

Confronting Shared History, Shared Insecurities

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It is odd that while South and Southeast Asia have been the oldest civilisational neighbours to each other, we know so little about our neighbouring communities and understand even less about our common shared history. A cursory overview of the state of official history writing in the postcolonial states of South and Southeast Asia would be instructive in making our point here:

Beginning in South Asia we can start by looking at the state of official history discourse in India. For half a century now Indian historians (even those who wrote during the last stages of the British colonial era) posited the view that there has always been such a thing as India and an Indian identity.

This jars with the simple fact that since the coming of the Aryan migrants who later settled in the Indus valley region of the north of Hind, there have been two major cultural-civilisational masses in India: that of the north Indians and that of the Southern Dravidians.

Historians like Majumdar and scholars like Radhakrishnan have written time and again about the so-called 'Indian colonies' that once dotted the landscape of Southeast Asia, oblivious to the fact that these co-called Indian colonies were not necessarily peopled by communities who came all the way from the Indian subcontinent, but which may have just been Hindu-Buddhist societies whose members were locals.

Furthermore, the use of the term 'Indian colonies' again re-states the fundamental error that there was such a thing as 'India' then, and that consciousness of this concept was prevalent among South Asians, when we know for the fact that the very term 'India' only came into usage much later from the 17th century onwards thanks to the contact with Europeans.

The same bias can be found in the official history books of Pakistan and Bangladesh, which also take off from the starting point of present-day political realities. And yet in both instances, the notion of a Pakistani and Bangladeshi nation-state serves as the entry into a wider historical narrative that back-dates the presence of Pakistan and Bangladesh as the defining actors of their respective histories; partly with the intention of creating a linear teleology that posits the existence of these modern political entities as the end-points for a long historical process that dates back to the pre-modern era.

The official history of Sri Lanka likewise obscures its long historical links with the rest of the Indian subcontinent and there is precious little mention of the long historical links with Southeast Asia, particularly with Burma/Myanmar, Thailand and Java. This is ironic considering the fact that Sri Lanka was the place where Buddhism thrived after its gradual marginalisation from India, and it was also from Sri Lanka that Buddhism was spread to places like Burma/ Myanmar and Java.

Until today there can be found important historical sites of monks' residences in places like Anuradhapura where Buddhist monks from Java, Burma and Siam congregated, and from which monks were later despatched to Southeast Asia.

Turning across the Indian Ocean, we discover the same historical slippages and blind-spots in the official histories of Southeast Asian polities. While in predominantly Buddhist Thailand, Cambodia, Burma/Myanmar and Laos we still find references to the Sri Lankan roots of Buddhism, there has been little substantial work done to further explore the long process of transoceanic transfer of ideas, values, cultural norms, languages and plastic arts.

Meanwhile in maritime Southeast Asia we see an even greater denial of the shared past in the official histories of Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore.

In all these cases, India - and by extension the entire South Asian subcontinent - has been relegated to a marginal position as some faraway land where there was once some form of cultural and economic contact. Yet the official languages of Malaysia and Indonesia - Bahasa Malaysia and Bahasa Indonesia respectively - are both deeply marked by the common linguistic past that they share with Sanskrit, and until today one can frame entire Malay and Indonesian sentences where practically every word is Sanskrit in origin.

In the domain of popular culture and the arts we likewise see the sharing of a common cultural heritage in the way in which so much of what makes up 'traditional' Malay and Indonesian culture - when understood in essentialist terms - is of South Asian origin.

Malay and Indonesian cultural practices such as the wayang kulit (shadow puppet theatre) derives most of its mythology and narratives from the great Indian epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharatta, both of which were later locally adapted to suit local needs and tastes.

And perhaps the most striking case of selective history writing has to be that of Singapore's, which dates its founding to the period and achievements of Stamford Raffles, the colonial official and governor of the British East India Company during the early stages of the 19th century.

This selective appropriation of Raffles and the role of the East India Company effectively introduces a historical break in the continuity of Singapore's history, presenting it as a commercial entrepot that emerged ex nihilo outside the context of a wider, deeper and older historical milieu when the region was a cosmopolitan continuum binding South and Southeast Asia together.

The net result being that most ordinary Singaporeans may not even know how and why their island state was named thus: Singha Pura being of course a Sanskrit name for what was once a Hindu-Buddhist polity that came into being during the era of the Majapahit empire...

And so as long as nationalism serves as the benchmark of our history-writing, how on earth can we ever hope to remember our long historical links and roots that we share together?

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