

Institute of Social and Cultural Studies (ISCS) Webinar
on 'Connect to Reconnect' - Chapter V Indo-Thai Conflux on 9 July
Remarks by Ambassador Suchitra Durai

Ambassador Wadhwa, former Secretary East, Ministry of External Affairs & former Ambassador of India to Thailand;

Ambassador Pattarat Hongtong, my counterpart;

Prof Surat Horachaikul, Director of India Studies Centre, Chulalongkorn University;

Prof Ishani Naskar of the Dept of International Relations, Jadavpur university;

Above all, Shri Arindam Mukherjee, Director, ISCS, the prime mover of this dialogue series;

Distinguished participants;

Good evening, Namaskar, Sawasdeekha

The story of India-Thailand relations is indeed that of mobility and connectivity.

As maritime neighbours there has been a long history of travel and connectivity between the two countries. So today I will touch upon three aspects of connectivity:

- The historical relationship
- People to People connectivity in the contemporary period
- Infrastructure and Digital connectivity

2. So, firstly the historical aspect although this is well known to my fellow discussants. India and Thailand established diplomatic relations in 1947 soon after India's independence, and next year we will be celebrating the 75th anniversary of our diplomatic relations. While our formal relationship is 74 years old, our bilateral relationship goes back to several millenia.

3. Our historical links span three areas: the religious links – Sona Thera and Uttama Thera are said to have brought Buddhism to Thailand in the 3rd BCE. Underlying Buddhism in Thailand is Brahmanism or Hinduism which manifests itself everywhere. There are the linguistic links – the Thai language,

though complex and tonal, incorporates both Pali and Sanskrit vocabulary; besides these two classical languages it also incorporates words from Bengali and Tamil. The Thai script is a derivation of the Pallava script. Thirdly, the cultural influence – seen in the shared epic Ramayana, known as Ramakien, the similarities between the khon dance and Bharatanatyam and Kathakali. The festivals of Songkran (similar to Holi) and Loy Krathong, which takes place usually two weeks after Deepavali, which is similar to Bali yatra of Odisha. Why, the very concept of kingship – a mix of the Buddhist concept of dharmaraja and the Hindu concept of devaraja shows Indian influence including, of course, the Chakri dynasty's title of Rama (the ideal king). So, Jambudwepea and Suvarnabhumi's association are long-standing.

4. The southern, eastern and western coasts of India were connected to the Southeast Asia thousands of years ago through the maritime route. Trading communities from the ancient Tamil kingdoms had settled along the Andaman sea coast of Thailand – the evidence is there in the stone inscriptions and the huge statue of Vishnu in the Andaman coastal town of Takuapa which is sculpted in the southern style. An Indian community flourished in the great entrepot of Ayuthaya in the 17th century. One can also notice the architectural influences of the Stupa style of India on the Chedi of Nakhon Pathom and the dharma chakras of the Dvaravati period.

People to People Connectivity

5. I have already covered the historical aspects. In the contemporary period, we have had regular political engagement with exchanges of PM-level almost annually until 2019. The Thai royal family has had an abiding interest in India. HRH Princess Mahachakri Sirindhorn, a scholar of Sanskrit visited India for the 20th time in February 2020. So did HRH Princess Chulaborn. Our defence and security relationship is robust; we have signed an MoU on defence cooperation in 2012 – this provides the framework. All the three arms of our defence forces engage through exchanges of visits, staff talks, training and by participating in joint exercises. Since 2019, we also participate in an annual trilateral exercise with Singapore. We have two Joint Task Forces on security related issues. Our economic & commercial engagement is at the heart of our relationship: our bilateral trade in 2019 was over USD 12 billion; even in 2021, the first 5 months have seen good recovery and now stand at USD 6 billion. Bilateral investment from both sides average between USD 50-70 m on an annual basis. Till the pandemic hit us, we had 300 flights on a weekly basis connecting 17 destinations in India with two destinations in Thailand. Businessmen & women, tourists, students were frequently travelling to each other's country. In 2019, 1.9 million Indians visited Thailand. Indians are high spenders and like to shop too. Cultural exchange is on-going. The Festival of

India in 2015 which brought several cultural troupes and exhibitions to Thailand was a big success. We also have groups of performing artists regularly participating in each other's festivals and events. There is a large Indian diaspora which serves as a bridge between the two countries.

6. An important aspect of P2P is educational exchange. We have around 500 students at any given time in Thailand studying at the Asian Institute of Technology or other Thai universities as well as young Indians coming to train at the swimming academies or at hospitality management institutes in Thailand. GoI offers around 75 different university level scholarships under the bilateral scheme as well as Mekong Ganga Cooperation. We also offer nearly 100 slots for training under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation programme. In addition in 2019, the Government of India launched the ASEAN India PHD fellowship scheme. Under this scheme for which USD 45 million has been allocated, 1000 slots have been offered to ASEAN countries in India's prestigious IITs. The fellowships are in cutting-edge areas of robotics, machine learning, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, targeted drugs – which is in harmony with Thailand's 4.0 policy. Generations of Thais have attended boarding schools in India particularly in Darjeeling and Mussoorie, some of them have also occupied high leadership positions. We also have a large number of self financing students from southern Thailand studying at AMU. On an average we have around 5,000 Thais studying in India. We are fortunate that there are several India Studies Centres in top Thai universities in Bangkok and Chiang Mai. What is also overlooked in the normal discourse is that under our New Education Policy, Thai language has been included as one of the foreign languages offered to children in Indian schools – this is a clear indication of the importance that we attach to Thailand.

Infrastructure and Digital Connectivity

7. Connectivity is at the heart of our Act East policy as well as our Vision of the Indo-Pacific which was outlined by PM Modi at the Shangri La dialogue in June, 2018. I have earlier spoken about air connectivity between the two countries. India's IPOI launched by PM Modi at the 14th East Asia Summit in Bangkok in November 2019 covers maritime transport. We are working on direct connectivity between ports on Thailand's west coast and ports on India's east coast. MoUs have been signed in 2019 between Ranong port of Thailand and Chennai, Krishnapatnam, Visakhapatnam and Kolkata; this is a prelude to the commencement of direct shipping lines which will cut freight costs and duration as mentioned by Amb Pattarat. As regards road connectivity -- the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway was scheduled to open in 2021; the physical road is ready as far as India and Thailand are concerned but there are some sections in Myanmar which have to be completed. Additionally, the Motor Vehicles Agreement between the three countries has to be finalised. We hope

that it will be completed soon, as that would change the landscape completely particularly as the decision has been taken to extend the highway eastwards through Laos to Vietnam.

7. At the 13th India-ASEAN summit in Kuala Lumpur in November 2015 our Prime Minister had announced a Line of Credit of US\$ 1 billion to promote projects that support physical and digital connectivity between India and ASEAN. Covid 19 pandemic has underlined the problems of digital divide between the relatively well developed urban and middle & upper class households and vulnerable sections of the population in both urban and rural areas. This has particularly impacted access to education. Digitisation is also particularly important in terms of healthcare. The effective rollout of mass vaccination has happened in India due to the success of the CoWIN platform. India is ready to share its experience in this area. India has developed and implemented the concept of digital villages elsewhere and we hope we can implement projects such as this jointly with Thailand. Fintech is another area where both sides can collaborate – ASEAN is already a big hub for e-commerce and India and some other ASEAN countries are collaborating in this area.

10. So, how can we enhance our connections to reconnect. As regards tourism (whenever international tourism resumes) we can develop our shared linkages further, particularly through working out of common Buddhist pilgrimage circuits as well as a Ramayana circuit. From Ladakh to Bodh Gaya, Sarnath to Sanchi, Ajanta-Ellora to Kushinagar unprecedented efforts are being made for connectivity of places related to Lord Buddha. Such places are being developed as Buddha circuits. Modern facilities have been built there. Further, young Thais can be encouraged to go to India's hill stations and avail of skiing, white river rafting, para sailing and other adventure sports. Cruise tourism connecting India's Andaman & Nicobar islands and Thailand's Andaman sea coast may be explored.

11. In the realm of India-Thailand economic and commercial partnership, the fast growing Indian market remains attractive for Thai businesses, given the vast opportunities available across a wide spectrum, including, but not restricted to infrastructure sector, tourism and retail industries. India views Thailand as a gateway to South East Asia and ASEAN. This is why GoI is giving special focus on strengthening linkages between India's north eastern states and South East Asia. It is thus that India's first North East India festival outside of India was held in Bangkok in February 2019 which opened new vistas of trade and tourism prospects. Our bilateral engagement is complemented by our cooperation under regional and sub-regional frameworks including BIMSTEC and MGC. We have also joined ACMECS as a development partner. Further, I must add that just physical infrastructure will not enhance trade and economic

engagement; initiatives such as paperless trade and removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers will contribute in a major way to increase in bilateral trade.

12. Importantly, we must change our mindsets and perceptions about each other and move away from stereotypes. For instance, India is not a place of snake charmers and rope dancers but an IT power house, a major space power, has world-class educational institutions and has the 3rd best start-up ecosystem in the world. The media in both countries can play a part in this.

13. To conclude, I wish to stress that we must take advantage of our geographical proximity. Given our cultural affinity and enormous reservoir of goodwill for each other, there is no doubt that we can, together, enhance our connect in multiple dimensions.

Thank you, Khap khon kha.