

GOVERNMENT OF INDIA  
MINISTRY OF CULTURE  
**LOK SABHA**  
**UNSTARRED QUESTION NO.4104**  
TO BE ANSWERED ON 18.08.2025

**CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS BONDS WITH SOUTH-EAST ASIAN COUNTRIES**

4104. Shri Anil Yeshwant Desai:

Will the Minister of Culture be pleased to state:

- (a) whether it is a fact that a number of our old religious or historical books describes our rich century old cultural and religious ties with some South-east Asian countries like Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam etc.;
- (b) if so, the details of the reference thereof; and
- (c) whether the Government has made any diplomatic efforts to re-claim our cultural ties with them and to enhance people to people relations and bonding for friendship with the people and if so, the details thereof?

**ANSWER**

MINISTER OF CULTURE AND TOURISM  
(SHRI GAJENDRA SINGH SHEKHAWAT)

- (a) Various ancient religious and historical texts and sources, which are part of Ministry of Culture's archival and research collections, contain numerous references to India's enduring cultural and religious linkages with South-East Asian countries such as Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam. These connections span over centuries and are evidenced through the spread of Indian philosophical systems, religious practices (especially Hinduism and Buddhism), epics, temple architecture, iconography, and performing arts across the region.

Religious and spiritual works of ancient and medieval India, especially the Ramayana, had extensive influence on the culture of South East Asia and Far East. In the medieval period, India and the countries of South East Asia maintained maritime relations and in many countries of South East Asia even today one can find the influence of Indian culture. Further,

Buddhism, which was born in India had an absolute influence on the culture of almost all the South East Asian countries. The Indian artistic style, especially from the Gupta Empire period influenced architecture and art. Angkor Wat temple complex in Cambodia is a prime example of Indian influence on Southeast Asian architecture and art.

(b) Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), as a premier research and documentation institution under the Ministry of Culture, has undertaken detailed studies, exhibitions, and publications highlighting these cultural exchanges. Notable references include:

- **Epigraphic records and Sanskrit inscriptions** in Cambodia and Indonesia, which are studied and preserved by this Institution's **Kalā Kośa Division**.
- Research on the **Ramayana tradition in South-East Asia**, including variants found in Thailand, Indonesia (Kakawin Ramayana), Cambodia (Reamker), and Laos.
- The **documentation of iconographic and architectural similarities** between Indian temples and monuments in countries like Cambodia (Angkor Wat), Indonesia (Borobudur and Prambanan), and Vietnam (My Son).
- Archival materials and rare manuscripts from IGNCA's repositories trace ancient maritime and cultural exchanges.

Sahitya Akademi, as an India's premier literary institution working under the Ministry of Culture, has published the Valmiki Ramayana in Thai language as Ramakien with changes to suit local cultural milieu. Same was published in Sanskrit as Sri Ramakriti Mahakvya by Satya Vrat Shastri and Sahitya Akademi published Tamil translation of the book, Sri Ramakirthi Maha Kaaviyam, translated by Rajalakshmi Srinivasan. Apart from that, the influence of the Ramayana in those cultures can be gleaned from the following books published by Sahitya Akademi:

- The Ramayana Traditions in Asia edited by Dr V. Raghavan
- Asian Variations in Ramayana edited by Dr K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar
- A Critical Inventory of Ramayana Studies in the World, Vol 1 & 2, edited by K. Krishnamoorthy
- Ramayana in South East Asia, Vol. 1 & 2, edited by Dr Satya Vrat Shastri

The Ramayana Traditions in Asia throws light on how deep Ramayana has influenced the cultures of South East Asia.

The Cholas, especially Rajendra Chola I conquered most of the regions of the far east and due to his influence, the philosophy of Saiva Siddhanta entered those countries. He also maintained maritime trade relations with these countries.

That is the reason names of many Hindu gods find place in these countries.

Religious texts and epigraphic evidence highlight the deep religious and cultural connections between India and Southeast Asia. For instance, the *Dipavamsa* records the transmission of Buddhism from India to Sri Lanka, facilitated by Sanghamitta and Mahendra. Inscriptions such as the Veal Kantel inscription from Cambodia further reflect this cultural diffusion; it documents that a Khmer king installed a *linga* named Tribhuvaneshvara and offered the *Ramayana* and the *Puranas* to temple priests for recitation, indicating the presence and reverence of Indian epics in the region. Similarly, the Yupa inscriptions of King Mulavarman in Indonesia detail Vedic and Puranic rituals, demonstrating the assimilation of Indian religious practices. Additionally, the Devanika inscription at Vat Phou in Laos provides the earliest known reference to the creation of Kurukshetra as *Dharmakshetra* beyond the Indian subcontinent. This inscription is particularly noteworthy as it contains verses that align with the *Kurukshetra Mahatmya* section of the *Mahabharata*.

(c) IGNCA has actively contributed to the Government's broader diplomatic and cultural initiatives to **revive and strengthen India's civilization ties with South-East Asia** through:

- Organizing **international seminars, cultural exhibitions, and academic conferences** on Indo-Southeast Asian heritage and religious linkages.
- Collaborative projects and academic exchanges with cultural institutions in Southeast Asian countries.
- Participation in the **Festival of India** and **Ramayana Festivals** abroad by curating exhibitions and sending scholars or performers.
- The **Cultural Informatics Lab** at IGNCA has also digitized and created virtual exhibitions showcasing Indo-ASEAN cultural links, aiding in wider dissemination and public engagement.

- Such activities directly contribute to fostering **people-to-people contacts**, scholarly collaboration, and cultural diplomacy in alignment with India's **Act East Policy**. Key Southeast Asia-Focused Initiatives are at **Annexure I**.

Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has under taken the conservation and restoration works with the collaboration of Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), in the following countries :

- My Son Temple and Nehan Tower-Vietnam.
- Vat Phou Temple- Laos
- Earthquake Damaged Temples and Pagodas, Bagan- Myanmar
- Preah Vihear and Ta Prohm- Cambodia
- Frida Mosque, Male - Maldives

The *Brihattar Bharat* policy, envisioned by the Government, highlights India's cultural influence on Southeast Asia by tracing shared heritage through historical connections. This influence is evident in the vast number of Sanskrit inscriptions found across Southeast Asia, which reflect Indian culture, religion, art, and traditions. However, many of these inscriptions remain unexplored.

In alignment with this vision, the Department of Palaeography, Epigraphy & Numismatics has launched a project titled *Sanskrit and Pali Inscriptions of Southeast Asia*. The project aims to systematically document, analyze, and interpret these inscriptions, showcasing India's cultural ties with the region. With proper funding, this initiative has the potential to significantly deepen our understanding of India's historical connections with Southeast Asia. As part of this effort, the Department also organized an international seminar, *Engraved in Stone and Metal: Indian Imprints on Southeast Asian Inscriptions and Coins*, held from 18th to 23rd November 2024 at the Indian Institute of Heritage, Noida. The seminar brought together leading scholars from India and Thailand in the fields of Epigraphy and Numismatics. It marked a major academic event, being one of the first international gatherings focused exclusively on Southeast Asian epigraphy and coinage.

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**ANNEXURE REFERRED TO IN REPLY TO PART (C) OF LOK SAHBA UNSTARRED QUESITON No. 4104 FOR 18.08.2025 REGARDING “CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS BONDS WITH SOUTH-EAST ASIAN COUNTRIES”**

**ANNEXURE I**

**Key Southeast Asia–Focused Initiatives**

S.No	Title/Project/Activity	Country/Region Focus	Description
1.	<b>International Conference on Ramayana Traditions in South-East Asia</b>	Multi-country (Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos)	IGNCA organized academic seminars and discussions on the spread, adaptation, and influence of the Ramayana in Southeast Asian cultures.
2.	<b>Exhibition on "Ramayana in Southeast Asia"</b>	ASEAN Countries	A curated visual and textual exhibition depicting local Ramayana adaptations like <i>Reamker</i> (Cambodia), <i>Kakawin Ramayana</i> (Indonesia), and <i>Ramakien</i> (Thailand).
3.	<b>Documentation of Indian Architectural Influence in Southeast Asia</b>	Cambodia, Indonesia, Vietnam	IGNCA has supported photographic documentation and scholarly study of sites such as Angkor Wat, Borobudur, and My Son temples, focusing on Indic iconography and sacred architecture.

4.	<b>Digitization of Southeast Asian manuscripts and epigraphy</b>	Various	Through Kalāsampadā and the Cultural Informatics Lab, IGNCA has digitized inscriptions and texts linked to Indian traditions preserved in Southeast Asia.
5.	<b>Conference on Shared Buddhist Heritage</b> (in collaboration with ICCR and IBC)	Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam	IGNCA co-organized thematic panels and exhibitions on early Buddhist transmission from India to Southeast Asia.
6.	<b>Participation in ASEAN-India Cultural Exchange Programmes</b>	ASEAN countries	IGNCA scholars and artists have participated in festivals, exhibitions, and cultural missions under MEA-MoC collaboration.
7.	<b>Publication: "Cultural Interface of India with Southeast Asia"</b>	Pan-ASEAN	A publication (print and digital) covering trade, religion, maritime links, and shared iconography between India and Southeast Asia.
8.	<b>Bilateral MoUs and Academic Collaboration</b>	Indonesia, Cambodia	IGNCA has initiated or participated in institutional partnerships to promote Indo-ASEAN cultural research and training.

9.	<b>India-ASEAN Virtual Museum (under discussion/proposal stage)</b>	Digital Project	IGNCA is exploring a collaborative virtual museum model to showcase shared cultural heritage with Southeast Asian nations.
10.	<b>Exhibition support for ‘Festival of India’ abroad</b>	Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam	IGNCA has curated thematic content and lent archival materials for cultural diplomacy events organized by the Ministry of Culture.

These initiatives reflect IGNCA’s integral role in **academic, archival, and cultural diplomacy efforts** to revive and promote India’s deep-rooted civilizational connections with Southeast Asia.