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# MEKONG-GANGA Policy Brief

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## Mekong-Ganga Cultural Fusion

The Mekong is one of the longest and most magnificent rivers in the world. Akin to the Ganga river in India, the Mekong is seen not only as a source of livelihood but also a sacred entity with cultural and spiritual significance. It is also known as "mother of rivers" or "mother of waters". The countries in this region, namely, Thailand, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Vietnam and Myanmar long fought over and controlled by outside powers, from the colonial era through the Cold War, are rapidly changing with a fast changing world. The Mekong countries are emerging to be a new growth centre and also a new strategic frontier in Asia.

With a population of around 240 million and a combined GDP of US\$ 664 billion, the Mekong region has geopolitical significance and economic weight. It is located at the junction of the enormous emerging markets of Asia. The cultural and religious diversity of the Mekong region in Southeast Asia is remarkable. Nearly 100 different ethnic groups live just in the lower Mekong basin. Khmer, Lao, Thai and Vietnamese people have depended upon the Mekong's resources for thousands of years. The Mekong still forms an integral part of each distinct culture and they all rely upon its fish to eat and its waters to travel and trade. The diversity of cultures and traditions is legendary.

Indian culture, religions and political ideas played a considerable role in the politico-cultural landscape of the Mekong region. The cultural and civilizational imprints of India influenced the emergence of statehood and inter-state system in Southeast Asia. Studies show that the countries in this region adapted and modified a whole range of foreign ideas and rules to suit their interests and local context. This process of adaptation preserved and in some cases amplified local beliefs and

practices while producing significant but evolutionary historical change in domestic politics and inter-state relations. The Indian cultural influence, therefore, was an adaptation and not an acceptance. Moreover, Southeast Asians gave as much as they learnt from foreign cultures and civilizations.

The influence of Indian civilization on the Mekong region is evident to anyone who has been to this region. Also, a large number of literatures are available on India's influence in this region. The impact that the Mekong region and Southeast Asia had on cultural and historical events in India has not drawn adequate attention. The evidence, however, suggests that the cultural influence flowed both ways and Southeast Asia has also contributed in enriching India's culture and traditions.

In his exceptional book *The Ocean of Churn*, Sanjeev Sanyal has illustrated Southeast Asia's influence on Indian society. The Khasis of Meghalaya, for instance, remain matrilineal to this day. Traces of matrilineal customs seem to have been imbibed even by neighbouring communities that may never have been matrilineal. For instance, in Assamese Hindu weddings, the 'sindoor' (red vermilion) is applied to the forehead of the bride by the mother-in-law at the 'jurun' ceremony that precedes the wedding. The act of applying sindoor is a key part of Hindu marriage ritual and is usually the prerogative of the husband. The performance of this rite by the groom's mother symbolizes the women of the family accepting a new member – a very matrilineal view of wedding. Another good example, which Sanyal highlights in his aforesaid book, is the custom of chewing paan (betel leaves with areca nuts, usually with a bit of lime and other ingredients). While it is common across the Indian subcontinent, the areca nut, called 'supari' in Hindi

or Bengali, is originally from Southeast Asia and was chewed across the region and as far as Taiwan. Paan continue to play an important cultural role and are used in many ceremonies in India and Southeast Asia. These examples are a clear manifestation of two-way cultural communication.

Despite a rich cultural heritage, the cultural connectedness and communication between these two regions is very limited. We are living in an interconnected world in the age of diffused culture based on a modern outlook that relies on science and rationality to address emerging challenges. While we celebrate our past and continue to follow several rich cultural traditions, we also witness modifications and adaptations and infusion of new elements in our cultural journey. The contemporary dynamics of the region and the fast-changing global society brings new ideas and poses different challenges. Therefore, it is important for the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) regional forum to deliberate upon issues on which they could share their expertise and experience and learn from each other. As such, we identify four major issues on which there is a possibility of greater collaboration.

### Cultural Resource Management

First issue is the management of cultural resources. Cultural resource management (CRM) is directly related to the management of economic development, tourism, preservation, and commodification. The ultimate goal of CRM is sustainable management of cultural resources. Culture and cultural resources represent a vital asset in efforts to develop tourism across Southeast Asia. Tourism in the Mekong region is highly dependent on cultural attractions, and proper management strategies