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## UNIT 2 INTRODUCTION TO THE SOUTH-EAST ASIAN REGION

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### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit is intended to serve as a general introduction to the South-east Asian region. After going through this unit you would be able to:

- identify the mainland and island states of South-east Asia,
- explain the main features of the states of South-east Asia.

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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The region of South-east Asia has both mainland and island countries — Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, Philippines, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia—with varying influence of Indian and Chinese culture and civilization. While Chinese influence is predominant in Vietnam, in the rest of the region, India exerted as much influence as China. However, since the 18th century, Western imperial powers supplanted both China and India and brought the whole region under their direct control. During the Second World War, the region came under the Japanese military administration while strengthened nationalism process in the region. In the post-war period, the region became a major scene of Cold War rivalry between the USA and the erstwhile USSR. This disturbed the stability and peace of the region. The end of the Cold War in the late 80s has already released the political environment and thereby creating conditions for the fuller development of the people of South-east Asia. Before we study the political structures and process in the states of South-east Asian region, let us get acquainted with the countries of this region.

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### 2.2 COUNTRIES OF SOUTH-EAST ASIA

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part of Asia from the Japanese control. Since then, all the states that lie to the south of China and east of India are known as South-east Asian states.

If we look at the map of Asia, we find that in the south-east of this large continent a big part is spread from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. This entire region is known as South-east Asia. It comprises of ten countries — Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, Philippines, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

Geographically, these states can be divided into two groups — the mainland states and the island states. The states that are a part of the Asian mainland can be called Mainland States, namely, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Malaysia. And the states that are spread in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean are island countries. These are — Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines.

In order to get a clear idea of the South-east Asian region, let us move through these ten states one by one.

### 2.2.1 Myanmar

Myanmar (earlier known as Burma) is surrounded by India and China in the north, Bangladesh in the west and Thailand in the east. Its area is 6,71,000 sq. kms. The estimated population of Myanmar is about 40 million. Of these, 68 per cent are Burmese and Indians. More than 85 per cent of the people are Buddhists. It is said that Myanmar is a land of temples and pagodas.

Waves of Buddhism came to Myanmar from India and gradually it replaced the earlier Vaishnavite and Shaiv cultures. The period of King Anurudha between 1044 and 1057, is known as the golden age of the country's history.

In the nineteenth century, after three consecutive invasions, Britain took over all of Burma. The British mercilessly exploited the country. During the Second World War, the country fell to the Japanese. The national movement led by Aung San, succeeded and ultimately Burma got freedom in 1948.

The capital of Myanmar is Rangoon. Another important city is Mandalay. It was in this city that Lokmanya Tilak and Subhas Chandra Bose were kept imprisoned by the British.

After independence Myanmar took to the road of socialism and non-alignment under the leadership of U Nu. That government was overthrown in 1962. Since then the country has been under the control of military regime.

Myanmar's economy rests on the export of rice and teakwood. It also produces oil, sugarcane, metal ores, and precious stones.

Myanmar today is struggling hard to get political and economic emancipation.

### 2.2.2 Thailand

Thailand is the only country in South-east Asia which did not come under the western imperialist yoke. It successfully maintained its independence, even when all the other countries of Asia were run over by one European power or the other.

Thailand lies to the south of Myanmar and Laos. Its eastern boundaries touch those of Cambodia. Malaysia lies in the south.

Thailand has an area of 5,17,000 sq. kms. Its population is more than 5 million. Racially, about 75 per cent population is Thai and 14 per cent Chinese. Besides, there are local tribes in the north and Malay in the south. Then, there are a large number of refugees from Laos and Cambodia.

Thailand is a Buddhist country. A small minority consists of Muslims and Christians.

Thailand has been influenced by many countries and cultures, but the impact of India on Thailand is profound. Hindu thought and way of life in the early period, and Buddhist religion and philosophy in the later period shaped Thai ethos and culture. Wherever one goes in Thailand, saffron robes and Buddha statues are a common sight. Thailand's earlier name was Siam. Its capital was Ayuthaya, a name derived from the Ramayana. All its kings in the Chakri dynasty were known as Rama. During the nineteenth century King Mongkut was known as Rama IV and King Chulalongkorn was known as Rama V. This, Rama dynasty, by cleverly playing one European power off against another managed to remain independent while the rest of South-east Asia was being colonised by the French, the Dutch and the British.

In 1932, a coup converted the monarchical system into a constitutional monarchy and the name of Siam was changed to Thailand. Since then, limited monarchy, with a democratic form of government, has prevailed in Thailand. Military, however, plays a prominent role in the political system. Another dominant factor in Thai political process is Buddhist monastery.

After the Second World War, Thailand remained non-aligned only in name but it openly leaned towards the United States. It was an active member of the ASEAN group.

Like most other South-east Asian states, Thailand is an agricultural country. Rice, corn, and sugarcane are the main crops. Besides, tin, rubber, natural gas, and fisheries products are the main export items. Thailand is also considered to be a Newly Industrialised Country (NIC). Textile, agricultural processing, and timber industries have taken a strong foothold.

Bangkok the capital of Thailand is one of the biggest tourist attractions in South-east Asia.

### 2.2.3 Malaysia

Malaysia is situated at the southern end of Thailand. It also stretches to Sarawak and Sabah in North Borneo. Actually, in 1963, Malaya, Sarawak, Sabah and Singapore joined together and formed a federation — Malaysia. Two years later, Singapore withdrew. At present Malaysia is a federation of 13 states. Its area is about 3,30,000 sq. kms.

The population of Malaysia is more than 16 million. About 60 per cent of the population is Malay and some other indigenous groups and 32 per cent Chinese. Indians constitute nine per cent of the entire stock. Malaysia has a Muslim majority, and, as such, it is a Muslim state. Though it is a liberal state, yet fundamentalists are becoming stronger day by day. Apart from Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, Confucians and Taoists also colour the religious scenario.

The ancient history of Malaysia is the history of Indian religious and cultural influences. Waves of Hindu and Buddhist political and religious forces from India and Thailand came and overshadowed the Malay peninsula. Then came Islam. By the later part of the fifteenth century the Islamic empire was established there.

In 1511, the Portuguese took over Malacca, but they did not stay long, for they were defeated by the Dutch in 1641. Finally, in 1795, the British took control. For more than a century and a half, Malaya remained a British colony. It got independence in 1957.

Malaysia is one of those few states of South-east Asia which have a democratic form of government. Malaysia has also followed the policy of non-alignment.

Malaysia's economy rests on agriculture and forestry. Apart from producing rice, cocoa and pepper, Malaysia is also rich in rubber, timber, and palm oil. It is coming up steadily in the field of industrialisation. Textiles, elementary electrical products, rubber products, automobile parts and assembly are some of the distinct industrialised areas. Export of petrol and natural gas have provided a strong base to Malaysia's economy.

Malaysia's capital, Kuala Lumpur, is one of the most modernised capitals of South-east Asia.

### 2.2.4 Singapore

Singapore, in the earlier times, was SINGH-PUR a lion city. It is a small island city with an area of about 616 sq. kms. Situated at the top of the Malaysian peninsula, Singapore is the biggest trade and tourist centre in South-east Asia.

Singapore has a population of about three million, which mainly consists of the Chinese, the Malay and the Indians. However, people from all parts of the world can be seen here. There are Buddhists, Christians—people belonging to all the religions and faiths, intermixing in Singapore. This city is a great example of unity in diversity.

Singapore was a British colony. During the Second World War it fell to the Japanese. It became independent in 1965. Since then Singapore has been governed by a democratic system of government.

Apart from being rich in trade and tourism, Singapore, one of the cleanest cities in the world, is strong in light industries. It is said, that Singapore is one of the booming 'four tigers' of Asia, the other three being Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea.

### 2.2.5 Indonesia

Indonesia is an archipelago. It comprises about 13,700 islands spread over 4,75,000 sq. kms. Of these islands, six are big and main—Java, Sumatra, Borneo, Bali, Kalimantan and West Irian. More than half of the population lives in Java alone.

Indonesia is the biggest Muslim country in the World. Its population is over 170 million. More than ninety per cent population is Muslim. Bali is Hindu. There are Christians in Timore and Flores. Ethnically, the people of Indonesia belong to different groups. They are Javanese, Sumatrans, Sundanese, Bataks, Chinese and Indians.

Wave after wave of religious and cultural influences came to Indonesia. First of all came Hinduism from India. Temples of Hindu gods and goddesses were built. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata were adopted in the folk music, folk dances and even in everyday rituals in Indonesia. All this can still be seen in Bali. Then came Buddhism. Great Buddhist temples were erected and monasteries established. Borobudur temple reminds one of Ellora, where huge sculptures of Buddha and other Hindu gods even today stand as the immortal monuments of Indonesia's great cultural heritage. Srivijay Empire in the fourth century and Shailendra Empire in the ninth century form the golden chapters of Indonesian history. Then came Islam. Traders from West Asia brought it in the form of a new mysticism. People started adopting it. By the end of the 15th century Indonesia became Muslim, though Bali remained Hindu. From the 14th to the 16th century, Majapahit Empire, with Muslim religion and Hindu culture formed another golden chapter in Indonesian history. In 1511, the Portuguese naval captain Alfansa de Albukark reached Indonesia. After a fierce struggle with Indonesians he captured Mallaca. Thus began the story of colonisation in Indonesia. Before Portugal could capture the entire archipelago, the war between Holland and Portugal broke out in Europe. In 1602, the Dutch defeated the Portuguese and took over the entire Indonesian archipelago.

The twentieth century saw the dawn of nationalism in Asia. Sukarno and Hatta led the nationalist movement in Indonesia. During the Second World War, the Dutch were defeated and Japan ran over entire Indonesia. However, the war brought Japan to its knees and the Dutch tried to regain their lost empire. Indonesians resisted this and proclaimed independence in 1946, when Indonesia became a sovereign independent state.

After independence, Indonesia experimented with democracy, which was overthrown. Since 1965, a military regime, under the garb of guided democracy has been ruling Indonesia. Its leader is General Suharto.



On the economic front, Indonesia is rich in rice, rubber, coffee, palm oil, sugarcane etc. A good number of industries have come up in the field of cement, textiles, fertiliser, light machinery, food processing etc. Export of oil, natural gas, tin, tea, coffee, and wood has strengthened the economy.

Indonesia's capital, Jakarta, has wide roads, huge buildings, and at the same time, dirty slums. Affluences and poverty can be seen together.

### Check Your Progress 1

**Note:** 1) Give your answer in the space given below.

2) Check your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1) One of the following is not a mainland state in South-east Asia.

- |            |              |
|------------|--------------|
| a) Myanmar | b) Thailand  |
| c) Vietnam | d) Indonesia |

2) ..... is the only country of South-east Asia which did not come under Western imperialist yoke.

3) Buddhism is the dominant religion in

- |             |                    |
|-------------|--------------------|
| a) Thailand | b) Indonesia       |
| c) Burma    | d) the Philippines |
| e) Vietnam  |                    |

### 2.2.6 Brunei

Brunei is a small part of the big Borneo island. It is a little country with only 22 lakh people. But, it is the richest country in the entire region.

Brunei is strictly a Muslim country. Racially, the main population is Malay, though there are Chinese and Indians too.

Brunei remained a British colony for about two centuries. It was only in 1984 that Brunei got independence.

Brunei is a monarchy. Its Sultan is the richest person on earth. Oil export is the biggest source of revenue. There is no income tax. Everyone gets pension. With huge buildings, wide roads, and glittering lights Brunei has the highest per capita income in South-east Asia.

### 2.2.7 The Philippines

The Philippines, like Indonesia, is also an archipelago comprising more than seven thousand islands. This group of islands lie in south Pacific, the north of Indonesia. Its area is about 2,99,000 sq. kms.

The population of the Philippines is more than 60 million. Most of the people are ethnically Malay, but their religion is Christianity. There are people of Chinese descent too. In the southern Island of Sulawesi, most of the people are Muslims. And, occasionally, they demand separation and independence.

In 1521, the Spanish Naval Captain, Fernondo Mananel, discovered and captured the Philippines. Since then, for more than, three centuries, the Philippines remained under the brutal Spanish control. Spaniards ruthlessly eradicated everything 'pagan' and converted the people to Christianity. Named after King Philip II of Spain, the Philippines came under the American control in the early period of the twentieth century. Spain had already Christianised the colony. Whatever was left was completed by the Americans. The US. Naval Admiral, Dewey, after capturing Manila, sent message to the US President, "Have captured Philippines, what shall we do with them?" President McKinley replied "Christianise them."

The American colonial period ended after the Second World War. The Philippines was granted independence in 1946. After independence the Philippines adopted the Presidential type of democracy.

The Philippines is rich in sugarcane, rice, coconut, corn, pineapples and bananas. It has enormous natural resources like timber, copper, nickel, iron, cobalt, silver, gold and petroleum. It has made impressive strides in the fields of textiles, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, wood products, food processing, electronic assembly etc.

Manila, the capital city has a number of moderate restaurants, folk music clubs and pubs.

### **2.2.8 Vietnam**

Three countries form the former Indo-China. They are — Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Of these Vietnam has a distinct place in modern history, for it gave heroic resistance to US imperialism in the post-War period.

Situated just across the southern borderline of China, Vietnam has an area of 3,29,566 sq. kms. Its population is more than 68 million. 85 per cent of the population is Vietnamese. Chinese, Muong, Thai, Meo, Kumer, Mau and Cham, are the minority ethnic groups. Most of the people follow Buddhism, though there are Christians and Muslims too in Vietnam.

The history of Vietnam dates back to second millennium B.C. when civilisation existed in the red River area, near the present day Hanoi. However, from time to time there were repeated attacks and occupations by the Chinese. These attacks were resisted by the Vietnamese people, yet for more than one thousand years Vietnam remained under the Chinese control. There was considerable Chinese cultural influence on Vietnam, but the Vietnamese loved to maintain their political independence and cultural identity. In the 19th century, there came the French traders and missionaries. And by the later part of the 19th century, the entire Vietnam became a French colony. In the twentieth century, a nationalist movement arose under the dynamic leadership of Ho Chi Minh. During the Second World War, the French were defeated and Vietnam was occupied by Japan. After the defeat of Japan, France tried to reoccupy Vietnam. The Vietnamese people, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, fought a determined guerilla warfare against the French. In 1954, the struggle ceased on the basis of the Geneva Agreement that divided Vietnam into the two zones — North and South. North Vietnam became independent and Communist, and the South became an American ally. Even in the South, the Vietnamese people did not surrender and a fierce battle against the US continued. Ultimately in 1973, America decided to withdraw and Vietnam was united again.

Vietnam for more than fifty years had been at war, against the French, the Japanese and the Americans. The wars ruined its economy. After 1973, Vietnam was put back on the roads to recovery and reconstruction. A gigantic task still ahead. Vietnam, like most of the other countries of South-east Asia, is basically an agricultural country, rice, corn, sugarcane, and coffee being the main crops. New industries are coming up in the field of textiles, electrical goods, cement, food processing etc.

Hanoi is not rich, but it is a proud city to be the capital of a great nation Vietnam.

### **2.2.9 Laos**

Laos is surrounded by China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Myanmar. It has no direct access to the sea. The country has an area of about 2,36,0000 sq. kms. and a population of nearly five million people. Most of the people are Lao and tribals. There are Chinese and Vietnamese too. Laos is basically a Buddhist country.

Since Laos has been surrounded by more powerful countries, it has been attacked and occupied by them again and again. China, Vietnam and Thailand — all had been the masters of Laos at one time or the other. However, Fa Ngoum established a strong empire there in the 14th century and Laos prospered. In the early 19th century, Laos fell

a prey to Thailand and in 1893, it came under the French rule. During the Second World War, Laos was also occupied by Japan, but after the War, the French tried to reoccupy it. After the Geneva Agreement of 1954, Laos was granted independence. Even after the independence, the road to progress was not smooth. The conflict between the Communist and the non-Communist forces continued for a long time. With the decisive victory of Communism in Vietnam, Laos too was overcome by the Communist forces. In December 1975, the Lao People's Democratic Republic was proclaimed.

On the economic front, Laos is a least developed country. It produces rice, tobacco, cotton etc. It is pretty rich in tin, lead, zinc, but Laos is hardly industrialised, and, therefore, poverty prevails, particularly in the remote areas.

Vientiane, the capital, is less glamorous in comparison to the capitals of the other South-east Asian states.

### 2.2.10 Cambodia

The ancient Indian name for Cambodia was Kamboj. Even in the mid-nineteenth century, when the French occupied the territory, they also called it Cambodge. Its English variant became Cambodia. Cambodia is a small country surrounded by Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. Its area is about 1,81,035 sq. kms. The population of Cambodia is about 8 million. Most of the people are Khmer. The Chinese and the Thais too live here. Most of the people are Buddhists. The impact of the ancient Indian cultural and religious tradition can be seen in Cambodia even today. The mighty monuments of Angkor Wat are the most eloquent evidence of the ancient Indo-Cambodia glory.

The golden period of Cambodian history is that of the Khmer Empire. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, it was the most powerful empire in the entire Indo-China region. Cambodian emperors were inspired by Indian thought and culture and they were exalted as God-Kings. That golden period, however, did not last long. Cambodia was overrun by Thailand in 1432 and later by Vietnam. In the nineteenth century, French troops occupied Cambodia and continued to rule over the State. In the third decade of the twentieth century, a strong nationalist movement emerged, but before it could overthrow the imperialist, the Second World War broke out and Cambodia was occupied by Japanese troops. After the War, the French tried to reoccupy Cambodia, but Prince Sihanouk declared its independence. The declaration was later affirmed by the Geneva Agreement of 1954. After independence, Cambodia fell a prey to cold war and factional politics, which resulted in the prolonged civil war in which lakhs of people were killed and the entire economy broke down.

On the economic front, therefore, Cambodia's condition is pretty bad. Rice is the main crop. Cattle rearing and fishing are also done. Iron, copper, manganese and gold are also found. The forests are still rich in timber. But political instability has hampered the growth of industrialisation.

The capital, Phnom Penh, gives a sad look.

### Check Your Progress 2

Note : 1) Give the answer in the space provided below.

2) Check your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1) Match the following two columns:

- |                    |            |
|--------------------|------------|
| 1) Vietnam         | a) Britain |
| 2) Indonesia       | b) Spain   |
| 3) The Philippines | c) Holland |
| 4) Malaysia        | d) France  |

2) Islam is the dominant religion in

- |              |             |
|--------------|-------------|
| a) Indonesia | b) Brunei   |
| c) Malaysia  | d) Thailand |

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## 2.3 LET US SUM UP

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From the above description of the countries of the South-east Asian region, it is obvious that the entire region has many socio-economic problems and political constraints. But for Singapore and Brunei, the entire region economically has yet to take off. Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines are moving in the right direction. Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia have to work very hard.

The entire region has tremendous potentialities. A determined leadership and dedicated people can perform any miracle.

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## 2.4 SOME USEFUL BOOKS

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- 1) Manzoor Alam S. and G.Ram Reddy (Ed) (1978), *Social Development of South and South-east Asia*, New Delhi.
- 2) Butwell Richard (1975), *South-east Asia— A Political Introduction*, Praeger, New York.
- 3) Singh L.P. (1979), *Power Politics and South-east Asia*, Ravidant, New Delhi.

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## 2.5 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) d
- 2) Thailand
- 3) a, b, and c

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) 1) (d)  
2) (c)  
3) (b)  
4) (a)
- 2) a, b and c.