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## Sociology of 'Area studies': Cultural and historical study of Southeast Asia and India's Northeast

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### Abstract

The paper aims at looking 'Area Studies' from the sociological point of view and explores how the 'field' can be enriched sociologically by the use of comparative and historical methods of study. The study explores the dual character of the discipline - which on the one hand studies the social life, social structure and its processes of a given geographical area and on the other hand comparing the same territorial space with other wider cultural and geographical areas. While, the scope of Area Study is confined to only a 'specific geographical location', which in other words is 'territorial' in nature, it is interesting to see how that 'geography' (or geographical community) produces distinctive historical, political and cultural communities contributing to the study of cultural diplomacy, emergence of the politics of 'soft power' and transnational ties with diverse societies allowing disciplines such as Law, Economics, International Relations and Diplomacy etc to see as well. Using sociological perspective, the paper will explore the cultural and historical study of Southeast Asia and India's Northeast.

**Keywords:** Comparative method, historical and cultural community, geography

### Introduction

Sociology and Social Anthropology do not have a geographical constraint of seeing and observing social facts. They together provide a body of concepts, methods and theories on which scholars can draw findings to arrive at logical conclusion. It is here that Andre Beteille (Beteille: 1996) <sup>[4]</sup> has viewed Sociology in the broad sense of the term to study social life, social processes, social structures and institutions with the help of historical sociology and comparative sociology. Since its inception in Europe and then its expansion to other countries, the discipline is not constraint to studying 'specific locations' and 'geographies'. In fact, the sociological tradition begun by the Classical Sociologists such as Emile Durkheim have laid down procedures for the comparison of facts relating to different societies. Accordingly, comparisons had to be made first between 'neighbourly societies' or those of the same type before wider comparisons are thereon made (Beteille 1997) <sup>[5]</sup>. Thus, segmentary and centralized political systems were first compared in Africa as a basis for attempting wider comparisons among political systems (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940) <sup>[15]</sup>. Or again, patterns of social mobility were compared among western European societies to provide a basis for comparisons of a wider sort (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992) <sup>[14]</sup>. Thus, the growth of sociological theories has immensely enhanced the study of other societies, peoples and cultures.

Area Study, however, is a newer discipline. It is, by definition, narrower than sociology in the sense that it is geographically constraint. However, there is another aspect of the Area Study. That, it is multi-disciplinary in nature, and its scope is wider than sociology, in the sense that any discipline can study it - geography, history, polity, economics, law and diplomacy etc. This is where I find both complementary to one another and have 'parasitical aspect of the disciplines'<sup>1</sup>. Area Studies programmes, thus, have grown in the past decades combining theoretical and practical demands of studying specific geographical locations.

The dawn of 'Area Study' as a specialized field commenced with the withdrawal of the old imperial powers. This process of decolonization called for the need to see closer and produce more systematic body of knowledge of the 'newly independent country', be it in Asia, Africa or Latin America etc. Thus, Southeast Asia as a field is chosen to study the sociological linkages between them in general and India's Northeast and Myanmar in particular.

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The term "Southeast Asia" was first used in 1839 by American pastor Howard Malcolm in his book *Travels in South-Eastern Asia*. It is a geographical region consisting of 11 countries but culturally most diverse in the world. India and Southeast Asia have a long history of transnational ties, dating back to ancient times. In recent decades, globalisation has accelerated the process of transnationalization, leading to stronger ties between the two regions. From a sociological lens, transnational relationships can be defined as social networks that connect people across national borders. These networks can be formed for a variety of reasons, including kinship, ethnicity, religion, or business. Transnational links can play a range of roles in people's life, including emotional support, economic opportunity, and cultural enrichment. In the case of India and Southeast Asia, transnational ties are particularly strong. Indian culture, notably Hinduism and Buddhism, has affected several Southeast Asian countries. This shared cultural heritage has created a strong sense of affinity between people in the two regions. There is a thriving cultural exchange between India and Southeast Asia. Indian films, music, and dance are popular in Southeast Asia, and Southeast Asian culture is also popular in India. There is a long history of migration between India and Southeast Asia. Many Indians have migrated to Southeast Asia over the centuries for economic and political reasons. This has resulted in the establishment of substantial Indian diaspora groups in Southeast Asia.

The relationship between India and Myanmar is rooted in shared history, ethnicity, culture, and religion. The border between Myanmar and India's Northeast spans approximately 1643 kilometers, encompassing regions like Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram. Various ethnic groups in Northeast India, such as the Nagas, Mizos, Bodos, Ahoms, and Meiteis, have corresponding counterparts in Myanmar. These groups have engaged in social interactions across the frontier for countless generations.

The first thing that comes to India and Myanmar is the "geo strategic location" that it acts as the gateway to Southeast Asia. At the same time, it is the only ASEAN nation directly bordering India. The 'India's Act East policy' and 'Neighbourhood First policy', are therefore emerged from geographical importance with the already cultural and historical linkages that have been strongly developed by religion such as Buddhism, Bharatnatyam, Bollywood movies, Business and the Burma Teak which is usually referred to as the "five Bs" (Chand: 2014)<sup>[9]</sup>.

The second issue is the large porous area of borderland which is 1643 km long stretch. Given the porosity along the Northeast (NE) border, drug trafficking, insurgency, illicit trades of narcotics a huge matter of concern for India. As a matter of this fact, India and Myanmar signed a border agreement in Rangoon on the 10 of March in 1967, and accordingly established a 'Joint Boundary Commission'<sup>ii</sup> to carry out boundary mappings of the two countries.

The other issue, the third one, is the challenges and problems of insurgency in the India's Northeast which long international borders have become a safe haven to flourish and campaign. Over 30 militant groups are said to be operating in the Northeast of India, such as the National Socialist Council Of Nagaland, United National Liberation Front of Manipur, Zomi Revolutionary Army, Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup and several others, these insurgent groups engage the authority of the state for various reasons,

separatism, secessionism, to target a rival ethnic group, to assert themselves in the face of oppression, or commonly a combination of these. The situation on the Burmese side is no better with groups such the Arakan army, Kachin Independence Army, Chin National Defense Force or the Lahu Democratic Union, engaged in rebellion against the military junta. These groups and their affiliated individuals often seek refuge across the border to lay low, set up camps, smuggle arms and drugs for financial purposes, in 2007 the rate of arms being seized in Mizoram rose by 21.43% ,Mandalay in Myanmar and the important border town of Tamu right across Moreh, are the primary hotspots. (Routray, 2009)<sup>[20]</sup>. Regarding the other major problem, drugs. The Shan state of Myanmar is at the heart of the "Golden Triangle", chemicals such as acetic anhydride, crucial in the manufacture of heroin are brought in from India, while the finished product is then smuggled back through various porous routs (Meehan, 2011, p. 383- 399)<sup>[17]</sup>.

Insurgency is a constant roadblock to any state sponsored infrastructure, as any outreach by the state is viewed suspiciously by both insurgents and non- combatants alike. But even when we review current infrastructure, the facilities at Moreh (Manipur) and Zokhawatar (Mizoram) – the two state designated border towns for trade, travel and other communication– is pitiful. The infrastructural shortcomings coupled with an extensively restrictive trading guide, along with the fact that the Myanmar's government on the other side of the border has opened the Namphalong market, has negatively impacted normal trade at Moreh giving rise to an informal economy. To give you n idea of the deplorable conditions, The land customs stations lack proper screening and detection machines, communication devices, parking spaces, communication equipment e.t.c. The Government of India in 2006-07 had declared that they would significantly upgrade and improve the customs station at Moreh, transforming it into an integrated check post (ICP). This ICP would consist of all regulatory and security agencies under the same roof, equipped with all the relevant amenities in an effort to and combat smuggling bolster trade, but this promise has gone unfulfilled.

The need for cooperation in matters of security have been felt by both countries, in 1993 J.N Dixit the foreign minister was sent to talk to officials in Myanmar on a wide variety of issues, in 1994 a Memorandum of Understanding regarding cooperation for securing the border was signed by both countries while Burmese general Than Shwe in 2004 declared that, Myanmar would not allow anti-Indian insurgency on its land, and would provide any relevant to Indian security forces (Mishra, 2009, p. 84)<sup>[18]</sup>. But India's tacit support for democracy have corroded trust, for example in 2017 the government alleged that over 2500 insurgents were using Myanmar as a safe haven (Basit, 2018, p. 74)<sup>[3]</sup>, but recent diplomatic overreach has received reciprocation from Myanmar, as evidenced by their joint cooperation in "Operation Sunrise 2" a three week long operation aimed at flushing out militants along the border. But despite the media propelled successes of these operations, are they really worth it in the long run? Insurgency might have reduced from its peak in the late 90s and early 2000s, yet it remains the pressing concern along the border, and these are just some of the many issues militancy brings, making the border unruly, chaotic and dangerous, but before worrying about where the border is vulnerable, or how the insurgents

are using it, it is better to figure out why the numbers of insurgents are constant, despite the firepower thrown at them. Firstly these guns, why are they being brought back? They are being brought to provide insurgency the tools it needs to wage an asymmetrical conflict with Indian forces, and the drugs are brought to finance this conflict. In other words the border, for the insurgents is simply another arena to be understood navigated, and subsequently utilized in their struggle against the state, failing to address the issues that cause insurgency, will lead to a frozen state of conflict at the border.

The biggest issue is that the indigenous groups residing in the border regions, do not accept the implication that the state now has the authority to decide where they can or cannot go, in other words the land their ancestors freely traversed and inhabited is now under the threat of being partitioned along imaginary lines drawn up by two states already at odds with these groups. For example in 2013 there were massive protests in Manipur, that united all political parties and groups against the fence, they vehemently rejected its construction along two pillars as they claimed around 10km of territory would be lost to Myanmar, a few months later the Burmese military were accused of uprooting trees on the Indian side, further agitating the residents.

The India-Myanmar border operates under a unique arrangement known as the Free Movement Regime (FMR). This arrangement allows the indigenous tribes living along the border to move up to 16 kilometers across the boundary without needing visas. The FMR has allowed these tribes to maintain their traditional kinship connections; but conversely it has also raised concerns within the security establishment. The FMR, permits tribal people to carry head loads, and this has facilitated the smuggling of arms and narcotics across the border, as these head loads are rarely inspected. Over the years, the India-Myanmar border has become the primary route for trafficking arms and high-quality heroin from Myanmar. Smuggling of ephedrine and pseudo-ephedrine, as well as the trafficking of women and children from the Northeast to Myanmar and onward to Southeast Asia, is also prevalent along this border. Insurgents have exploited the FMR by crossing into Myanmar for weapons training, laying low, establishing militant safe bases, and then re-entering India to carry out subversive attacks. It is estimated that several insurgent groups in Northeast India have set up to 20 camps in Myanmar, (Das, 2013). The border fence will greatly limit the privileges of the FMR, and this is an additional concern for tribal groups as it is an unwanted submission to state authority. So in conclusion a border fence is firstly an exercise in futility, as it attempts to force an imaginary line to be visible, secondly because it is not effective alone, and must be integrated with other security and administrative measures (Which India has so far been ineffective at) to even resemble some sort of legitimacy. And finally because it is another example in Northeast India of ethnic considerations being on the periphery of state consciousness.

Another interesting point for centuries is that, Myanmar has stood as a distinguished hub of Buddhist scholarship and cultural advancement. Legend has it that Lord Buddha personally frequented the serene hills of Mandalaya, leaving behind a tapestry of anecdotes and tales that continue to resonate in Myanmar's heritage. Since the era of U Nu (1948-1962), Buddhism has held the honored status of being the state religion. A substantial majority of Burmese people

hold deep veneration for Lord Buddha, their unwavering faith firmly rooted in the teachings of Buddhism

### Conclusion

The regional dynamics are undergoing swift transformations, with East Asian nations showing a growing interest in accessing Indian markets. The emergence of the East Asian Community (EAC) is poised to foster a collaborative environment, signifying a significant development in regional cooperation. India, China, Myanmar, and Japan are expected to play pivotal roles in the establishment and consolidation of this community.

The envisioned framework includes ambitious goals such as free trade agreements, the potential adoption of a common currency, and fostering extensive people-to-people interactions. These measures are poised to strengthen economic ties and deepen cultural exchanges among member nations, contributing to a more integrated and prosperous region.

Within this context, Myanmar assumes a critical position as a key economic hub, serving as a vital link between the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This strategic role underscores the need for Myanmar to diversify its economic partnerships and reduce an over-reliance on China. By doing so, Myanmar can effectively balance its economic engagements and bolster its position as a central player in the evolving regional economic landscape. This multi-faceted approach is essential for Myanmar to harness its full potential and contribute significantly to the growth and stability of the broader East Asian community.

In such a scenario, where Myanmar actively diversifies its economic engagements and reduces its over-dependence on China, it would not only garner appreciation from China but also from the international community at large. This strategic shift towards a more balanced approach in economic partnerships would be viewed positively by nations around the world.

India, in particular, stands to benefit significantly from this development. It would lead to a substantial enhancement in India's position for collaboration and integration with Myanmar. The strengthening of economic ties and regional cooperation would not only bolster bilateral relations between India and Myanmar but also contribute to broader regional stability and prosperity.

This shift aligns with the broader goals of fostering a cooperative and integrated East Asian Community (EAC), wherein nations like India, China, Myanmar, and Japan play pivotal roles. The potential for free trade, a common currency, and increased people-to-people contacts within the EAC framework holds immense promise for the entire region.

The Government of India's Act East Policy with strong cultural base will improve economic, political and cultural relations with the Southeast Asia region. The social relations will act as the catalyst once cultural ties are strengthened. The sociological study thus becomes very crucial for the understanding of this transnational region and societies.

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<sup>i</sup> Having inability for the scholars to have full knowledge of the entire body – analytical or theoretical, there is this ‘interdependency’ of one discipline to another which is referred to as the ‘parasitical aspect of the discipline.

<sup>ii</sup> For details, Ministry of External Affairs has in its official websites carried all Agreements. (<https://www.mea.gov.in>)