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Q20

Indian Diaspora has an important role to play in South-East Asian countries' economy and society. Appraise the role of Indian Diaspora in South- East Asia in this context (250 words).

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2017 · GS II · 15 marks · Diaspora and Developed Countries

Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests, Indian diaspora.

Core demand of the question

- Indian Diaspora has an important role to play in South-East Asian countries' economy and society. Appraise the role of Indian Diaspora in South- East Asia in this context

Revision summary

South-East Asia's Indian communities are old (Malaya, Burma) and also professional and expatriate.

Economic roles include professions, SME trade, historical Chettiar credit, and a bridge for Indian firms.

Socially, Tamil in Singapore, festivals and religious institutions mark multicultural public life.

Myanmar shows how nationalism can shrink an Indian economic role.

India should appraise them as Act East partners, not as a controllable lobby.

Introduction

- **South-East Asia holds some of the oldest Indian overseas communities:** Tamils and other Indians in Malaysia and Singapore, a long trading presence in Indonesia and Thailand, and a complicated Indian-origin story in Myanmar. Appraisal means weighing economic weight, social-cultural presence, and political limits. The diaspora is important to those countries' markets and plural societies, and it is an asset for India's **Act East policy**, but it is not a replica of the American Indian professional lobby.

Body**Who the South-East Asian Indian diaspora is**

- Colonial-era labour and clerical migration produced large Tamil and other Indian communities in Malaya (now Malaysia and Singapore) and in Burma/Myanmar. Chettiar and other merchant groups financed trade and agriculture.
- Post-independence professionals, teachers, and later IT and service workers added a skilled layer in Singapore, Malaysia, and, in smaller numbers, in Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines.
- **The community is internally diverse:** plantation descendants, urban merchants, professionals, and newer expatriates on work passes. Appraisal must not flatten them into one "PIO success" story.

Economic role in host countries

- In Malaysia and Singapore, Indian-origin citizens are visible in professions, public services, retail, and increasingly in tech and finance. Singapore's Indian community punches above its population share in law, medicine, and the civil service.
- Historical Chettiar credit and Indian trading networks linked South-East Asian rice, rubber and textiles to the Bay of Bengal. That older role shaped ports and bazaars even where later nationalism squeezed Indian capital (notably Myanmar after the 1960s).
- Remittances, tourism, and Indian restaurants, cinema and festivals are small as a share of ASEAN GDP but dense in urban social markets.
- Newer Indian firms in ASEAN - IT, pharma, energy, and infrastructure - use diaspora managers and trust networks as a market-entry layer. That is economy as bridge, not only as shopkeeping.
- In Myanmar, expropriation, citizenship fights, and later political crisis reduced the old Indian business role; the appraisal must record decline as well as glory.

Social and cultural role

- Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian Indian institutions, temples, gurdwaras and Tamil schools are part of Malaysia's and Singapore's multicultural public square.
- **Language:** Tamil is an official language in Singapore, which is a rare constitutional honour for a diaspora tongue and a social fact of the city-state.
- Indian cinema, food, yoga and festivals (Deepavali as a public holiday in some States of Malaysia and in Singapore) shape everyday pluralism. Soft power here is lived locally, not only beamed from India.
- **Social tension is also real:** race politics in Malaysia, occasional anti-Indian rhetoric, and the Rohingya and citizenship crises in Myanmar that have trapped or expelled people of Indian origin. A diaspora can be a scapegoat as well as a bridge.

Appraisal for India and for ASEAN

- For host economies, the diaspora supplies skills, small and medium enterprise, and a link to India's demand. It is important, not dominant, beside Chinese business networks and indigenous majorities.
- For Indian foreign policy, PIOs and NRIs in ASEAN support trade, student flows, and a friendly public, which is why PBD-style outreach and consular work matter.
- **Limits:** most Indian-origin citizens owe political loyalty to Kuala Lumpur or Singapore, not to New Delhi. India cannot "use" them as a vote bank abroad without harming them.
- Compared with the Gulf, this diaspora is more settled and citizen; compared with North America, it is less of a high-technology lobby and more of a historical minority. Appraisal should stay in that middle.

Balanced judgment

- The role is historically deep, economically useful, and socially visible in Malaysia and Singapore; thinner but growing in mainland ASEAN; wounded in Myanmar.
- Importance is real and should be cultivated as people-to-people Act East, not as a claim that South-East Asia's economy runs on the Indian diaspora.

Flow diagram

Indian diaspora in SEA -> Skills trade SME
Indian diaspora in SEA -> Tamil culture temples festivals
Indian diaspora in SEA -> Act East people bridge
Malaysia Singapore -> Skills trade SME
Malaysia Singapore -> Tamil culture temples festivals
Myanmar limits -> Citizenship expropriation

Conclusion

The Indian diaspora in South-East Asia matters to host economies as skills, trade networks and small enterprise, and to host societies as a long-standing plural community, especially in Singapore and Malaysia. Its role is uneven, politically bounded, and in Myanmar historically damaged. Appraisal for India is to treat this settled presence as an Act East people-bridge, not as an overseas electorate or a substitute for State-to-State economic policy.

Facts & figures

Tamil as official language, Singapore

Tamil is one of Singapore's official languages, reflecting the settled Indian community's civic place.

Malaysian Indian community

A large, mostly Tamil, citizen minority with roles in plantations historically and in urban professions today.

Nattukottai Chettiars

Historic merchant-bankers who financed trade and agriculture across Burma and Malaya.

Myanmar nationalisation

1960s policies and later citizenship rules displaced much Indian-origin business and status.

Act East Policy

India's strategic and economic turn to ASEAN, of which diaspora and cultural ties are a people-to-people layer.

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