



## A RETURN TO “GREATER INDIA”

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### **Abstract:**

This article examines India’s diplomacy and self-conception through the revival of the idea of “Greater India”, which flourished in the early twentieth century and died out shortly after India’s independence. Once developed for nation-building, “Greater India”, was based on the idea of ancient India’s civilizational influence in Asia, especially Southeast Asia. After independence, however, this concept was largely abandoned, as it conflicted with India’s post-war aspiration to act as an equal partner in Asia and in Asian and African self-organisation: “Greater India” was incompatible with a partnership of equals and was largely absent at the 1947 Asian Relations Conference in Delhi and the 1955 Bandung Conference. This is now beginning to change. The idea of “Greater India” serves as a historical framework to assert India’s cultural and geopolitical influence. As it has reappeared in the last decade, it has taken older forms, but without the subtleties of those forms.

**Keywords:** Indian expansionism, civilizational state, cultural nationalism, foreign policy, heritage diplomacy.

*Titulo en Español: El regreso a la «Gran India»*

### **Resumen:**

Este artículo examina la diplomacia y la autoconcepción de la India a través del resurgimiento de la idea de la «Gran India», que floreció a principios del siglo XX y desapareció poco después de la independencia de la India. La «Gran India», desarrollada en su momento para la construcción de la nación, se basaba en la idea de la influencia civilizatoria de la antigua India en Asia, especialmente en el sudeste asiático. Sin embargo, tras la independencia, este concepto fue abandonado en gran medida, ya que entraba en conflicto con la aspiración de la India de la posguerra de actuar como socio en igualdad de condiciones en Asia y en la autoorganización asiática y africana: la «Gran India» era incompatible con una asociación entre iguales y estuvo prácticamente ausente en la Conferencia de Relaciones Asiáticas de 1947 en Delhi y en la Conferencia de Bandung de 1955. Ahora esto está empezando a cambiar. La idea de la «Gran India» sirve de marco histórico para afirmar la influencia cultural y geopolítica de la India. Al reaparecer en la última década, ha adoptado formas más antiguas, pero sin las sutilezas de aquellas.

**Palabras Clave:** *Expansionismo indio, Estado civilizador, nacionalismo cultural, política exterior de la India, diplomacia patrimonial.*

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## 1. Introduction

The autumn of 2026 will mark the centenary of the founding of the Greater India Society in Calcutta. Many Indian historians and their sympathizers view this impending anniversary as an occasion to return to the exploration of India's legacy beyond its borders, while the proponents of the right-wing have been increasingly raising the idea of "Greater India" over the past decade. The Greater India Society, which in 1926 was inaugurated "to study and renew the spiritual and cultural relationship of India with Greater India",<sup>2</sup> apparently serves as a framework for advocating not only the Indian "indigenous, scholarly tradition of studying Southeast Asia"<sup>3</sup> but also India's foreign policy, an "Act East Policy" proactively engaging with Southeast Asia, especially with ASEAN countries.

The elaboration of "Greater India" as a strand within India's foreign policy, based on the Greater India Society's scholarship on ancient Hindu and Buddhist influences on Asia and Southeast Asia in particular, yet rooted in a Hindu-inflected nationalism, is hardly distinguishable from chauvinism. In this regard, the newly-revived academic interest in historical sources bearing witness to India's relationship with Southeast and Central Asia is based on undeniable historical research, while doing so in terms of "Greater India" claims a cultural supremacy for a Hindu-Indian civilization. Over the last decade, changes in India's political landscape and the recent official emphasis on India's civilizational identity has coincided with a renewed interest in the "Greater India" discourse. The idea of India's civilizational influence in Asia has been openly discussed in Indian media and on social networking platforms, particularly among right-wing sympathizers. While such discourse among the latter group is characteristically expansionist and supremacist, its resonance in the official India's foreign diplomacy has been justified through shared cultural and historical ties with countries in Asia and Southeast Asia in particular, by explicitly emphasizing the rejection of political or expansionist domination. An examination of official speeches and public reports, their comments and interpretations, suggest India's projection of Hindu and Buddhist heritage abroad and the presence of Indian communities or people of Indian origin beyond India's borders, in an attempt to establish India's civilizational status.

This projection of Indian nationalist ideas beyond India's borders can be traced back to the *svadeśī* [indigenous; of one's own country] movement, which emerged in 1903 as an economic strategy aimed at resisting British power and products, and soon expanded to involve Indian educationalists, as well as artists and writers in its cause. In this context, (re)writing Indian national history challenged the British colonial assertions about India lacking a great and influential civilization. The framing of the "Greater India" discourse went along with *svadeśī* by advancing the claim that India was not confined to the Indian subcontinent but was extended wherever Indians has been living. The domestic movement that was against British commodities was taken out of India and brought into a wider context in the idea of the "Greater India": *svadeśī* went beyond its own boundary lines by becoming external *svadeśī*. While *svadeśī* itself was grounded in the notion of India's 'natural' boundaries, the simultaneous invocation of the past glories of a Hindu civilizational influence on Southeast Asia and beyond legitimated claims to India's right to expansion.

The "Greater India" narrative was written mainly in English, heavily informed by Western European (including British) scholarship. The recent revival of the "Greater India" concept turns this around somewhat in an attempt at indigenization. The translation of the foundational "Greater India" books, such as those authored by R. C. Majumdar, from English

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<sup>2</sup> "The Greater India Society", *The Indian Historical Quarterly*, Vol. II, n° 4 (December 1926), p. 865.

<sup>3</sup> Raghavan, T. C. A.: "Look East 1.0", *The Telegraph Online*, 17 October 2025, at <https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/look-east-1-0-invoking-the-greater-india-of-scholarship-prnt/cid/2128154>.



into Bengali, signals the orientation of this “Greater India” theme towards Indians themselves first and foremost, who apparently should revive it from the perspective of indigenous history, even if the Indian scholarship in English was officially based on Dutch, French, and British scholarship. Therewith the revival of the concept is framed from the perspective of indigenous history. This tendency to return to Indian vernaculars bypasses the policy of the one language, yet it ultimately reinforces cultural and political objectives centred on indigenism. The emphasis on allegedly indigenous scholarship, combined with the increasing usage of old Sanskrit or ‘Indic’ terms, such as *Bharat* in replacing India, or *Sanātana Dharma* in place of Hinduism, is also part of this trend of pursuing the revival of older ‘indigenous’ vocabulary and histories in (re)asserting Indian civilizational power.

## **2. Origins and development of the “Greater India” idea**

The concept of “Greater India”, which has been recently addressed in Indian public and social media, took shape at the turn of the century. During the late nineteenth and beginning of twentieth centuries Western European scholarship on Hindu and Buddhist architecture, sculpture, inscriptions and literary texts in Central and Southeast Asia laid the foundations for Indian scholars to consider this heritage as part of their own Indian national history. The (re)discovery of Indian heritage in Southeast Asia was discussed in writings often titled as histories of Indian “colonies” in the Far East or Hindu “colonization” of Java, for instance. The concept of “Greater India” implying a Hindu colonization of Southeast Asia, was framed as a “cultural” form of empire, and presented as completely different from imperialism gained by economic exploitation and by military conquest. This Indian idea of a “Greater India” was an Indian nationalist version of a civilizing mission, framing Indian civilization as superior to Southeast Asian civilization, and with a history of expansion or colonization comparable to or even superior to the Europeans’. In this regard, a great input in constructing the discourse on superiority of Indian civilization came from British and Irish art historians who were often members of the Theosophical Society in India. Their framework of Hindu and Buddhist monuments outside India as an Indian ‘national’ art contributed to Indian scholarship on Hindu architectural masterpieces outside the Indian subcontinent and on maritime shipping and trading activities.

In the context of Indian nationalism, the then cultural nationalists were searching for Indian cultural uniqueness rooted in the ancient Hindu past, with culture and civilization often being used interchangeably. Culture here was identified with past historical events, and contrary to a perception of culture that develops by becoming constantly renewed and actively created. Indian culture and art discussed in this “Greater India” discourse has been perceived as culture and art still living as it existed in historical times before the arrival of the British and even the “Mohammedans”. Indian civilization that was still alive, was juxtaposed against *Magna Graecia*, which had vanished. India was seen as the ancient still-living civilization. The Hindu and Buddhist heritage in Siam for instance, was deliberately framed in a way that was intended to create a bond between India and Siam that was apparently still alive. The story of a ‘Hindu’ cultural space that extended across South and Southeast Asia served to awaken Indian traditions as a basis for an Indian nation. The conflation of ‘Hindu’ and ‘Indian’ is notably present in these writings. In writing national histories of India, the focus was on pre-colonial history with the emphasis on the pre-Islamic period. A common culture that was Hindu (which was a conception that flexibly expanded to include Buddhism) within the national boundaries, which were natural boundaries, but were nevertheless able to be expanded by arguing the Hindu pilgrimage or economic expansion in the past, was postulated. Expansion towards the other ‘national communities’ that were considered as inheritors of the Hindu national community, whether they consented to this description or not, was not considered problematic. The “Greater India” theme was thus central in building a Hindu nationalism. The focus was on an Indian expansionist



history glorifying a ‘Hindu’ period (that included a Buddhist period) of Indian ‘civilizational’ dominance, predominantly but not only in Southeast Asia. The idea of “Greater India” was expanded geographically beyond Southeast Asia and included other parts of the world that had been influenced by Hindu civilization.

This idea of “Greater India” was for a long associated with the Greater India Society which as we have mentioned already was established in Calcutta in 1926. The idea has a longer history and a greater spread and significance than its institutionalised history. The discourse on “Greater India” emerged in the 1880s, with “Greater India” becoming a recognized term in itself by the 1920s, before being institutionalized in a Society in 1926. It was mostly Bengali scholars, journalists, politicians, who had developed the “Greater India” discourse not only in British India but also abroad. “Greater India” was itself a self-contained argument that was repeatedly used in various Indian writings until it became normalized. It was selectively used before European audiences in order to show the greatness of Indian civilization and was used among a self-perpetuating public of Hindu-Indian nationalists to reiterate their grand history. “Greater India” historians placed special emphasis on the story of “Greater India” as “the high-water mark of maritime and colonial enterprise of the ancient Indians”<sup>4</sup>. Its audience was assumed to be “all educated people of this country” (India) besides scholars and students of history.<sup>5</sup> To reach these readers in their native country, Indian scholars had disseminated the story of ancient Hindu colonies not only in their history books or lectures used in History Departments, but also in various non-academic magazines and newspapers. The same Indian scholars who wrote the histories of Ancient India for academics and students contributed articles in non-academic magazines. The story of “Greater India” had thus often already been brought to public debate even before it was published in the form of a book. Yet, some other examples of publishing the research results first in the magazines for the general public and then in books framed for academics indicate that the precedence of importance of “Greater India” as a public theme rather than as an academic one was a practice rather than an exception.<sup>6</sup> Indian scholars also often published their writings in several academic publications simultaneously. Obviously, the reproduction of the same writings several times and in various academic and non-academic publications was an attempt to afford “Greater India” the opportunity for maximum impact.

This Indian narrative on “Greater India” was not merely a history written from a different point of view, nor a reinterpretation of the European scholarly narratives, but rather a new appropriation of India as a clearly-defined Hindu motherland or ‘New India’, which was related to the motherland culturally. Majumdar expressed the distinction between India and ‘New India’ by calling the ancient “Indian Colonization in the Far East” a “fascinating tale of the rise of a New India far away from the motherland.”<sup>7</sup> Considering his descriptions of the terms ‘New India’ and ‘Greater India’, it becomes obvious that these two terms were more or less synonyms. According to Majumdar, India “radiated her cultural influence, across the mountains and seas, far beyond the frontiers that nature set up for her and played a larger part in civilizing Asia than perhaps even Greece did in respect of Europe. This is what we mean by Greater India.”<sup>8</sup> The distinction between India and Greater India was drawn by applying the old

<sup>4</sup> See for instance, Majumdar, Ramesh Chandra (1927): *Ancient Indian Colonies in the Far East, Vol. 1 Champa*, Greater India Society Publication n° I., Lahore, the Punjab Sanskrit Book Depot, p. i.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> For details see, Zabarskaitė, Jolita (2023): *‘Greater India’ and the Indian Expansionist Imagination, c. 1885-1965: the Rise and Decline of the Idea of a Lost Hindu Empire*, Berlin and Boston, De Gruyter Oldenbourg.

<sup>7</sup> Ramesh Chandra Majumdar is sometimes also known as Ramesh Chandra Mazumdar, for instance, Mazumdar, Ramesh Chandra (1958): *Greater India: Sain Dass Foundation Lectures, 1940*, Sain Dass Memorial Publications n° 1, Sholapur, Institute of Public Administration (1st ed. 1941), p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.19-20.



term Hindu as a territorial term and not a religious one, suggesting an awareness that the term might contain implications of religious supremacism: “I have used the word Hindu in its original sense of an Indian and not as a member of the Hindu religious community.”<sup>9</sup>

The French project of *mission civilisatrice* was thus taken up and developed in the Indian writings on Indian colonization and moulded into the story of an ancient Hindu imperialism. The Indian narrative on India as superior civilization in the glorious ancient times was created in order to deny the narrative of Indian despotism and obscurantism proclaimed by colonial British authors on Indian history. Indian history was constructed in defence against the claim about India lacking a great and influential civilization. It was used in writings not only on history but also on the economy. In an analysis of trade, shipping, and transport industry, there was an attempt to display several potential reasons to stand up against the colonial rule that had destroyed the previous position of India as “a mighty sea-power of the East”.

The rhetoric of the Hindus as the world-conquerors or as the pioneers of civilization and colonization was typical for the Hindu Mahāsabhā and their associates. The framework of India as a Hindu nation unified on the basis of Sanskrit language and literature, Hindu religion and culture, or the amalgamation of Hinduism with culture, was extensively discussed in the 1910s and 1920s, and again in the 1930s. The coming back to these writings before the Akhaṇḍ Hindustan Conference once again demonstrates that the idea of India as a Hindu nation was still very much alive. Despite their attempts to frame India and her inhabitants in geographical terms, with terms such as ‘Hindustan’ and ‘Hindu’ being cast as geographical, in order to establish the narrative of an undivided India, the usage of ‘Hindu’ and ‘Hindustan’ pulled in the opposite direction to what had been articulated as geography at the Conference.

After independence, the scholarship on Southeast Asia could not be framed in the Indian imperialist narrative of “Greater India”. The cultural superiority argument, applied before 1950s in relation to the French argument of the superiority of Indian civilization over the Southeast Asian culture, and even over French and European culture, became irrelevant or damaging. An attempt to place India in the context of newly-independent Asian and African powers as co-strugglers against colonialism could only be framed as a movement among equals. “Greater India’s” implied hierarchy was incompatible with that attempt. The scholarship on the Southeast Asian past still received attention among Indian historians; but it was not placed at the centre of the new state’s international relations initiatives.

### **3. The revival of “Greater India” or “Akhaṇḍ Bhārat”?**

Towards the end of the Second World War, with the Hindu Mahāsabhā emerging as a political force against the Indian National Congress and the All-India Muslim League, the idea of an “Akhaṇḍ Bhārat” began to take shape against the backdrop of “Greater India” ideas. While “Greater India” was imagined as extending beyond the Indian subcontinent, “Akhaṇḍ Bhārat” was then the essential territorial and cultural entity upon which the larger “Greater India” could be constructed. Mobilisation of earlier texts, often published with new titles, was common in the process of claiming the geographical and political unity of India as perceived by Hindus from the outset of their history. The core premises of “Akhaṇḍ Bhārat” were articulated already in the 1914 book *The Fundamental Unity of India (From Hindu Sources)*, which denoted the unity of the people of the Indian subcontinent and hinted at their possible expansion beyond the subcontinent as an aim of Indian colonization, which was framed as indisputable evidence of Indian unity throughout the vast territory of the subcontinent.<sup>10</sup> Therewith, “Greater India” was presented as a sequel to “Akhaṇḍ Bhārat”, united by Indian culture throughout the Indian

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>10</sup> Mookerji, Radhakumud (1914): *The Fundamental Unity of India (From Hindu Sources)*, London, Longmans, Green and Co.



subcontinent and beyond. “Akhaṇḍ Bhārat” had to be imagined as a hard cultural unity, held together by a ‘Hindu’ imagination, if it had to become the basis for a ‘soft’, and not a military-based or conquest-based view of a cultural “Greater India”.

In the last decade, the terms “Greater India” and “Akhaṇḍ Bhārat” have been increasingly used interchangeably, although the conceptual differences remain. “Akhaṇḍ Bhārat” is framed as a territorially defined land of Hindus, whereas “Greater India” is imagined as possessing fluid and infinite borders defined by cultural influence rather than political sovereignty. As the idea of “Greater India” made a comeback in 2010s, particularly in the context of historical scholarship in India, it was addressed again within the context of research and writing on Indian history. In 2014, in an interview with *Outlook*, a weekly English news magazine published in India, the then Chairman of the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR), Yellapragada Sudershan Rao, said, in response to a question about whether he was concerned with ‘correcting’ the writing of history: “I won’t put it that way. But real history has to come through. I am a follower of truth. The ICHR should encourage research about India and Greater India – from Southeast Asia all the way to Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran. There is enough archaeological evidence to show the connection of our civilization there.”<sup>11</sup>

Such a statement echoes pretty directly the lectures given more than seventy years ago by the well-known Indian historian Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, one of whose main arguments for bringing “Greater India” into the limelight was indeed “to represent the true character of Indian civilization”.<sup>12</sup> The expression of India and “Greater India” as separate entities was also in use in the discourse on “Greater India” in pre-Independence India. Like other points raised by Rao, such as the need for “India’s history from an Indian perspective”, the statement that “being a Hindu is not a religion” or India as “a continuing civilization” and therefore “the writing of history cannot depend only on archaeological evidence, [...] but on folklore too”, the correspondence with the arguments used by “Greater India” thinkers in the first half of the twentieth century is striking. This might not be entirely a coincidence, considering the fact that the new chairman of the ICHR was appointed by the newly-elected Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government. This right-wing party, closely linked with other Hindu nationalist organizations (and together self-identified as the Sangh Parivar, in familial terms), espouses the ideology of Hindu nationalism similar to that which are found in writings about “Greater India” during the struggle for India’s independence. Many of the scholars who were associated with this early trend were also on the right-wing of Indian politics in the period leading to and after independence, arguing for an identification of post-independence India with a ‘Hindu’ nation.

2014 serves, then, as a landmark year for the revival of “Greater India”. The theme of ancient Indian influence on Southeast Asia was invoked in connection with the Act East Policy (AEP) launched by the new India’s government in 2014. The foreign policy intended for India’s active engagement with the East and Southeast Asia in particular, was a continuation of the Look East Policy implemented in 1992 by the then Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao. In the same year India established a sectoral dialogue partnership with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and a full dialogue partnership in 1995.<sup>13</sup> Since then the cooperation with ASEAN under the ASEAN-India Dialogue Relations has grown not only to include political and security, economic, and socio-cultural cooperation, but also to establish a separate

<sup>11</sup> Rao, Yellapragada Sudershan: “Ramayana, Mahabharata Are True Accounts of The Period...Not Myths”, Interview, *Outlook*, 21 July 2014, at <http://www.outlookindia.com/article/ramayana-mahabharata-are-true-accounts-of-the-period-not-myths/291363>.

<sup>12</sup> Mazumdar, Ramesh Chandra (1958): *Greater India: Sain Dass Foundation Lectures, 1940*, Sain Dass Memorial Publications No. 1, Sholapur, Institute of Public Administration (1st ed. 1941), p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Association of Southeast Asian Nations: “Overview ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership”, June 2024, at <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Overview-ASEAN-India-as-of-June-2024-cl.pdf>.



Indian diplomatic mission to ASEAN, inaugurated in 2015. Then, in 2017, while celebrating the 25th Anniversary of ASEAN and India Dialogue Relations, in her keynote address at the Ministerial Session of the ninth edition of Delhi Dialogue, H. E. Smt. Sushma Swaraj, External Affairs Minister of India, highlighted the “geographical, historical and civilisational ties” between India and Southeast Asia by emphasizing that their mutual cultural enrichment was a “two way process” and “that this inter-mingling happened without any conquest or colonization”.<sup>14</sup> Considering the international audience of high-ranking politicians gathered in Delhi from Southeast Asian countries, such an appeal to cultural affinities illustrating historical ties by demonstratively emphasizing the rejection of the colonial perspective, was made in order to justify and strengthen the ASEAN-India cooperation and its economic and political goals. But this also entails the problematic discourse itself of this theme in history and its proliferation so much so that it was necessary to emphasize historical ties based on mutual interconnections engaging for equal partnership to offset the implied civilizational supremacy of the theme.

Refraining from using the term “Greater India” and emphasizing India’s long historical ties with Southeast Asia established through trade, migration, the spread of culture and religion rather than conquest and colonization, the Indo-centric perspective or the positioning of Indian civilization as a superior civilization have continued to be used (even if indirectly implied rather than explicitly stated) among Indian authors and diplomats, especially among the latter. A short while after the Delhi Dialogue 9, the narrative on Indian influence on Southeast Asia, without mentioning the term “Greater India”, was briefly presented by the former ambassador, Ashok Sajjanhar, in his lecture “From Look East to Act East: India’s growing engagement with ASEAN and beyond” at the Tamil Nadu National Law School in Tiruchirappalli. A somewhat less international but no less important audience (considering that the distinguished lecture was also published on the official website of the Ministry of External Affairs Government of India) was given a brief overview of “the historical and civilizational ties between India and South East Asia”.<sup>15</sup> In his brief description of how Indians, in particular “Tamil traders, adventurers, teachers and priests” shaped Southeast Asia, Sajjanhar expressed India’s political and cultural dominance there: “The influence of the civilization of the Indian subcontinent gradually became predominant among them [the peoples of maritime Southeast Asia], and among the peoples of the Southeast Asian mainland. Tamil traders, adventurers, teachers and priests continued to be the dominating influence in Southeast Asia until about 1500 CE. Tamil kings often ruled the earliest states in these regions.”<sup>16</sup> By framing the first political and social structures in Southeast Asia as under the rule of those who came from India, he referred to the “Hinduized states” and “Hindu-Khmer state” in Cambodia, or “Hinduised empires” in Indonesia and the “Indianised states and empires of this first 1500 years CE”, which according to Sajjanhar, “though founded by Indian colonisation and maintaining diplomatic contacts with India, remained politically independent of the Indian kingdoms”.<sup>17</sup> This suggests that Indian civilization should be seen as more advanced, with its forms of state governance and administrative culture being adopted by local polities. Finally, his closing remarks reflect a slightly more positive but essentially the same idea as that of “Greater India” shaped in the first half of the twentieth century: “Yet India’s cultural conquests were peaceful and without forced conversions. There was no evidence of violence, colonisation and subjugation and there was no extensive migration from India to the countries of Southeast Asia. The Indians who went there did not go to rule nor had any interest

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<sup>14</sup> Ministry of External Affairs Government of India: “Ministerial Session of Delhi Dialogue 9”, 4 July 2017, at [https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/28596/Ministerial\\_Session\\_of\\_Delhi\\_Dialogue\\_9](https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/28596/Ministerial_Session_of_Delhi_Dialogue_9).

<sup>15</sup> Sajjanhar, Ashok: “From Look East to Act East: India’s growing engagement with ASEAN and beyond”, 26 April 2018, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/distinguished-lectures-detail.htm?749>.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*



in controlling from afar. Indian influence travelled to Southeast Asia through trade, religion and philosophy and not by sword or violence or conquest”.<sup>18</sup>

The persistent adherence to the idea of the extension of Indian civilization in Southeast Asia has also been maintained in relation to the ongoing archaeological excavations in Southeast Asia partially or fully funded by the Indian government. The Hindu and Buddhist heritage beyond India’s borders which contributed in defining India’s relationship with countries in Southeast Asia as millennia-old cultural ties officially addressed as “civilizational links”, has been used not only for strengthening partnerships in overseas diplomacy but also for reinforcing the role of India as a great civilization with its visibility in Southeast Asia and even in the so-called ‘Global South’. India’s engagement in the temple restoration initiatives in Southeast Asia, among other regions not only in Asia but also Africa, has been an integral part of India’s cultural diplomacy.<sup>19</sup> In the last decade the growing number of the archaeological and conservation initiatives occupy an increasingly significant position in India’s soft power diplomacy.<sup>20</sup> “Cognisant of India’s identity as a civilisational and cultural powerhouse”, as stated in the annual report of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), in January 2020 the Ministry (MEA) established a dedicated division for heritage conservation in Southeast Asia within the Development Partnership Administration.<sup>21</sup>

One of several such successful examples illuminating India’s civilizational power through its heritage in Southeast Asia was celebrated in the Indian press. In 2020, reports appeared in the Indian media about the discovery by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) of a monolithic sandstone Shiva Linga of the 9th century in Vietnam. The articles featured a subheading about Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar congratulating the ASI on their discovery, unearthed in the ancient Cham temple at UNESCO heritage site of My Son Sanctuary in central Vietnam. Jaishankar’s own posts on his personal social media account with the headlines “Reaffirming a civilisational connect” and “A great cultural example of India’s development partnership” signalled more than just the importance of the discovery, which reaffirms long-standing cultural ties and illustrates India’s approach to partnership through contribution to restoration and conservation of cultural and archaeological heritage abroad. The archaeological excavation in Vietnam was defined in the framework of civilization. In this way, the past has been used in the present not in the way of remembering and perceiving the past as something old and finished – like a historical event – but as the roots of a still-living culture in the present.<sup>22</sup>

For several Indian authors, this archaeological discovery was an opportunity to revive the scholarship of Indian historians and members of the Greater India Society or the French historian engaging with the history of Southeast Asia as the history of “Further India”. In one such article, the discovery of the Shiva Linga in Vietnam was defined as further evidence, or

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Mahaseth, Harsh; Sarmah, Udipto Koushik and Qureshi, Shifa: “Temple Diplomacy and India’s Soft Power: A Cultural Approach to Diplomacy in Southeast Asian States”, *India Review*, Vol. 22, n° 1 (2023), pp. 28-42.

<sup>20</sup> Kuzmenchuk, Alexandr: *India’s Heritage Diplomacy Database: Archaeology and Conservation Initiatives since 2014*, 21 April 2025, Centre for Social and Economic Progress, New Delhi, India.

<sup>21</sup> “The Annual Report of the Ministry of External Affairs 2020-21”, Ministry of External Affairs, Policy Planning and Research Division: at [https://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/33569\\_MEA\\_annual\\_Report.pdf](https://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/33569_MEA_annual_Report.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Bhattacharjee, Dhrubajyoti: “India-Vietnam Civilisational Linkages: Remembering Kalinga and Cham of the Past and the Present”, Special Report for *Indian Council of World Affairs*, 18 February 2025, at [https://www.icwa.in/show\\_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls\\_id=12466&lid=7617](https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=12466&lid=7617).



more precisely, “more validation of a ‘Farther India’ past”.<sup>23</sup> The author’s choice to discuss “Indianized states” in “Farther India” is based on the monograph *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* by French scholar George Coedès, who according to the Indian journalist, “was the first to have developed the concept of ‘Indianised kingdoms’ in what he coined to be ‘farther India’.” A contemporaneous term “Farther India” or “Further India” was in use: “The geographic area” which Coedès called as “‘Farther India’ consists of Indonesia, or island Southeast Asia except for the Philippines; and the Indochinese Peninsula, or India beyond the Ganges, including the Malay Peninsula” and excluding “Assam, which is simply an extension of India and Bengal, and northern Vietnam, whose history developed outside Indian influence”.<sup>24</sup> “Indianization of Farther India”, which Coedès described as the expansion of Indian civilization, was first discussed in his work written and published in French in 1944 under slightly different title *Les Etats hindouisés d’Indochine et d’Indonésie*, whose English edition appeared in 1968. Although Coedès emphasized that the Indian colonization of Southeast Asia “did not involve political ties with the mother country [India]”, he described the processes of the first and second “Indianization”, “the first Indian Kingdoms” following by their “decline” and the “end of the Indian Kingdoms” in the way he suggested to perceive the Indian civilization in Southeast Asia as “[T]his Sanskrit or Indian civilization, transplanted into Southeast Asia and called, according to the country, ‘Indo-Khmer,’ ‘Indo-Javanese,’ etc.”.<sup>25</sup>

This theory of “Indianization”, which points to Indian origins of statecraft, kingship, architecture, religion, philosophy, literature, and other cultural forms in Southeast Asia, reiterates largely what Majumdar and other members of the Greater India Society stated before Coedès’ theory came to light. In both these French and Indian works, ancient India’s relation with Southeast Asia was studied in the framework of colonialism and Indocentrism, albeit with minor differences. Indian nationalist approaches, in addition to colonial and imperial frameworks, had contributed, according to the former diplomat T. C. A. Raghavan, to the critique and neglect of the work of Greater India Society.<sup>26</sup> Yet, as he stated in his article “A forgotten Scholarship” written in connection with the archaeological discovery in Vietnam, the enduring relevance of ancient India’s connections with Southeast Asia highlights the importance of the Greater India Society’s scholarship, that, separated from its nationalistic triumphalism, deserves recognition and revival.<sup>27</sup> The revival would be valid only for scientific research analysing interconnections between India and Southeast Asia, but not in terms of “Greater India” or “Farther India”, “Indianization” or “Sanskritization” that themselves are indicative of Indo-centric framing and hardly separable from the nationalism or colonialism in which they are rooted. Otherwise, their revival would only serve the purposes of Hindu nationalist ideology.

Most interestingly, it is *Western* scholarly interest in the Greater India Society’s research that Raghavan makes responsible for what he sees as a false connection made to the growing Hindu political establishment in India. He urges us to ignore this scholarship as involved in an inappropriate perception of the question of “Greater India”: “From the late 20th century, as *Hindutva* politics consolidated itself in India, there has been a natural tendency to seek to dig

<sup>23</sup> Roychowdhury, Adrija: “In Vietnam’s Shiva Linga Discovery, More Validation of a ‘Farther India’ past”, *The Indian Express*, 4 June 2020, at <https://indianexpress.com/article/research/in-vietnams-shiva-linga-discovery-more-validation-of-a-farther-india-past-6440155/>.

<sup>24</sup> Coedès, George (1975): *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, edited by Walter F. Vella, translated by Susan Brown Cowing, Canberra, Australian National University Press, p. xv.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>26</sup> Raghavan, T. C. A.: “A forgotten scholarship”, *The Telegraph Online*, 11 June 2020, at: <https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/the-scholars-of-the-greater-india-fraternity-combined-a-mix-of-impulses-nationalism-and-pan-asianism/cid/1780206>.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*



deep to analytically uncover its roots and identify its intellectual origins. In this context, attention by some Western scholars refocused on the Greater India Society. In their accounts, the Society was less about scholarship and more about public advocacy that acted as the forbear of a muscular Hindu nationalism ascribing to itself an imperial history and colonial conquests. In some of these treatments, the entire approach of the Greater India Society amounted to a kind of ‘epistemic violence’ being perpetuated on Southeast Asia.’<sup>28</sup> Instead of this, he argues for revisiting and (re)evaluating what he describes as India’s first and “indigenous scholarly tradition of studying Southeast Asia”.<sup>29</sup> To what extent this can be called an “indigenous” tradition of studying Southeast Asia depends on what we mean by “indigenous”. As far as it concerns firsts in India, then the first Indian scholars’ analyses of inscriptions, archaeological artefacts, architecture or literature related to the ancient history of Southeast Asia, were based on British studies and later translations of Dutch and French writings on Indian colonies and their heritage in Southeast Asia. Moreover, the “Greater India” protagonists *themselves* attributed the emergence of “Greater India” exploration to British, Dutch, and French scholars, especially the French School of Indologists, which was seen as “ever expanding the frontiers of the new science, ever widening the horizon of Indian history”.<sup>30</sup>

Recently, the interest of Indian historians in the “Greater India” narrative has also increasingly been seen in the context of arguing that the long-dominant left-wing Indian historians have misrepresented India’s development. Arguing that the latter misinterpreted the British role in India’s indigenous shipbuilding industry, a younger generation of Indian historians invoke the Mauryan Empire to argue that Indian naval capabilities emerged early and continued to dominate the Indian Ocean until the rise of British power. “Greater India” in this context, described somewhat speculatively as one of the greatest achievements in Indian maritime history, echoes Radhakumud Mookerji’s *Indian Shipping*<sup>31</sup> and implies a retelling of the tale told in his book.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The present resurgence of the concept “Greater India” is related more to India’s recently proclaimed domestic and international self-assertion than to the historical investigation of the evidence for the reconstruction of ancient history. The contemporary appeal to India’s civilizational identity reflects the language used in discursive construction of the culture and identity of the Indian nation and its consequent right to an extension beyond the Indian subcontinent. The ancient Hindu and Buddhist heritage in Southeast Asia – framed as “Greater India” and used as a civilizational claim in the first half of the twentieth century – has been recently deployed for enhancing India’s diplomatic engagements with the countries in Southeast Asia among other regions. The first iteration of “Greater India”, which became itself a self-contained argument and was repeatedly used in various Indian writings until it became normalized, was incompatible with India’s post-independence politics, both in domestic and foreign policy. The “Greater India” which was used to raise awareness about India as a great civilizational power in the past with the right to become a nation-state and great power in the near future, was predominantly oriented towards establishing a Hindu-inflected order in India, which was not implemented after India’s independence. The “Greater India” which was shaped

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<sup>28</sup> Raghavan, T. C. A.: “Look East 1.0”, *The Telegraph Online*, 17 October 2025, at <https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/look-east-1-0-invoking-the-greater-india-of-scholarship-prnt/cid/2128154>.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> For instance, see, Nag, Kalidas: “Sylvain Lévi and the Science of Indology”, *The Modern Review*, December 1921, pp. 670-676.

<sup>31</sup> Mookerji, Radhakumud (1912): *Indian Shipping: A History of the Sea-Borne Trade and Maritime Activity of the Indians from the Earliest Times*, Bombay, Calcutta, London and New York, Longmans, Green and Co.



on the hierarchical relationship between India and Southeast Asia, implying India's civilizational superiority, was also inappropriate to use in building India's diplomatic relationships based on anti-colonial solidarity and egalitarian partnership.

In the last decade, however, the return of this idea and the story behind this concept of "Greater India" or "Indianization", highlights tensions in India's foreign politics. India's active engagement into the preservation and enhancement of Hindu and Buddhist heritage beyond her borders contributes to sustaining an Indian (seen specifically as Hindu which includes Buddhist) cultural sphere. While in pre-independent India the articulation of India's great civilization which not only laid the foundations for other nations' development into institutional and organized societies but was still a living civilization, was discursive, the recent civilizational claim has been enhanced materially, for instance through India's proactively implemented initiatives in Hindu temple restoration, or Buddhist and Hindu exhibitions and festivals in Southeast Asian countries. India's heritage initiatives mentioned in the official speeches and reports by ministers, including the prime minister, suggests political instrumentalization of Hindu and Buddhist culture in strengthening the partnership between India and ASEAN countries. Officially referred to as shared cultural affinities between states, while claiming India's civilizational identity, the question of identity remains problematic: does the restoration of Hindu temples and festivals in Vietnam, for example, contribute to strengthening the identity of the Vietnamese Hindu community, or to the civilizational identity of India, which is swallowing it up?

Civilization, which Christopher Coker describes as "becoming the currency of international politics"<sup>32</sup> was used in this way in the beginning of the twentieth century by Indian scholars and intellectuals. The recent Indian civilizational claims are a repetition of the claims made in the formation of discourse on "Greater India". In the struggle for independence, India's international politics were built in order to receive an acknowledgment for India as a nation-state with its right to sovereignty. For this purpose, Indian intellectuals, and among them foremost the protagonists of "Greater India", used Indian culture and Indian communities abroad. Similarly, today the usage of culture in international politics is directed still very much to its people at home while attempting to dominate ASEAN and the 'Global South'. That civilizational claim is in an attempt to unify a diverse society and create a homogeneous society unified around Hindu culture rooted in its civilizational greatness. Such claims to civilizational identity have now been made officially. Contrary to Christopher Coker's assertion that "India is unlikely to ever become a civilizational state committed to upholding a single version of its past", and that its "history is far too diverse and diversified for it ever to become a Brahminical project"<sup>33</sup>, this essay highlights India's contemporary attempts to unify India, or rather Bharat, around the Hindu imperial history that marked its civilizational greatness as seen in its pre-Islamic cultural expansion throughout the Southeast Asia and to some extent even Central and East Asia. Moreover, the research conducted by Arkotong Longkumer in Northeast India, the region with the majority of Christians among other religious minorities, has shown the ways in which the communities of the region, which can themselves claim an indigenism of a different kind, have been fused with a Hindu identity by the Hindutva activists under the national agenda "one country, one language and one culture".<sup>34</sup> This is itself a form of "Greater India" expansionism, as Longkumer points out. Since 2014, when Narendra Modi came to power, the 'Hinduization' of the region has been accelerated by instrumentally using myths and mythology,

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<sup>32</sup> Coker, Christopher (2019): *The Rise of the Civilizational State*, Cambridge, Medford, Polity.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 130-131.

<sup>34</sup> Longkumer, Arkotong (2021): *The Greater India Experiment: Hindutva and the Northeast, South Asia in Motion*, Stanford, Stanford University Press.



and framing Christianity as religion adaptive to Hinduism, among other tactics, in an attempt to establish “civilizational identity intact no matter where the wind blows”.<sup>35</sup>

The revival of this “Greater India” discourse is based on the same motives that were used at the beginning of the 20th century. Without an initiative to explore shared cultural development by emphasizing mutual exchanges between cultures or civilizations of equal cultural capability to perceive or adjudicate this influence, the current form of Indian cultural diplomacy reiterates much of what had been argued in the earlier discursive construction of “Greater India”, and in some respects in a cruder manner. Due to the spiritual and intellectual advancement of Indian civilization, so the argument goes, countries all over Asia received their civilization from India. And it is important to note that the recent revival of the story of “Greater India” is associated with anything but the analysis of new historical facts.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.



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