Preface

This book was submitted and successfully defended as a doctoral dissertation under the title “‘Greater India’ and the Indian Expansionist Imagination, c. 1885–1965” at the Faculty of Philosophy, Heidelberg University.

The book examines the arguments and implications of the concept of ‘Greater India’ from the 1880s to the 1960s. The term ‘Greater India’ was an abbreviated reference to ‘Hindu’ cultural influences in Southeast Asia over a period of about 1500 years of history. By extention, the implications of the arguments were that India had once been able to sustain a ‘Hindu’ colonial empire, signalling a cultural and geopolitical greatness in the past, and would therefore once again emerge to greatness. The idea of ‘Greater India’ thus expanded geographically to include other parts of the world that had been greatly influenced by Hindu civilization, and chronologically to the present and future, to an imagined Indian Hindu-dominated world outside India.

‘Greater India’ was crucially connected with a Hindu revivalist nationalism, which sought, and seeks, to establish a Hindu-inflected political order in India. In building such a Hindu nationalism, the ‘Greater India’ theme was central, not only because the protagonists of ‘Greater India’ were many of the same people as the ideologues of Hindu nationalism, but because this normalising of thinking about an Indian expansionist history glorified a ‘Hindu’ period (that included a Buddhist period and subsumed it within a definition of ‘Hindu’) of Indian ‘civilizational’ and sometimes ‘racial’ dominance, predominantly but not only in Southeast Asia.

The subtitle of the book, “The Rise and Decline of the Idea of a Lost Hindu Empire” refers to the lifespan of the ‘Greater India’ idea, rather than the historical time-frame to which it claims to refer. The cluster of ideas that comprised ‘Greater India’ emerged in the 1880s, with ‘Greater India’ becoming a recognized term in itself by the 1920s, before being institutionalized in an eponymous Society in 1926. European scholars had influenced the formation of the ‘Greater India’ idea: their writings laid the foundations for Indian scholars to consider this heritage as part of their own Indian civilization. In the way they reframed the argument, the narrative of ‘Greater India’ implied a (nation-)state of Hindus as having existed with all its national institutions, and including overseas ‘colonies’, before British rule. The Indian discourse on ‘Greater India’ was an Indian nationalist version of a civilizing mission, framing Indian civilization as superior to Southeast Asian civilization, and with a history of expansion or colonization comparable to or even superior to the Europeans’.

The language of civilizational hierarchies used by the ‘Greater India’ protagonists included claims about “primitive” “savages” in Southeast Asia, Africa, and
elsewhere, who had been “civilized”, or were in need of being civilized, by the Hindus. The theme of ‘Greater India’ was widely discussed in the same superior civilizational framework in Indian history textbooks and articles. Approaching independence, and in the era of inter-Asian cooperation, scholarship on Southeast Asia could not be framed in terms of the Indian imperialist narrative of ‘Greater India’. The cultural superiority argument, applied before the 1950s, became irrelevant or damaging. The newly independent countries of Southeast Asia were not inclined to accept a narrative of ‘Greater India’ which suggested their own inferiority. By the 1960s, therefore, new trends in politics and historiography had rendered the ‘Greater India’ idea obsolete.

The history that ends in the 1960s for the purposes of this study has a further twist to the plot with the re-emergence of the ‘Greater India’ narrative in recent times. This adds a sense of urgency to the present publication.