

## Role of Sanskrit in Shaping Cultural Identity and Peaceful Coexistence in Southeast Asia

### RESEARCH ARTICLE

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#### ABSTRACT

Language has an influence on our thoughts, behaviours, and sense of belonging. Around the world, languages have influenced the evolution of civilizations through everything from legislative decrees to prayers and hymns. Their ability to create common cultural frames and encourage peaceful cohabitation is what makes them so effective at bringing people together across racial and geographic divides. Incorporating secondary sources such as historical texts and peer-reviewed journal articles, this review takes a qualitative, interpretive approach. Using Southeast Asia as a case study, this essay explores how world languages, especially Sanskrit, contribute to the formation of cultural identities and the promotion of peace. A powerful example of language as a tool of soft power is the expansion of Sanskrit in this area, which was driven by trade, religion, and pure admiration rather than conquest.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

During the course of time, language has not only served as a means of communication, but also as a source to store the culture, memories, and values. It is through language, a civilisation is able to communicate its emotions, thoughts, and values from one generation to another. It is not just letters or sentences but how a person or a community conveys their ideas, either verbally or non-verbally. It is impossible to think about a world without language. The use of language also promotes social cohesion, whereby people feel as if they belong and have a sense of unity within the community.

Because of globalization, migration, and cultural interaction, multilingualism has become more important than ever. To understand each other's culture, it is important to understand the importance of multilingualism. Multilingualism not only promotes cross-cultural understanding but also fosters empathy, and helps break down prejudices.

India is one of the diverse countries among all the nations owing to its diversity of languages and cultures. Over 22 languages are included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, representing the concept of "unity in diversity" throughout the country.

*Sanskritization* in South East Asian countries is an important example of how language served as a carrier of culture, religion, and identity. We can observe that Buddhist monks, Indian traders, brahmin's started crossing the Bay of Bengal. As early as the first century C.E., Buddhist monks, Indian traders, brahmin's crossed the Bay of Bengal. The Silk Route allowed them to not only transport goods but also the intangible resources like culture and religion. It is with the help of language, traders exchanged the values of India, including the Mahabharata and Ramayana stories.

This article will explore how does world languages will build cultural identity and promote peaceful coexistence taking the example of *Sanskritization* in Southeast Asia. This study aims to highlight the importance of language and the role it plays in carrying culture and promoting peaceful coexistence.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous scholars have worked and explored about the historical significance of *Sanskrit* in Southeast Asia emphasising the cultural exchange in terms of social interaction, political influence and cultural transmission. Pollock, S (1996) calls this phenomenon as the “*Sanskrit cosmopolis*,” cultural space between 300 and 1300 CE where *Sanskrit* was the predominant language for political, religious, and intellectual discourse across the regions. *Sanskrit* was utilised in holy texts, court poetry, and inscriptions, but it was never spoken as a vernacular. This promoted mutual recognition and ideological unity by enabling leaders and elites in Cambodia, Java, Thailand, and other areas to engage in a shared cultural code. (Bronkhorst, 2015). This shared language and symbolic vocabulary brought together different Southeast Asian communities (Jain & Mohanan, 2020).

Chattopadhyay has emphasised how *Sanskrit* temple texts and inscriptions in Cambodia, especially in Angkor Wat, not only linked local customs with Brahmanical cosmology but also legitimised kings (Bunthorn, 2010).

Southeast Asian populations, particularly the Mon, Khmer, and Cham, bear evidence of South Asian heritage, whereas more isolated groups do not. This pattern is consistent with language: groups whose languages were used by Indianized states have higher genetic and cultural linkages to India. The study also reveals similarities between speakers of Austronesian and Kra-Dai, indicating strong historical linkages between language families. These findings underscore the importance of language in carrying and moulding Indian influence, alongside trade and migration, in spreading ideas and identity throughout the region (Changmai et al., 2022).

The adaptation of Indian scripts and terminology into regional languages like Old Javanese, Khmer, and

Thai is another example of *Sanskrit* 's contribution to linguistic unification. *Sanskrit* words, particularly those pertaining to law (*dharma*), art (*citra*), language (*bhāṣā*), and governance (*rāja*), were incorporated to form a pan-regional vocabulary that strengthened a shared intellectual legacy (Suwignyo, 2023). Recent works indicated how multiple languages can coexist peacefully and also help in sustaining ethnic attachment in diverse societies.

Additionally, the adoption of Indian scripts and terminology into regional languages like Old Javanese, Khmer, and Thai has demonstrated *Sanskrit* 's role in linguistic unification. The Khmer language was enhanced by epic, philosophical, political, and poetic aspects found in *Sanskrit* inscriptions, which promoted regional unity and cultural coherence. Hoogervorst (2021) highlights that the most evident South Asian impact in Southeast Asia is in language, where many *Sanskrit* and Pali terminology have been incorporated into local vocabularies, particularly in religion, governance, and elite society.

Acri, A. (2015) explains this with the example How *Sanskrit* religious and literary traditions spread over the Malay world is demonstrated by the Tanjung Tanah codex. This combination of Indic textual methods with Malay explanations illustrates a cultural diffusion process in which information from India was not only transported but also modified by local interpretation, resulting in a shared but regionally different manuscript culture spanning Sumatra, Java, and Bali.

Another example of how *Sanskrit* promoted multicultural harmony is the localised renditions of the *Sanskrit* epics, including the Ramayana and Mahabharata, such as the Javanese shadow puppet shows (*wayang kulit*) and Thai *Ramakien*. In Southeast Asian contexts, these texts—which have their roots in Indian myth—were reinterpreted to represent common ethical themes and uphold communal norms (Ladna, 2025).

## 3. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative and comparative review technique is applied in this article, which includes:

**Source Selection:** To include both traditional and contemporary viewpoints on the subject, peer-reviewed papers, historical monographs, and epigraphic studies were chosen.

**Thematic Analysis:** Themes such as identity, multilingual cohabitation, *Sanskritization*, and religious syncretism were used to analyse the sources.

## 4. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

*Sanskrit* inscriptions started to occur in Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam around the fourth century CE, indicating that the governing classes

voluntarily adopted the language. *Sanskrit* was selected for its symbolic validity, which connected rulers to local power structures and divine cosmologies, rather than being imposed by imperialism (Pollock S, 2006). *Sanskrit* spread because it was associated with Brahmanism rather than just because it was a common language or because it was beautiful. Priests and counselors known as Brahmins spread *Sanskrit* throughout Southeast Asia and India. *Sanskrit* was a high-status, sacred language that demonstrated social and religious might, in contrast to regional tongues. The Brahmins' authority had a direct impact on its spread Bronkhorst (2015).

In the areas of administration, astronomy, and religion, Southeast Asian languages adopted *Sanskrit* vocabulary. Translations or hybridisations of *Sanskrit* into regional languages were common. For example, the *Ramayana* was adapted into Old Javanese as *Kakawin Ramayana*, which incorporated regional themes (Suwignyo, 2023).

Both Buddhism and Hinduism spread through *Sanskrit* scriptures without eliminating indigenous beliefs (Jain, 2021). The resulting cooperation, which can be seen in temples like as Angkor Wat and Borobudur, is an example of how language promoted interfaith communication rather than confrontation. *Sanskrit* acted as a link or bridge throughout the Southeast area. Unlike many cultural effects that are transmitted through political power, *Sanskrit*'s influence was achieved through peaceful cultural interchange.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The review reveals how world languages, particularly those that are freely accepted and locally modified, can significantly influence cultural identity and promote harmonious cohabitation. The introduction of *Sanskrit* throughout Southeast Asia without the need for political conquest provides a compelling historical example of language serving as a bridge between cultures rather than as a colonial instrument.

Living in an era where people are fighting among themselves in the name of religion and language, the story of Sanskritization in Southeast countries shows the importance of cultural identity and language. This example encourages educators and policymakers to value linguistic pluralism, mutual tolerance, and cultural memory in a time of growing linguistic nationalism and identity struggle.

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## Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) did not employ any of the Generative AI and/or AI-Assisted technologies for Language refinement, drafting background section and did not perform any Task of the technology.

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**Professor Dr. Venus Jain** is a distinguished historian and educator with an illustrious career in academia. She began her professional journey at the Galaxy Education System, Rajkot, and soon rose to leadership roles as Principal and Director (Education) at Global Indian International School, Gandhidham. She later served as Group Director of Shri Ram Group of Colleges, Muzaffarnagar, before joining Amity University, Noida, as Junior Vice President, where she was instrumental in establishing the Department of History and served as Global Stream Coordinator for the subject.

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A Distinguished Fellow of the National Foundation for Entrepreneurship Development, Coimbatore, she is frequently featured on media platforms, including television and Radio 90.8 FM, and is a sought-after keynote speaker at national and international conferences. Her scholarship, particularly in cultural history and the global



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With a strong foundation in teaching, Senu brings years of experience in the classroom, complemented by her skills in public speaking, writing, and proofreading. She is deeply committed to making historical research accessible and interdisciplinary.

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