretches into the European and the Eurasian landmass. The Strait's geostrategic significance has further increased with the

emergence of Indo-Pacific region as the new geopolitical reference point underscoring not merely the key role that the Indian Ocean is expected to play in global affairs and its growing linkages with the Pacific. In this context, China began to talk about the *Malacca Dilemma* to depend less on the strait due to various geostrategic factors (Myint-U 2012, 119).

In the East Asian economic integration process too, SEA is at its core. There are also several frameworks beyond SEA like ASEAN Plus Three (APT), East Asia Summit (EAS) or Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RECP). Not only were its members very dissimilar in terms of their physical size, ethnic composition, socio-cultural heritage and identity, colonial experience and postcolonial polities, it also lacked any significant previous experience in multilateral cooperation. Since cultural and political homogeneity could not serve as an adequate basis for regionalism, the latter had to be constructed through interaction. Such interactions could only be purposeful if they were consistent with the principles of peaceful conduct amongst the member states when playing by the rules of diplomacy.

So, ASEAN's diplomacy is based on six core norms – sovereign equality; the non-recourse to the use of force and the peaceful settlement of conflict; non-interference and non-intervention; the non-involvement of ASEAN to address unresolved bilateral conflict between members; quite diplomacy; and mutual respect and tolerance (Haacke 2003). Such an approach is the manifestation of an 'ASEAN Way' (Capie and Evans 2003). Among the characteristics, 'sovereignty enhancing regionalism,' is to be noted where most decision–making powers stays in the various national capitals. In this sense, the member states do not seek to create a supranational authority, nor a political union. ASEAN's institutional resources reflects its preference for informality. To point out the weakness they would avoid some formal terms like the 'multilateral security mechanism' in the ASEAN Regional Forum and rather opt to use terms like a 'dialogue forum'.

The preference of the 'ASEAN way' for informality can also be seen in the Association's use of consultative processes such as 'habits of dialogue' and non-binding commitments rather than opting to a legalistic formula and codified rules. According to Foong and Nesadurai (2007), 'ASEAN officials have contrasted their approach to that emphasizes legal contracts, formal declarations, majoritarian rules, and confrontational tactics.' Advocates of the 'ASEAN way' also stresses the importance of patience. Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir had described the first task of any dialogue process was to be 'tedious business of getting to know one another.'

Another important element of the 'ASEAN way' is its particularity of consensus. Some accounts trace the origins of ASEAN's deep-rooted preference for consensus to Javanese village culture, in particular is its twin notion of *musyawarah and mufakat*. Herb Faith (Acharya 2001) has described *musyawarah* as a psychological disposition on the part of the members to give due regard to the larger interests. It is a process of discussion and consultation. At the village level, it means that the leader should not act arbitrarily or impose his will, but rather should make gentle suggestions on the path that a community should follow. The leader is to be careful and consult all other participants to take their views and feelings being considered before delivering a conclusive action. *Mufakat* is the consensus reached through the process of *musyawarah*. It is important to note that ASEAN's approach towards building consensus should not be confused with unanimity. Where there is broad support for a specific measure, the objections coming from a dissenting participant can sometimes be discounted, provided the proposal does not threaten a member's most basic interest.

On the core ASEAN's norms, some scholars talk about the 'Concentric Circle Model' of the regional integration process of East Asia as ASEAN at the centre, APT at the next band and the EAS at the outer band. The model is supported by the Second Joint Statement on East Asia Cooperation Building on the Foundations of APT Cooperation (2007) which stated the ASEAN's goal was to build an open, dynamic, and resilient ASEAN Community by 2015, in the security, economic and socio-cultural pillars. It also includes narrowing the development gap within the ASEAN member countries. The APT members welcome the signing of the ASEAN Charter and shared the view that a united and resilient ASEAN is essential to ensure regional stability and prosperity in SEA and beyond, particularly in the Asian side of the Pacific rim.

Conclusion

It can be argued that there is a cultural or geographical diversity in SEA. From the geographical point of view, the conventional perception that consider SEA as consisting of two broad areas - mainland and maritime - is extensively untenable. New geographical identities have been accorded to the region by the recent academic works. For instance, Scott identifies two new geographical concepts - Uplands (Zomia) and lowlands. Discussing the pre-modern SEA, O. W. Wolters's 'mandala concept' brings out another two geographical spaces - *mainland* and *maritime* SEA. Tambiah's construction of 'galactic polity' talks about a space identified by several kingdoms while Clifford Geertz's 'theatre state' which is known as *Negara* gives a commonly explainable geographical identity to SEA.

The term *Indianised* kingdoms in SEA needs to be rethought with a caveat. Nonetheless, the usage of the term *Hinduised* kingdoms   has limited connection with the contemporary India. Annales school advocates for making a collective SE Asian historiography. It gives new insights on material and cultural linkage at supra–national levels. The Annales school provides a narrative based on human and geographical interface. The emergence of ASEAN is an apt example. As *social constructivism* explains the construction of social

selves and its belongingness to a larger social space, SE Asian identity can also be understood from such a socially constructed identity based on shared experiences and emergent values. Moreover, the SEA identity can be interpreted in numerous ways, where many scholars also contextualise it as a part of the larger Asia Pacific, Indo-Pacific and other geographical acronyms based on political, economic, and strategic interfaces and circumstances. Due to the contested interests of the big powers, there are persistent pressure and influence on SEA, and SEA has been successfully handling it, and ably retaining a SE Asian identity driven by the ASEAN.

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