

## The imagination of Southeast Asia in Post-independent Bengali Travel Writings: A Study of Nimai Bhattacharya's *Ekchakkar Dakkhin Purba Asia*

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### Abstract:

In the post-independence period, Bengali travel writings about Southeast Asia created a new imagination of Southeast Asia for Bengalis. This imagination involves an insightful understanding of the various politics and relations between Bengal and Southeast Asia. Both the regions have a long history of exchanges. Their connection became more visible when people travelled from Bengal to Southeast Asia for regular economic, political, and cultural reasons after independence. During colonial rule, interest in Southeast Asia began to grow among the Bengalis. Nationalist historians and Bengali intellectuals have repeatedly sought to present the region as part of "Greater India". However, this relationship between Bengal and Southeast Asia changed radically after independence. Nehru's enthusiasm for this part of Asia has been palpable since independence and it was followed by an increase in travels to Southeast Asia by Indian politicians and bureaucrats. This re-imagination of Southeast Asia through travel writing in a post-independence context constitutes a major topic of discussion in this paper. In addition, this paper undertakes a comparative study of the approach taken by the Bengalis towards Southeast Asia at two different times. Through a study of Nimai Bhattacharya's *Ekchakkar Dakkhin Purba Asia* (1993), it tries to initiate a new South-South dialogue between Bengal and Southeast Asia and explores the changed dimensions of their relation.

**Keywords:** Travel Writing, Southeast Asia, Greater India, ASEAN, Look East Policy

Travel and travel writing have occupied an important place since the beginning of human history and have always fascinated people. Although travel writing as a literary genre existed in literature for a long time, it was initially regarded as a popular pastime subject by the readers and not as a subject of serious discussion. However, this attitude towards travel literature has changed in the past few centuries with the advent of new approaches, such as - such as - colonial discourse, postcolonial writing etc. This marginalized position of travel

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literature within the Indian literary discourse began to change from the nineteenth century onwards. Satchidananda Mohanty in his introduction of the book *Travel Writing and the Empire* has aptly said that such approaches in literature brought a new dimension and a new way of understanding of the literary texts and the politics of representation has also changed (Mohanty 1). It is noteworthy, that the advent of large empires, in the early nineteenth century in various parts of the world made travel popular. Travelling to new colonies was a major means of gaining a better understanding of the inhabitants of that land. Consequently, travel literature played a significant role in the dissemination of knowledge about other people and their culture. Mohanty further added:

With the advent of colonial modernity in the nineteenth century in India, we see a form of colonial travel within India as a geographical space. The element of keenness and curiosity evidenced by those who took the early Indian railways, for instance, can be seen in early travelogues in the various Indian languages. There is much of local colour here, aside from the discovery of new lands and regions. But there is also the self's encounter with the mighty power of the British Empire. (Mohanty 2)

Travel Accounts occupy a special place in Indian History. In the twentieth century, travel took place in various ways such as migration, exile, and exodus etc. and many travel writings have been written in Bengali and these travel writings were not just geographical descriptions, local colours, depictions of place or manners and ethics. These travel accounts may be made for religious / pilgrimage or commercial purposes but they are full of the descriptions of the new lands and cultures they encountered. Historians have heavily relied on these travelogues to compose ancient histories of India. How the history of India has been written, especially with the help of the travelogues, proves the reliability of travelogues as a source for writing history. Through these travelogues, Bengalis sought to discover the antiquity of Indian civilization and raised questions about the idea of the orient in the writings of European scholars. But this was a little different when it came to writing history for Southeast Asia. From the 19th century onwards, the Bengali public had a special interest in Southeast Asia. With the emergence of nationalist thinking, acquiring knowledge and promulgating information about the others became an integral part of the agenda of Bengali nationalists. In addition to being educated in English, reading and practising various subjects in leisure became a special pastime habit for the Bengalis. As a result, along with the study of

various subjects, the formation of a comprehensive idea about one's own country and at the same time determining the position of one's neighbour became a special topic of discussion for the Bengalis.

In the wake of rising anti-imperialist consciousness in the Indian sphere, a more influential Asia-discourse emerged in the 1920s, imagining India as a colonial power and Southeast Asia as their colony. Part of this Asia discourse project was to get to know and understand the long-standing traditions of the East and to propagate the vastness of Indian civilization. In this context, Gandhi's remark in the concluding session of the *Inter-Asian Relations Conference* is particularly relevant. As Gandhi aptly puts it:

What I want you to understand is the message of Asia. It is not to be learned through the Western spectacles or by imitating the atom bomb. If you want to give a message to the West, it must be the message of love and the message of truth... I am certain that if all of you put your hearts together - not merely heads - to understand the secret of the message these wise men of the East have left to us, and if we become worthy of that great message, the conquest of the West will be completed. This conquest will be loved by the West... It is up to you to tell the world of its wickedness and sin - that is the heritage of your teachers and my teachers have taught Asia. (Gandhi 116)

The same words that Mahatma Gandhi spoke about the role of Asia and the message that he tried to convey, were echoed in the works of Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore asserts the same concept of Asia in his various writings and speeches. As Tagore wrote in his essay *Brihattara Bharat*, "it should be the historical mission of all Indians to project the greatness of the nation to the world and to discover the soul of the country in a wider arena because limited aspirations bring limited gains" (Tagore 301).

At the same time, nationalist thinkers were particularly interested in proving the antiquity of Indian civilization beyond the confines of European thought. Even Acharya Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay, in his essay *Hindu Sabhyatar Pattan*, spoke in favour of the antiquity of Hindu civilization. He mentioned in his essay that the Hindu civilization of India is the oldest and the Aryans founded this civilization (Chatterjee 1). In another essay in the book *Bharat Sasngskriti(1944)*, Suniti Kumar Chatterjee mentioned that India's imagination of Southeast has remained incomplete without realizing the extent of India's cultural conquest throughout Southeast Asia since ancient times (Chatterjee 88). Bengali nationalist historians

worked hard to establish this antiquity of Indian civilization and they engaged themselves in writing a new history of India. In this context, the concept of *Greater India* should be mentioned here.

The members of the *Greater India Society* were undoubtedly inspired by Tagore's idea of Asia. *Greater India* arose from within the framework of an Orientalist scholarship dealing with the question of Hindu and Buddhist influence in Southeast Asia. It originated from the idea of some Western researchers and historians at the beginning of the last century and was later chosen by Indian scholars. With this idea of a Greater India in mind, they later formed a separate society called *Greater India* which was established in 1926. Talking about where this idea of Greater India first originated, Jolita Zebarskaite said in her article that the term first originated from a conference in Paris. She commented that Hemendranath Ghosh was the first to mention this idea while writing in *The Modern Review* about the proceedings of the reunion party of the Hindustani Association of Paris (Zebarskaite 265). Although, *Greater India* began its organizational and institutional triumph in Calcutta in the 1920s, long before that the Bengalis began to write about it in various periodicals. Satish Chandra Mukherjee, leading Bengali educators of 1890s, was the first to speak out on the subject. He started publishing an English monthly magazine from 1897, where he started criticizing the colonial education system as well as promoting the superiority of Indian religion and philosophy. The magazine sought to awaken nationalist consciousness and to build a sense of unity among Indians in different provinces. Thus, from the middle of the nineteenth century, references to other Asian states and regions took place in the Bengali public sphere. Along with the concept of Greater India, the issue of constructing an Indian identity, devoid of contemporary colonial hegemony, rose to prominence.

The promotion of the antiquity of Hindu Civilisation helped the nationalist thinkers to form a movement against the one-sided prejudices of European Scholar. One thing of note here is, the Bengali scholars who promoted the idea of a Greater India were themselves educated by European Scholars. As a result, Bengali historians under the tutelage of European ideas sought to present Southeast Asia as a colony of India. This is how Bengali historians of the time like Ramesh Chandra Majumdar or Radhakumud Mukherjee imagined Southeast Asia in their respective books. In their books they sort of advocated for the *Indianization* of Southeast Asia and this idea of *Indianization*<sup>1</sup> was further developed by the members of Bengal National College and National council for education. These 20<sup>th</sup>-century

history books asserted clearly that Southeast Asia was largely under the Hindu kings of India and had no separate culture of its own. According to these nationalist historians, Indian culture had a major influence over Southeast Asian culture. In *Greater India Society*, historians and philologists sought to popularize the idea of a Greater India. Even, in the twentieth century, an educational mission was conducted through Bengali periodicals for creating awareness among the conscious Bengalis about the diversity and generality of Asia which could bind them together against colonialism. A detailed discussion of the different countries of Asia, their cultures, people and cities, etc., were presented in these periodicals through travel narratives. Images of places of tourist and religious interest, architectural monuments were used to attract readers of all ages, compared to serious academic journals in English. In this context, Sarvani Gooptu reminds:

In all the writing a similarity or dissimilarity with Indian culture and history was defined to retain the interest of the reader. Another important and common idiom in all the writing was the expression of commonality of history and culture of the Asian country and the outright difference with western countries. This thread of nationalistic and patriotic sentiment was more Asian than Indian and that is what made these writings unique at a time when Indian nationalism itself was in its formative stage. (Gooptu 401)

The main objective of the intellectuals of that time was to explore cultural pre-eminence, which India established over other Asian countries. They opined for the replication of this cultural pre-eminence at present where the political scenario of the twentieth century will be disregarded and colonialism will be replaced by the active exchanges between India and other Asian countries. For this exchange and to discover the spirit of India beyond the regional boundaries, Bengalis started travelling to different countries from the twentieth century. In this context, Rabindranath Tagore can be particularly remembered. Tagore travelled to almost all parts of the world and talked to people about their culture and in his writings, he discussed those experiences to educate his countrymen. Various letters written by Rabindranath can be mentioned in this context. Rabindranath also wrote extensively on Southeast Asia. However, the complete account of Rabindranath's trip to Southeast Asia was recorded by Acharya Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay. In *Rabindrasangame Dwipamay Bharat O Shyamdesh*(1960) Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay presented to the reader a diary of Rabindranath's travels to

various countries throughout Southeast Asia. Apart from Rabindranath and Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay, several Bengalis at that time wrote travelogues about Southeast Asia. Notable among these travelogues were – Bimal Mukherjee's *Du Chakay Duniya* (1986), Ramnath Biswas's *Sarba Swadhin Shyam* (1949), Kalachand Dalal's *Brahmaprabasir Patra* (1909), Ramnath Biswas's *Malayasia Bhraman*(1949), Sudhangshu Bimal Mukhopadhyay's *Mandalayer Katha* (1951) etc. Apart from it, many travel writings on Southeast Asia can be found in various periodicals of that time such as *Prabasi*, *Manasi*, *Bhratabarsa*, *Basumati*, *Navya Bharat* and others. These travelogues cover a wide range of topics. Some have described interesting places as well as customs, dress and culture have also been described, which the authors think may be of interest to their readers. Most travel writings are general travel writings where the author aims to bring knowledge to readers from different lands that may not be accessible to many. Another reason for the enthusiasm among Bengalis to travel to Southeast Asia was, crossing the sea here would not have earned them the so-called untouchable tag. A closer look at the travelogues in Bengali periodicals reveals another interesting trend. When various countries in Southeast Asia are described, especially when cultural patterns or styles are praised, it is mainly highlighted as a contribution to Indian civilization. Sometimes there are free comparisons to show the difference and at other times the similarities are highlighted to differentiate Asians from Europeans. In this context Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta wrote quite evocatively:

Travel writing has quite often been linked with the colonising imperialist gaze but that I think is just one kind of travel writing. In the context of Bangla travelogues there is often a point of view on the part of the traveller that is superior, sometimes assimilative, as in the case of Southeast Asia, and sometimes distancing, in case of communities in the mountainous regions of the Himalayas or the Far East. (Dasgupta 10)

However, it is not difficult to understand that during the colonial period and the nationalist movement, the Bengali imagination about Southeast Asia was a conscious effort of nationalist historians and scholars. Imagining Southeast Asia through travel writings was part of their project to map the Greater India. However, there was a detrimental aspect to imagining Southeast Asia as a part of the Greater India. This idea of Greater India denied the distinct rich history of Southeast Asia and sought to present Southeast as a colony. This nationalist historiography of India had a deep purpose. They incorporated Southeast Asia into

national history as part of India, intending to prove themselves older than Western civilization. The Bengali travel writings on Southeast Asia in the pre-independence period mainly aided the project of the Bengali nationalist scholars. After India's independence in 1947, the situation changed completely. India's relations with Southeast Asia achieved a new dimension. It was during this time that various countries in Southeast Asia gained independence from long-standing colonial rule.

In the post-independence scenario, India attached the utmost importance in rekindling relations with Southeast Asia. Despite its longstanding ties, India attached special importance to strengthening diplomatic relations with Southeast Asia. India's foreign policy has been directed to respect its legitimate aspirations to emerge as a major player in South Asia and the world. History reveals that India and Southeast Asia have a long account of mutual exchanges and it also reveals that India's cultural ties with Southeast Asia developed mainly through trade and financial exchange. Numerous traces are found all over Southeast Asia of this ancient relationship. Indian philosophy, culture, religion, Buddhism, art and architecture, language, had a lasting impact on countries of Southeast Asia. As a result of the emergence of these countries as modern countries, these ancient relations came alive and became stronger. From the very beginning, India felt the need to establish closer ties with Southeast Asia and prevent the domination of the region by Western powers. Whether it is combat against colonial power or active support for India's independence movement, Southeast Asia has always played an active role as its closest neighbors.

In the post-independence period, India was the first to give special importance to Southeast Asia in determining its foreign policy. The question of sovereignty and security of the newly formed India was directly related to Southeast Asia. As Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, said, India was the gateway between West and Southeast Asia and so inevitably the independence and security of Southeast Asia helped strengthen India's independence and security. Any sort of political upheavals in Southeast Asia was a potential threat to India. It was through this understanding, that India played an active role in the fight against various political movements in Southeast Asia such as Dutch and Indonesia conflict. The post-cold war realities have prompted India and the Southeast to strengthen strong economic and security ties. Various policies and initiatives such as ASEAN<sup>2</sup> and Look East Policy<sup>3</sup> by the government of India was taken to maintain good relations with various countries in Southeast Asia. But not only this, the large number of Indian migrant workers

working in Southeast Asia and their interest led the government to develop relations with Southeast Asia. This undoubtedly had an impact on India's relations with these countries. To further this argument on why Southeast Asia holds an important place in India's foreign policy, scholars have pointed out some reasons. P Tepekrovi Kiso in his thesis has pointed out that the nationalist leadership and the first generation of post-independence leaders in India took special initiatives and plans for Southeast Asia even before independence. Even before the formal declaration of independence, the interim government convened the first Asian Relations Conference<sup>4</sup> in March 1947 and took steps to forging a strategic relationship with Southeast Asia. Even within two years of independence, the Indian government convened an international conference in Indonesia in 1949 to expand political ties with Southeast Asia (Kiso 75). Even Nehru himself, speaking at the Asian Relations Conference on Southeast Asia in Delhi, explained exactly how India would approach its neighbours in the future. He said in his speech that in the past, Indian culture flowed to all the countries of Southeast Asia and Central Asia and the relationship between them developed in different ways. He further emphasized in rekindling of closer organization among these countries in near future.

However, the strategic importance of Southeast Asia in India was evident even before the transfer of power from the British to India. The events of World War II and Japanese invasions through Southeast Asia led India to secure its borders on the east. Furthermore, India also took a policy to ally with Southeast Asia. The rise of China as a new power in Asia also forced India to adopt a new foreign policy in Southeast Asia. India realized long ago that the Sino-India relationship would not be the same shortly. Even in 1950, during the heyday of India-China relations, India was aware of the fact that diplomatic relations with China would not last long. Besides, due to the dominance of communist power in China, India had shown special interest in Southeast Asia at that time. Also, the presence of people of Indian descent in Southeast Asian countries, mainly Burma, Malaysia and Singapore, played a significant role in India's policy towards Southeast Asia. However, the success of Indian foreign policy in Southeast Asia in the mid-1950s led to a reluctance on the part of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs in the region. A sense of neglect aroused from the part of India about Southeast Asia. It was on this occasion that China strengthened its diplomatic and trade relations with Southeast Asia. However, at the first Afro-Asian Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955, India strongly urged China to integrate with the international community

in the interest of Asian integration and requested that China be considered more of a nationalist country than a communist revolutionary power (Muni 5).

In the 1950s, India focused on developing its internal infrastructure, so from the outset, India wanted to maintain peace and good relations with its neighbours, instead of going into conflict with them. Even India signed *Panchsheel Agreement*<sup>5</sup> with China in 1955. But India's peace efforts did not succeed, as clashes with Pakistan and China pushed India away from Southeast Asia. Speaking in this context Sreya Maitra Roychoudhury in her article has pointed out that-

.....the end of 1950s saw the brewing of troubles with Pakistan and China. The monumental defeat at the hands of the Chinese Army in 1962 and military stalemate with Pakistan in 1965 unsettled India's security calculations. Moreover, at the domestic level, India veered to a policy of 'import-substituting industrialization' and the state-controlled the 'commanding heights of the economy'. Thus, the exigencies of the international and internal environment were such that India did not Come much in contact with Southeast Asia. (Roychoudhury 26)

Harping on the issues of conflict with Pakistan and China, created a certain kind of distance was created between India and Southeast Asia. However, post-independent diplomatic relations or exchanges between India and Southeast Asia have never been completely disrupted. Numerous travel writings about Southeast Asia written at that time bear witness of this exchange. In the post-independence period, the Bengalis in particular re-imagined Southeast Asia in a new form. Post-independent Bengali Travel writings on Southeast problematizes this imagination of Southeast Asia. The study of post-independence Bengali travel writing on Southeast Asia claimed an important place and highlighted the contribution of Indian foreign policy in shaping this imagination. The political ups and downs that began in the whole of South and Southeast Asia after the Second World War had a profound effect on the Bengali people. Impressions from the colonial past formed a revisionist investigation of imperialist enterprise which creates the structure of survival. Tutun Mukherjee has aptly pointed out:

Though the era of high nineteenth-century imperialism ended after the Second World War, the reality of the imperial past and the historical experience of colonialism

remain vivid as the shared memory of the ruler and the ruled and colour their expression and perception of culture, ideology and politics. The appeal to the colonial past to interpret the postcolonial present is not just an expedient strategy. It constitutes a revisionist inquiry into the enterprise of the empire that created structures and institutions to perpetuate colonialism. (Mukherjee 63)

Whatever it is, the colonial mentality of India towards Southeast Asia is very much evident. Just like the British, India used to think of Southeast Asia as its colony, which reflected in the various travel writings of that time. But the post-independent situation was completely different. When India emerged as a new power, it raised security concerns among countries in the Southeast Asian region. This is mainly due to its geographical location and its population which has become a threat to the countries of Southeast Asia. Speaking about India's troubled relations with Southeast Asia, Mohamad Nasir Saludin cited the example of India's relations with Malaysia and Indonesia. He showed how India supported Malaysia in the conflict between Malaysia and Indonesia during the formation of Malaysia in 1963. Even then, Malaysia repaid its support to India on behalf of the federation by strongly supporting New Delhi on the China border. (Saludin 5) In the aftermath of the Cold War, India moved towards Southeast Asian countries to create a new equation in South Asia. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the simultaneous economic crisis forced India to think differently. India adopted a two-pronged strategy to gain a foothold in Southeast Asia. This led to closer contacts with ASEAN as well as it improved India's bilateral relations with Southeast Asia. India intended to develop a prosperous trade relationship with the Southeast Asian region. This new equation of relations with Southeast Asia later helped India formulate the Look East policy.

In the post-cold-war situation, it soon became necessary to enable a multilateral approach to establish strategic and closer political ties with ASEAN and to develop stronger economic ties with the region. India's *Look East Policy (1991)* was an attempt to carve out a place for India in the greater Asia-Pacific region. A close reading of India's diplomatic relations with Southeast Asia makes it clear that in the post-independence period, bilateral relations became more intense than ever. As a result, Indian travel to Southeast Asia was increased at that time. From the nationalization of Burma to the strengthening of diplomatic relations with Indonesia, many Indian diplomats travelled to Southeast Asia at that time.

Along with them, journalists can be mentioned here who went to Southeast Asia to cover this constantly changing political news. Many of these leaders, diplomats or journalists who were Bengalis wrote several travel writings about Southeast Asia that helped the Bengali mind to imagine Southeast Asia in post-independence context. In addition to political reasons, tourism from Southeast Asia, in particular, attracted Indians to travel to Southeast Asia. Due to which, numerous travel writings about Southeast Asia were published in various newspapers and magazines at that time. Nimai Bhattacharya's travel writing *Ekchakkar Dakkhin Purba Asia* (1993) is one such travel story that helped Bengalis to understand Southeast Asia in the post-independence period. Nimai Bhattacharya was a prominent journalist and writer. He was a brilliant name in the world of Delhi at that time. In his career, he came in contact with many political personalities and travelled around the country to cover the news. Nimai Bhattacharya's travel writing *Ekchakkar Dakkhin Purba Asia* (1993) discusses three regions in Southeast Asia, namely Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. The reason why Bengalis re-imagined Southeast Asia in the post-independence period can be understood by reading the preface of Nimai Bhattacharya's *Ekchakkar Dakkhin Purba Asia* (1993). In the introduction to the book, he explains how his vision remained westward as a result of colonialism, and the rise of Asian powers like China and Japan did not change his view during World War II. He further added that despite his interest in Southeast Asia, there was always a lack of enthusiasm, which created an ignorance in him about this region of Southeast Asia (Bhattacharya 11).

The importance of Southeast Asia in the post-independence period can be traced here in the words of Nimai Bhattacharya. An echo of this same concern can be heard in the words of a friend of the author, where he spoke of a change in the direction of travel from west to east. In his travelogue, Nimai Bhattacharya talks about the traditions and culture of Southeast Asia and their efforts to preserve them. At the same time, he reminded the history of the connection of Bengalis with South East Asia. In the Singapore chapter of his travel story, he repeatedly reminisced about the Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and Azad Hind Army. In this way, he wanted to remind the Bengalis who have forgotten their history. His travel account reveals how the Ramakrishna Mission in Singapore has been actively working and their contribution in organizing the Bengalis there. Regarding the Bengali population in Singapore, Bhattacharya talks about his conversation with Bengalis at the Ramakrishna Mission and how

he met a Bengali woman named Mira Chatterjee who was actively associated with the Azad Hind Army (Bhattacharya 30).

In this way, he sought to restore by reminding them of their ancient connection with Southeast, which had been quite stagnant since independence. It should be noted that India was formerly not welcomed by Southeast Asia in the post-independence period, but was viewed with suspicion and fear. Nimai Bhattacharya travelled to Southeast Asia on the eve of India's Look East policy. His informative travelogue about Southeast Asia was, in fact, an attempt to turn the Bengalis' sights from west to east. It should be noted that in this context, India was not first welcomed by Southeast Asia in the post-independence period, but was viewed with suspicion and fear. Speaking of Malaysia, the author again praised the way of life there, as well as the comparison of Kolkata with the cities there to explain exactly why we should follow Southeast Asia. He goes on to discuss in the Malaysia chapter how Indian merchants have been associated with Southeast Asia since ancient times due to trade. He also mentions how the Portuguese, Dutch and British later established their colonies in the Southeast and the internal exchanges that took place between these colonies during the colonial period are also discussed in Bhattacharya's travelogue. In his travelogue, Bhattacharya acknowledges the antiquity of Thai civilization. The pre-independence Bengali travelogues and writings of Bengali nationalist historians presented Thai civilization and culture as an extension of Indian civilization. But Bhattacharya claims in his travelogue that Thai civilization is about five lakh years old and that the inhabitants of the Saw Valley of Thailand lived long before the birth of Christ. The fertile land of this country was particularly favourable for habitation and attracted the people of the neighbouring country. Thus the kingdom of Subarnabhumi was established there (Bhattacharya 63).

He said more specifically that through Buddhism, Indians became acquainted with Thailand and their exchanges began. Drawing upon this argument, Nimai Bhattacharya, in his writings, refuted the nationalist narrative about Southeast Asia which have its root in colonial time. He further said that Indian culture has a lot in common with Thailand, but while acknowledging the contribution of Indian culture, he did not deny Thailand's own culture like his predecessors. On the contrary, they have strengthened the relationship by mentioning the regular cultural exchanges between them even after independence. In this way, *Ekchakkar Dakkhin Purba Asia* (1993) written by Nimai Bhattacharya presented a completely new

narrative about Southeast Asia to the Bengali readers and made a special contribution to the imagination of Southeast Asia in the post-independence period.

I would like to say in conclusion that the imagination of Southeast Asia in post-independence context was completely different from the representations of that region in the writings of Bengali nationalist historians and travel writings. The post-independence Bengali travel writings about Southeast Asia were an attempt by the Bengalis to create a new South-south dialogue with that region, which went on for a while in the two decades after independence. This idea of the Bengalis about Southeast Asia was an attempt to look at the region in a new direction by discarding all previous ideas. This is exactly what Nimai Bhattacharya's travel writing did, and the text has considerable relevance in post-independence Bengali imagination of Southeast Asia.

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<sup>1</sup> Indianization of Southeast Asia was propagated by Brahmin Scholars and it was widely accepted theory about Southeast Asia.

<sup>2</sup> The Association of Southeast Asian Nations is an organization consisting of ten countries in Southeast Asia, which promotes cooperation and supports socio-economic integration between its members and other Asian countries.

<sup>3</sup> Look East Policy is an attempt by the Indian Government to build greater economic and strategic ties with Southeast Asian countries to strengthen its position in this region.

<sup>4</sup> The first Asian Relations conference was held in 1947. The objectives of the conference were to encourage mutual communication and understanding between Asian countries.

<sup>5</sup> Panchasheel agreement was signed between Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and the first Chinese Prime Minister, Chou En-Lai. The agreement was signed for the purpose of peaceful coexistence.