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Shweta Sinha
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&

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NEW DELHI, INDIA

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22 March 2018: Sanya Dhamasakti Meeting Room
23 March 2018: Wan Waithyakon Meeting Room

THAMMASAT UNIVERSITY

Keynote speaker: Shri Ram Madhav,
National General Secretary of Bharatiya Janata Party

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# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From the Editor</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programme</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inaugural Session</strong></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background: Cultural Confluence in Ganga Mekong Region</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>S. R. Bhatt</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report Remarks</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Nitinant Wisawesisuan</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opening Speech</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Gasinee Witoonchart</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome Address</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>H.E. Mr. Bhagwant Singh Bishnoi</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keynote Speech</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Shri Ram Madhav</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conference Papers</strong></td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparing Emerging Youth Civic Engagement in the Mekong and Ganga Basins</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Pimjai Banlangpoh</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian Culture in Ganga-Mekong Region</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>S. R. Bhatt</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Controversies: The Disputes over Common Culture in Ganga Mekong Region</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Kamontip Dueathong</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ganga in Khmer Language, Literature and Culture</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Srey Peou Em</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Buddhism: A Uniting Force among the Asian Nations 63
    Baidyanath Labh
Mekong-Ganga Cooperation: An Overview 66
    Jaran Maluleem and Mohd Faheem
Early Religious Interface between India and the Mekong Regions 72
    Chirapat Prapandvidya
Glimpses of the Ramayana Culture in the Ganga Mekong Region 81
    Rana Purushottam Kumar Singh
The Mekong and the Ganga: Interlinked Socio-Cultural Spaces 86
    Sachchidanand Sahai
Lecture on Linking Ganga with Belt and Road 92
    Kalinga Seneviratne
The Impact of Sanskrit Prosody on Thai Poetry 97
    Satyavrat Shastri
Celebration of Culture and Life through Indian Classical Dance (Natya) 101
    Pavithra Srinivasan
Re-Establishing Economic Linkage in Ganga-Mekong Basins 102
    Supruet Thavornyutikarn

Roundtable Session: the Way Forward 104
Valedictory Remarks 106
    S. R. Bhatt and Supruet Thavornyutikarn
Closing Remarks 107
    Nitinant Wisaweisuan
Vote of Thanks 108

Organising Committee 111
Comparing Emerging Youth Civic Engagement in the Mekong and Ganga Basins

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ABSTRACT

International youth civic engagement (YCE) has recently grown in societal and political impact. (UNDP, 2012). In Thailand, students protested in October 1973 against a military dictatorship. The resulting demonstrations led to political change in the form of a new election in Thailand (Thai radical discourse, 1987). In 1960s, the youth movement grew across the United States. During that decade, youth groups joined public discourse to try to change public policy. (Taj & Kim, 2011). Today, Youth Civic Engagement has become more frequent in Europe, North America, Latin America, South Asia, and the ASEAN community (Alex, 2010; Avadhani, 2012; Blum, 2007). Subsequent impacts have become evident. Today, around 65% of the ASEAN population are under 35 years of age. They are a driving force to shape the future (YSEALI, 2015). Youth have the power to transform a society from leader-centric to people-centric. The power for change among youth is based on social support rather than numbers. If it receives sufficient societal support, Youth Civic Engagement may address societal issues, creating a more inclusive society. As a result, ASEAN countries and India are investing in Youth Civic Engagement for community balance. In addition, Indian Youth Civic Engagement draws 30% of its population from the Indian democratic movement, so youth activities occur freely throughout the country (Alex, 2010; Avadhani, 2012).

Introduction

In recent years, youth civic engagement (YCE) has made an increasingly strong impact on international society (UNDP, 2012). Social impacts extend from national to transnational and international levels. Youth Civic Engagement regional responsibility has arisen in Europe, North America, Latin America, South Asia, and the ASEAN community (Alex, 2010; Avadhani, 2012; Blum, 2007). Subsequent impacts have become evident. Today, around 65% of the ASEAN population are under 35 years of age. They are a driving force to shape the future (YSEALI, 2015). Youth have the power to transform a society from leader-centric to people-centric. The power for change among youth is based on social support rather than numbers. If it receives sufficient societal support, Youth Civic Engagement may address societal issues, creating a more inclusive society. As a result, ASEAN countries and India are investing in Youth Civic Engagement for community balance. In addition, Indian Youth Civic Engagement draws 30% of its population from the Indian democratic movement, so youth activities occur freely throughout the country (Alex, 2010; Avadhani, 2012).
This paper compares emerging Youth Civic Engagement in the Mekong and Ganga basins to learn about the respective movements’ development and sustainability. Core factors and limitations of YCE in both areas are examined, to gain insight on future possibilities.

**Research Design and Methodology**

A qualitative approach was used to examine six MGC nations: Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, and India. Purposive sampling selected participants. Primary source data was obtained by in-depth semi-structured interviews with five staff members of Thai Volunteer Services (TVS) and six youth-led working groups from the ASEAN Youth Forum (AYF), including representatives from Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Secondary source documentary data was drawn from TVS plans, policies, and annual reports, as well as published studies on India.

**Definitions and Typologies:**

**Definition of Youth Civic Engagement**

Different definitions of Youth Civic Engagement exist based on context and perspective. They share this in common:

**Belonging:** Youth have a sense of belonging to their hometowns and want to address social problems in their areas and networks (UNESCO, 2012).

**Care and Social Justice:** Civic engagement is a non-political social form enhancing youth social capital and reducing skilled labor shortages, providing a demographic dividend for developing regions such as South Asia (Alex, 2010).

**Engaged Citizenship:** Youth Civic Engagement is also linked to increase public awareness of children and young people’s rights to be heard and accepted as active contributors for social change (United Nations, 2016).
Positive Youth Development: The World Bank identifies the exercise of active citizenship as a key activity for healthy transition to adulthood for the youth of today and tomorrow (United Nations, 2016).

Typologies of Youth Civic Engagement

Eleven types of Youth Civic Engagement were categorized by UNICEF:

1. Formal, long-term community services and volunteering: 20 hours per week of services within three months or more;
2. Part-time volunteering: more than two hours per week within two months;
3. Occasional volunteering: anything less than the above requirement;
4. Service-learning: a school or non-school program engaging students contribute their service skill to solve the problem in schools and communities, and conforming to their setting objectives with community needs;
5. International volunteering: volunteers contribute their service to other communities, not their own;
6. Mutual aid: groups of people who have the same situation assisting and supporting each other within the same community or social groups. The distinction between volunteer and beneficiary may be less clear;
7. Youth for governance: youth delegates represent or lobby government bodies to develop public policies about Youth Civic Engagement programs;
8. Advocacy and campaigning: raising public awareness or reforming legislation, changing cultural norm or government policy;
9. Youth media: providing possible media production including video, radio, film, newspaper by young people for public;
10. Social entrepreneurship: creating and designing innovative solutions for addressing social problems; and
11. Leadership training and practice: organising workshops to learn and practice leadership skills as well as participating in volunteer activities.

Comparing Emergent Youth Civic Engagement between Mekong and Ganga Basins:

Characteristics of Emerging Youth Civic Engagement in Mekong

The ASEAN Youth Forum (AYF) project was established in 2009 as a platform for youth to discuss key issues, develop joint ASEAN civil society actions, and deliver statements to ASEAN policy makers. Mekong Youth Civic Engagement is subordinate to this project in Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam. From 100 to 150 youth workers with 10 to 15 youth activists for each ASEAN nation collaborate. They organize the annual forum, reporting to the ASEAN summit chair. Youth representatives also run core projects in their hometowns.
Mekong Youth Civic Engagement consists of people aged from 15 to 35. Diversity helps in supervising a variety of different activities in each nation. Due to socio-cultural differences across Mekong countries, youths learn from each other within the team. Political cultures are also understood differently, depending on political regime. Empowering youth to learn from each other across borders helps them contribute to national politics. The different Mekong country political regimes affect youth diversely. Democratic practices flourish in civil societies. Mekong countries are familiar with authoritarianism, and regimes in Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar do not support youth movements. The respective governments fear that if they admit democratic practices into civil society, they might lose power. Only Thailand has some policies supporting youth movements. (Avadhani, 2012).

Mekong Youth Civic Engagement activities occur on local and regional levels. One local activity in Vietnam gathered 100,000 young people in a Green Summer volunteer campaign to build 130 welfare centers to give over 70,000 people access to healthcare (AYM, 2012). The government does not support such activities, funded by nonprofit organizations.

Other regional collaborations include the Human Rights Volunteer Project, Collaboration for Young Generation in Mekong Region (CYM), Youth Leadership for Social Change, and Youth Leadership and Education for Sustainable Agriculture and Food Sovereignty. The Human Rights Volunteer Project provides annual training for lawyers to contribute to their communities, helping people who are suffering from injustice. It has 139 alumni and 7 batches of human right lawyers in Thailand (AYM, 2012). The Young Generation in Mekong Region (CYM) distributes over 2,000 copies of Mekong Youth Diary for Peace: Listen to Our Voices, Join the Change to young Mekong river residents in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand. The published diaries lead to the promotion of peace and increased comprehension and understanding of cross-cultural issues among Mekong neighbors (CYM, 2015).

**Characteristics of Emerging Youth Civic Engagement in the Ganga Basin**

Participants in Ganga Youth Civic Engagement consist of people aged from 15 to 24 from geographically, economically, linguistically and culturally diverse groups. India’s democratic character gives Youth Civic Engagement opportunities for free expression and association. Due to a national tradition of volunteerism and civic engagement, Youth Civic Engagement has become a consistent feature of the political culture and official policy planning. A National Youth Service and National Policy on the Voluntary Sector in addition to National Youth Policy, Youth Ministry, and sound legal framework for the NGOs have resulted. India has duly developed a vigorous and sophisticated civil society. Historically, the relationship between civic engagement through voluntary action and India’s independence movement shaped the relationship between government and civil society.
Indian policies supportive to youth grants opportunities to join many types of civic engagement programs. Youth Civic Engagement in India is widespread and powerful as formal long-term national service to advocacy, service, and learning for social entrepreneurship and leadership.

**Mutual Factors Influencing Youth Civic Engagement in Both Basins**

Investing in Youth Civic Engagement as part of a regional vision:

Globalization often means that the effect of social problems is not limited to a single nation but extends to neighbors as well. For sustainable solutions, Youth Civic Engagement network collaboration may address certain problems, while individual countries retain specific characteristics. The more Youth Civic Engagement seen in the ASEAN region and South Asia, the more social, political, and economic engagements will also be visible.

In the digital era, the internet and social networks are main communication channels of Youth Civic Engagement network communication, especially Facebook (Avadhani, 2012):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Internet users (people)</th>
<th>Internet penetration (%)</th>
<th>Facebook users (people)</th>
<th>Facebook penetration (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>449,160</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>449,160</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laos</td>
<td>527,400</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>129,660</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>110,000</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>18,310,000</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>13,276,200</td>
<td>19.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>30,516,587</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>3,607,220</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>259,880,000</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>135,600,000</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Facebook, the internet, and social networking can save time in Youth Civic Engagement communication on an international level (AYM, 2012; CYM, 2015; Alex, 2010).

**Shared and Nation-Specific Challenges Affecting Youth Civic Engagement**

Mekong Youth Civic Engagement work in national atmospheres far from democracy and experienced with authoritarianism. As noted above, while Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar do not support youth movements, democratic characteristics promote Ganga YCE in India. There, citizens have some opportunities for political participation and freedom of expression and association. Mekong Youth Civic Engagement have much to learn about democratic characteristics from India to improve social, political, and economic engagement.
National economic factors influence governmental decisions for budget allocation to support youth activities, according to the Thai Volunteer Service Foundation, staff interviews, and Indian Youth Civic Engagement documents. When some nations disregard youth issues, they receive inadequate funding for organising activities, and results in lack of national youth policy. Youth from poor families cannot attend Youth Civic Engagement activities without financial sponsorship from supporting organizations. Economic factors are major challenges in both regions.

Since ASEAN Youth Forum lacks financial support to implement projects, private and civil sectors nationally and internationally are relied upon. Yet such collaboration with governmental sectors is not facilitated in some countries along the Mekong River. By contrast, Youth Civic Engagement in India enjoys a positive relationship between private and public sectors, reflecting the ongoing historical influence of the Indian independent movement.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

For long term development and sustainability of Youth Civic Engagement in the regions, the following recommendations are made:

1. Invention by youths is better than having them follow existing plans. Four key youth movements in ASEAN are examples that projects originated without youth participation may not be enduring. Youth participation in creating and evolving such movements guarantees that learning is transferred across generations.

2. Since youth activists require advice from older consultants, they should feel empowered to seek expertise without lessening their roles in movements.

3. Smooth work transitions are vital when teams of youth resign and new ones assume responsibilities. Transitional systems should be put into place to facilitate such changes.

4. Skill training for youth activists should include leadership, professionalism, time management, reliability, and thinking and working processes.

5. Transparent evaluation of youth movement work leads to accountable organizations. Many youth organizations evaluate themselves without external approval and cannot identify, or learn from, mistakes.

6. Budgetary resource from individual donations ensures that some organizations do not take control of Youth Civic Engagement efforts for their own benefit. By accepting donations only from individuals, instead of organizations, the meaning and purpose of such work is less likely to be hijacked.

7. National policies in each country should support youth movements. Although youth organizations seek support from international and regional organizations, it is most efficient to be supported by national leadership.

8. Regional policy plays a key role in overseeing and supporting youth movements. If regional policies do not support or promote the work of youth, it is difficult for them to succeed.
These core factors must be balanced to enable youth movements to achieve their goals. In the complex political, economic, and sociocultural world, youth movements have a role to play in solving and balancing social issues in a peaceful and sustainable manner.

References