

Recalling Past, Recognizing Present and Reinforcing Future: A Buddhist Design for Realization of 'One Identity' Goal of ASEAN Community

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Southeast Asia is geo-politically important as well as sensitive region. In ancient and medieval times its spices and timber attracted people from Europe and the Middle-East; and presently: its location is a dividing line between two great oceans, the Indian and the Pacific, ascribes it strategic prominence. As member states of ASEAN are comparatively smaller in size, some of them are conglomeration of isles and are inhabited by racially, culturally and religiously diverse people - their strength lies in their unity. Hence, one of the goals of 'ASEAN Vision 2020', adopted at Kuala Lumpur Summit in 1997, is 'Building ASEAN Identity' (ASEAN Sociocultural Committee, Clause-E). Complexities of identity are major source of clashes and conflicts in contemporary societies. Thus, attainment of this goal may certainly play a crucial role in addressing the concerns for perpetual peace and sustainable development of the region. The main argument of this study is that a broad spectrum based cultural identity could be endorsed as one identity for the ASEAN.

The issue of identity has emerged as a hot spot of intellectual thought process the contemporary world. It has transcended the boundaries of different realms of knowledge and attracted interest of philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists and others. Rene Descartes, the French philosophers, was the first thinker who presented a rationalistic view of human 'being' in his book 'Rules for the Direction of the Mind', published in 1684. John Locke not only dealt with the subject but also conceptualized it as the identity being founded on the consciousness of an individual. Identity is approached with different modules, which break down the individual as a coherent whole into a collection of various identifiers such as race, gender, class, ethnicity, religion etc. Psychology delves into identity at both the levels of individual cognition and collective behavior. Weinrich has developed an experiment of identity structure analysis in which relationship between the self and the other is analyzed with special emphasis on the socio-cultural milieu in which self relates to other agents and institutions (Weinrich & Sanderson, 2003:1). In its simplest form identity may be defined as the distinctive characteristic belonging to any given individual or shared by all members of a particular group. Identity is important as it is considered to be the source of an individual's self-respect and dignity (James, 1999: 1-45). Apparently there are two major types of identities - personal identity and group identity. Group identity has a large number of variants, some exclusive, some overlapping and its membership may range from a few members to several nations. The search of one identity for ASEAN community, with ten member states needs to focus upon forms of group identity.

Postmodernists strongly believe in the relevance of the group identity, their denial of self is based on the view that everything is in constant flux, a person is shaped by outside world, an individual is a social construct and that an individual just do not get to be a single consistent somebody (Anderson, 1983). Even if a group is a social construct, identity theorists add that the individuals comprising a group classify themselves as belonging together in virtue of their shared characteristic (Gilbert, 2000: 18). These shared characteristics fulfill the desire for group distinctions, dignity and

peace within historically specific discourses (Herrigel, 1993: 371). Group identity is manifested in different molds, i.e., social identity, ethnic identity, national identity, regional identity and many more. Since social identity is related to a comparatively smaller groups, national identity has its own legal limitations, regional identity seems to have the potential to address to the quest of one identity of ASEAN. The association began with five countries and presently there are ten members (Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, Brunei, Singapore, Vietnam and Myanmar) and its doors are wide open to welcome many more. Hence only a broad spectrum based identity like regional identity would serve the purpose.

By implication of regional identity with ASEAN community, it is attempted here to redefine it and to enhance its stature. Hitherto it has been treated as a “Meso-scale” identity and has been located somewhere in the middle of local and national identity (Pohl, 2001: 12, 917-922). The kind of regional identity perceived for ASEAN is supranational in its nature because it seeks to invite adhesion from people representing an array of diversities, both intranational and international. Identity discourses relating to ASEAN and need to carefully consider the distinct pattern of historical evolution of these states. They were recipient of foreign influences from a very early time, accommodated several waves of migrations and were subjected to colonial occupation by French, British and Portuguese. Therefore, it is emphasized that a geo-historical, multi-layered approach is needed to determine and define regional identity (Passi, 2013: 1209). Thus history and geography of the region may be marked as the two pillars, over which the platform of regional identity is laid out. In fact it is felt that exploitation of history is often more crucial in the process of construction of regional identity (Tomany and Ward, 2000: 471-78). Regional identity construction is a process through which certain territorial, institutional and cultural features emerge to become an established part of social consciousness.

To produce social consciousness at regional level, it is required to figure out commonalities and authenticate them as symbols which bear uniform meaning across the region. Cha-am/Hua Hin Declaration as the Roadmap for ASEAN community aims to promote common values in the spirit of unity in diversity at all levels (Clause E.42). In carving out a regional identity for ASEAN, ethnic and other types of group identities become irrelevant because this does not have to be an intermediary identity. Cultural identity seems to be the most pertinent one to the context and perspective of ASEAN vision of one identity. Finding commonalities in the present state of affairs in Southeast Asia would be an arduous task, as the political system followed by them range from sultanate (Brunei) to communists regimes, religion followed range from Buddhist to Islam and the member states are at different levels of modernization. Culture as a ‘historical reservoir’ (Nicola, 2005: 72), could provide resources to develop a mechanism for common identity. Culture has two significant aspects which distinguish it from other bases of identity. One is that culture is a human construct as French philosopher Vico observes, men make their own history what they know is what they have made. Men are not only creators but participants, culture is not extraneous to them but it is within them. It is a system of beliefs and practices in terms of which human beings understand, regulate and structure their lives (Parekh, 2006: 143). Moreover, culture is more impressive as a collective expression. The other significant aspect as Gramsci has noted that it operates through ‘consent’ and not through domination (1971: 324). Individuals cherish culture as their inheritance, feel responsible for its enrichment and feel committed to preserve, it for their future generations, all this without interference of state or any kind of coercive forces. This element of voluntarily is vital for success of ASEAN identity, because for all practical purposes it is going to be an ‘imaginary identity’ which might not have any legal status. Even more, cultural identity

conceptualization has provision of generous sets of parameters, which provide more avenues for inclusion than exclusion.

Buddhism has been a dominant force in cultural life of Southeast Asia, which is reflected in the tangible and intangible heritage of this region. Even at present five member states of ASEAN may be counted as almost exclusively Buddhist, i.e., Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar and Thailand, status of Singapore is not clear as it is a truly multicultural city state and rest of the four countries have also been in the sphere of Buddhist influence at some point of history. In Indonesia, where Islam is the popular religion, Borobudur is the largest and one of the most magnificent Buddhist structure, and the earliest Sanskrit inscription belonging to 4-5th c. A.D., outside of India is found in Malaysia (Allen, 1986-7: 35-57). Discovery of etched carnelian beads of Indian origin from Philippine sites suggest but it was part of Indo-pacific trade network and in all probability was visited by Buddhist traders (Glover, 1989).

History of Southeast Asia indicates that Indian religions Buddhism and Brahmanism played an important role in state formation, cultural and material development of the region. In the middle of the twentieth century this impression was so intense that it was denoted in terms of “Indianization of Southeast Asia (Majumdar, 1944), “intense Indian grip”, (Wales, 1951) and ‘Profound cultural influence’” (Le May, 1954). These strong worded expression immediately evoked reactions (Van Leur, 1955: 92-98). But scientifically proven archaeological discoveries had reaffirmed that Buddhism had been a popular religion and it is still. Brahmanism text like Arthashastra and Ramayan along with Buddhist Jatakas and Pāli texts from Sri Lanka have a common appellation *Suvarnabhumi* to devote to Southeast Asia. Southeast Asian tradition fondly refer to the tales of Brahman Kaundinya and Buddhist prince Sudhana and other Indian immigrants who contributed greatly in political and cultural life of the region. Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand were part of Indianized states of Funan and Champa in 3rd – 4th CE. The Khmer empire that ruled in Cambodia from 9th to 15th c. CE. was founded by the king bearing Indian name Jayavarman-II. Indonesia acquainted itself with Buddhism in 4th c. CE, through traders and missionaries. In the 7th c. CE, it was part of the Srivijaya kingdom and it was ruled by the Buddhist Sailendra dynasty during 8th to 10th c. CE. who commissioned the famous Borobudur temple. Early civilizations in Myanmar, Pyu and Mon were inspired by Buddhism and the later Pagan Empire (12th – 13th c. CE.) celebrated Buddhism in a big way and its edifices are still intact. Malaysia was also part of Srivijaya Empire. Buddhism pervades throughout ASEAN territory and its tracts are obviously still visible in the states where other religions hold hegemony and in the rest of the states that are Buddhist to their core. Therefore, it is completely justified to locate ‘one identity’ of ASEAN in Buddhist context, which may be amenable and agreeable to all.

ASEAN community blueprint includes a clause (E.2) regarding ‘preservation and promotion of ASEAN cultural heritage to ensure its continuity to enhance awareness and understanding of the people about the unique history of the region.’ The action plan includes documentation of heritage sites, their protection and promotion of tourism. It is proposed here that the first step towards the attainment of goal of one identity would be to develop an integrated Buddhist circuit, linking all the major and minor Buddhist sites scattered in ASEAN countries. Indian government has successfully adopted this scheme. A Buddhist circuit, namely *Baudha paripath* links all the four places related to the important events of life of Buddha, i.e., Lumbini, Sarnath, Bodhagaya and Kasinagar. Government of Nepal has collaborated in this venture as birth place of Buddha lies in Nepal. ASEAN countries are rich in Buddhist heritage. Most importantly Buddhism is a living tradition at almost all Buddhist sites. This is a major drawback faced by later Buddhist sites in India despite their sculptural

and architectural wealth like Ratnagiri, Udayagiri and Lalitgiri sites of Odisha and some other sites in Gujarat state. These places do not have Buddha's footsteps, therefore are unable to attract tourists; but it is actually because these are abandoned sites. With high percentage of practicing Buddhists sites could be enlivened with virtual performance, enabling visitors to have a better understanding and insight into their shared cultural heritage.



There are two options available for planning this ASEAN integrated Buddhist circuit. Revival of the route traversed by two Chinese travelers like Faxian and I-Tsing in 4th and 7th centuries respectively. Another is the revival of ancient maritime silk route. Bagan in Myanmar may become the point of departure for this Buddhist circuit. Bagan is situated on the banks of river Irrawaddy. It was a flourishing Buddhist town during 11th – 13th c. CE. Around 10,000 Buddhist temples, Viharas and Pagodas were built during this period. Out of them, 2200 are still there in very good states of preservation. This lesser known site is considered among the three best sites with Borobudur and Angkorwat.

Ayutthaya, Thailand could be the next stop over. North of Bangkok, Ayutthaya was the capital of the ancient kingdom of Siam between 1351-1767 CE. The place is characterized by the remains of sprawling monasteries and Buddha sculptures. It has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage site.



Sukhothai is located in North Central Thailand and was the first capital of kingdom of Siam in 13th c. CE. It has been developed as an historical park. Borobudur, Java is located in Megelang province of Central Java. It is a massive Mahayana structure concentrated by Sailendra Kings in 9th c. CE.

It is concluded that this Buddhist circuit will greatly help in realizing the national motto of Indonesia 'Bhinneka Twnggal Ika' (Unity in Diversity) could become a reality of ASEAN.

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