

# South Asia Analysis Group

Published on *South Asia Analysis Group* (<http://www.southasiaanalysis.org>)

[Home](#) > Book Review: Ganga to Mekong of Hema Devare

---

## Book Review: Ganga to Mekong of Hema Devare

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Mon, 06/13/2016 - 05:55

**Paper No. 6127     Dated 13-June-2016**

Book Review- By Prof. V. Suryanarayan.

Book by Hema Devare, *Ganga to Mekong: A Cultural Voyage through Textiles* (Manohar, New Delhi, 2016), pp. 197. -*Invaluable contribution to South and Southeast Asian Studies.*

The fascinating encounter between Indian cultural forms and Southeast Asian countries, leading to the cultural efflorescence of the region, is a significant phase in Indian and Southeast Asian history alike. Indianised kingdoms like Funan, Sri Kshetra, Pagan, Champa, Sri Vijaya, Sailendra and Majapahit; the familiar Indo-Sanskritic vocabulary in Thai and Bahasa Indonesia; architectural monuments like Angkor, Pagan, Borobudur and Lara Djonggrong; literary masterpieces like Ramkein, Amaramala, Arjuna Vivaha and Bharata Yuddha; the Wajang Kulit based on Ramayana and Mahabharata themes, the living Indian cultural traditions in the island of Bali – all these bear testimony to the courage and zeal of Indian merchants, princes, poets, artisans and priests and to the ingratiating and assimilable qualities of the peoples of Southeast Asian countries.

Norodom Sihanouk, founder of modern Cambodia, expressed his country's cultural indebtedness to India on several occasions. Inaugurating the Jawaharlal Nehru Boulevard in Phnom Penh in May 1955, Sihanouk declared: "When we refer to thousand year old ties which unite us with India, it is not at all a hyperbole. In fact, it was about one thousand years ago that the first navigators, Indian merchants and Brahmins brought to our ancestors their Gods, their techniques, their organization. Briefly India was for us what Greece was to Latin Orient". Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, who visited Indonesia in 1927, remarked: "I see India everywhere. But I don't recognize it". As Hema Devare puts it, "To my mind, that is the essence of India's cultural saga in Southeast Asia".

The spread of Indian cultural influences was in direct contrast to the impact that China made in northern part of Vietnam. It was a consequence of political conquest and consequent Sinicisation of the territory. It must be highlighted that Indian cultural influences spread in the region in a peaceful way. Except for the solitary instance of Chola naval expedition to Southeast Asia, no other Indian ruler embarked on military expeditions. Secondly, Indian contacts, as some historians have written, did not snap in the 13th century. Recent research in maritime history clearly proves that the Keralites, Tamils and the Gujaratis had extensive contacts with Southeast Asia during the medieval period. In fact, in the Islamisation of Indonesia the Muslims from Gujarat and Malabar, Tamil Nadu and Bengal played decisive roles. What is more, it is high time that we in India undertake a re-evaluation of the concept of "Greater India". The concept was a product of Indian national movement and it gave Indians a sense of pride in their glorious history. But its advocacy was sometimes done in a patronizing tone and very often the protagonists turned a "Nelson's eye" to the virile indigenous cultural forms. This book takes a balanced approach. As Kapila Vatsyayan writes in the Foreword: " Her book is yet another important step in asserting that it was a two way traffic and perhaps should continue to be a two-way multiple route traffic of creativity between India and Southeast Asia".

The Author had a distinct advantage. Being a diplomat's wife, she spent considerable time in Southeast Asian countries. She realized that textiles from different parts of India were binding factors between India and Southeast Asia from very early times. During the days of barter, it was the prevalent medium of exchange. As she began her research, Hema realized, Southeast Asian fabrics looked familiar, yet were not Indian. It was a beautiful synthesis between local and Indian craftsmanship. Enthralled and intrigued, she delved deep into the subject and interviewed the craftsmen in Southeast Asia and India. Travelling in Thailand and Cambodia, Hema found that each day of the week had its own preferences of colour. Sunday - red, Monday - yellow; Tuesday - pink; Wednesday - green; Thursday- orange; Friday - blue; and Saturday- black or purple. The Cambodian royalty were very particular in wearing the colour of the day while participating in the royal functions.

The book is a labour of love. Its academic worth has been enhanced by beautiful photographs and captivating illustrations. Hema Devare joins the group of outstanding Indian historians – Nilakanta Shastri, RC Majumdar, H B Sarkar, Prof. Satyavrata Shastri, Prof. Devahuti and Prof. Damodar Singhal – who have made yeoman contributions in evaluating the cultural interaction between India and Southeast Asia.

With a little more care Hema could have avoided some simple errors which have crept into the book. The State of Kelantan in Malaysia is spelt as Kelatan. Mattancherry, coastal town in Kerala, where the famous Jewish synagogue is located, is spelt as Manttacheri. Krishna Delta is not near Madurai; it is to the north in Andhra Pradesh, Madurai is located on the banks of the river Vaigai.

The book should serve as a model for historical writing. It is a result of passionate commitment and meticulous research.

*Dr. V. Suryanarayan is founding Director and Senior Professor , Centre for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Madras. His e mail id: [suryageeth@gmail.com](mailto:suryageeth@gmail.com)* <sup>[1]</sup>

**Tags:**

[Indian Culture in South east Asia. Textiles of India](#) <sup>[2]</sup>

[South East Asia](#) <sup>[3]</sup>

**Category:**

[Papers](#) <sup>[4]</sup>

**Countries:**

[SEAsia](#) <sup>[5]</sup>

[India](#) <sup>[6]</sup>

**Topics:**

[General](#) <sup>[7]</sup>

Copyright ©2012. All Rights are Reserved.

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/2005>

**Links**

[1] <mailto:suryageeth@gmail.com>

[2] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/1461>

[3] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/768>

[4] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers>

[5] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/se-asia>

[6] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/india>

[7] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/general>