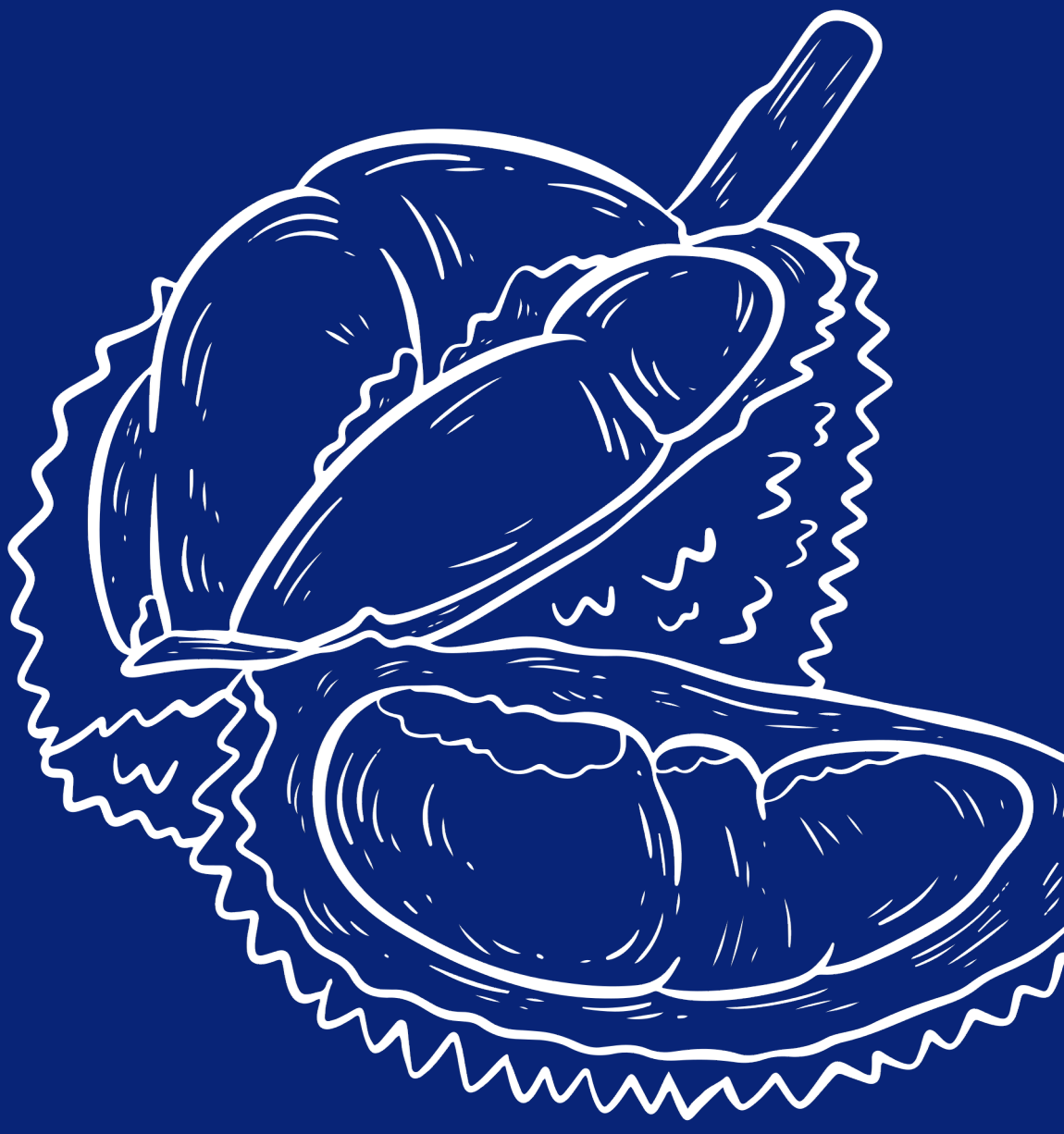
LAKSHMAN KADIRGAMAR INSTITUTE
OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND STRATEGIC STUDIES

DURIAN FLAVOUR IN COLOMBO: SRI LANKA IN A CHANGING ASIA AND THE WIDER INDO-PACIFIC

Guest Lecture by Ambassador Gurjit Singh



Report by Gavinya Wijesekera

Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies (LKIIRSS) is an independent foreign policy think tank, affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Employment & Tourism of Sri Lanka.

Named after the late Lakshman Kadirgamar, P.C., M.P., and three-times Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister, that institute engages in independent research of Sri Lanka's international relations and strategic interests, providing insights and recommendations that advance justice, peace, prosperity, and sustaibility

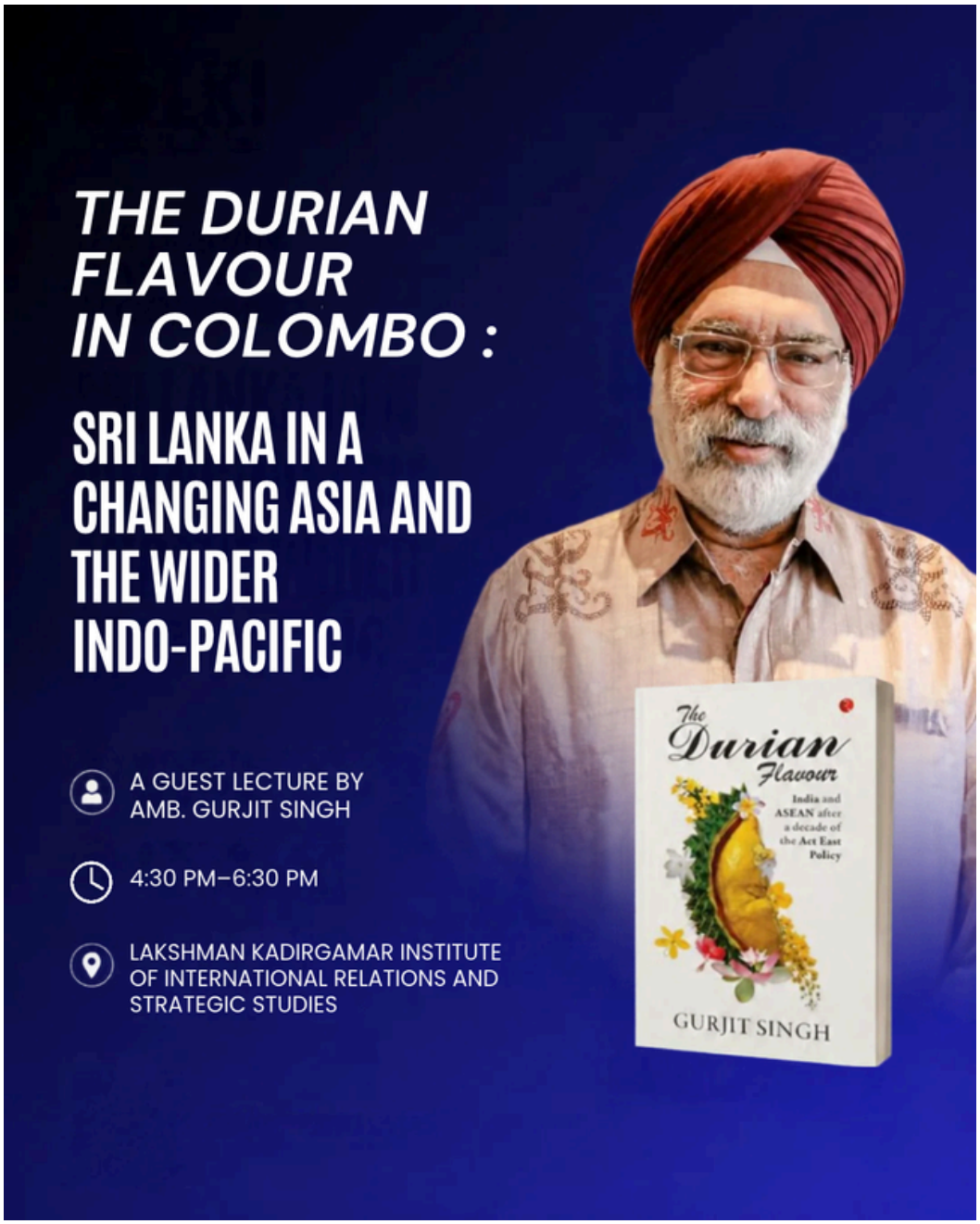
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***Durian Flavour* in Colombo: India, ASEAN, and Sri Lanka in a Changing Asia and the Wider Indo-Pacific**
Guest Lecture by Ambassador Gurjit Singh
6th of October 2026
4:30PM to 6:30PM
Light House Auditorium, LKIIRSS, Colombo 7

This report has been prepared by Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies (LKIIRSS) to document the proceedings and key insights of the guest lecture Durian Flavour in Colombo: India, ASEAN, and Sri Lanka in a Changing Asia and the Wider Indo-Pacific, held on the 6 of October 2026.

The views, opinions and observations expressed by the speakers and contributors are attributable to them and do not reflect the official position of LKIIRSS or the Government of Sri Lanka. The report is intended for informational and educational purposes and seeks to summarise the key themes and discussions arising from the event. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, the report should not be interpreted as an endorsement by LKIIRSS of the views expressed or as representing a comprehensive account of every contribution made during the event.

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LIST OF SPEAKERS



Ambassador Gurjit Singh is a distinguished Indian diplomat with extensive experience in international relations, economic diplomacy, and development cooperation. During his diplomatic career, he served as India's Ambassador to Indonesia, Ethiopia, Germany, and the African Union. He was posted to Sri Lanka from 1988 to 1991, early in his diplomatic career, as the First Secretary at the Indian High Commission.

He is an Honorary Professor at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Indore and has authored several books on international partnerships and economic diplomacy. His latest book, *The Durian Flavour: India and ASEAN after a Decade of the Act East Policy*, explores the potential for deeper India–ASEAN cooperation and the importance of trust, sustainable development, and a stronger Global South partnership.

Piyumani Ranasinghe is a Senior Research Fellow at the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute. An Attorney-at-Law and interdisciplinary researcher, specializing in gender, environmental and climate governance, and Critical Discourse Analysis. She is also a certified International Negotiator. Her extensive academic portfolio includes an M.Sc. in Human Rights and Multiculturalism from the University of South-Eastern Norway (2021-2023), an L.L.B. from the University of Peradeniya (2014-2018), and a B.Sc. in International Relations from the University of London (2013-2016).



Her published work focuses on international human rights and environmental governance, with a specific interest in pluriversal approaches to environmental security. She is currently reading for her Masters in Gender and Women Studies at the University of Colombo.

Event Curator



Gavinya Wijesekera is a public health and gender studies scholar, currently interning at the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute. Her research focus lies in the intersection of women, health, and public life. She has a Masters in Public Health with a focus on Population Health Promotion from Tufts University School of Medicine, Massachusetts and a Bachelors of Arts in English Literature and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies from Augustana College, Illinois.

She is an incoming Masters candidate at the Gender and Women Studies programs at the University of Colombo.

LAKSHMAN KADIRGAMAR INSTITUTE
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KEYNOTE: Ambassador Gurjit Singh

DURIAN FLAVOUR IN COLOMBO: SRI LANKA IN A CHANGING ASIA AND THE WIDER INDO-PACIFIC

The following section presents a summary of the key points and arguments expressed by the speaker during the keynote address. It has been edited for clarity and readability.

Durian from an Indian perspective refers to ASEAN; hard to enter but soft once you've made your way inside. There is a rich history between India and ASEAN that is often overlooked, which has caused these links to be covered with hard shell, very much like the heart of it. As a matter of fact, the entire world seems to have resorted to transactional relationships, devoid of loyalty and trust. The Durian Flavour: India and ASEAN after a Decade of the Act East Policy reflect on this, delving into building sustainable relationships in contemporary times while keeping best interest in mind.

Today's world of international relations is full of mistrust, with energy resources and security heavily violated, unregulated sanctions imposed, and the rise of AI making everyone distrustful of one another. As one pandemic is conquered, another emerges. Neither technology or partnership is open to trust anymore. That is the reality of the global world. *The Durian Flavour* asks, how do we subvert this distrust and animosity to bring about change that actively benefits our people as foreign policy is meant to do?

India and ASEAN remain divided by their habit of looking away from each other towards other nations in the hope of forming diplomatic relationships. India looks to Japan, ASEAN looks to West Asia.



Amb. Gurjit Singh delivering keynote

However, if we, India and ASEAN, were to look at each other, we would find that many of the problems we face are solvable –together.

In the past, ASEAN, specifically in its desire to grasp onto a global power, neglected its presence and potential within South Asia and the larger Global South. There seems to be a shift in this in the more recent years, with ASEAN showing more attention to the Global South, which holds larger implications for global governance. To face the big powers of today, the Global South must stand together to create multipolarity. The book looks to this multipolarity, a deviation from the big powers, as a means of bringing truly effective and long lasting change to the Global South and its people. Global South outlook is the panacea to the Indo-ASEAN relations.

Another aspect that The Durian Flavour delves into is national development through efforts targeting population level empowerment. International relations often look to policy level efforts when pursuing progress. However, often larger initiatives of this kind do not directly translate into actionable deliverables for the everyday person. Strategies outlined in the book that can be better utilized to ensure that global and national level decision making benefits lives on a population level are as follows,

- **Impact investing:** Private company capital should be directed towards public effort to achieve Sustainable Development Goals. Companies such as Ma's Foods in Sri Lanka and the Aavishkaar Fund in India are both successful models that demonstrate this.
- **Green Economy:** Countries must invest in solar plants, green hydrogen, biomass, and waste-to-energy. This must be coupled with essential skills for these new sectors, as there's a significant market for job development within this field.
- **Trilateral Cooperation:** The Indian development model is well regarded, in terms of coast, quality and efficiency. This must be leveraged to build partnerships and collaborate with G7 countries like Germany, as well as Denmark and countries in the African region.

The Durian Flavour also discusses regional governance, taking a closer look into complexities of trade agreements. For Sri Lanka, this points to a tendency to seek out partnerships with countries like Germany, Denmark, and UAE, despite occupying sectoral dialogue partner status with ASEAN.

Ultimately, *The Durian Flavour* calls for a shift from transactional diplomacy to relationships built on trust, mutual respect, and shared prosperity. India and ASEAN's historical and cultural ties must translate into practical cooperation that addresses the needs of their people and overcomes mutual mistrust.



Amb. Gurjit Singh with members of LKIIRSS board of management Dr. Ranga Kanlansooriya and Dr. Kamal Tennakoon, and LKIIRSS senior research fellows Piyumani Ransansighe, Madhuka Rukmalgama, Nillasi Liyanage

From left to right: Piyumani Ransansighe, Dr. Ranga Kanlansooriya, Amb. Gurjit Singh and Family, Dr. Kamal Tennakoon, Madhuka Rukmalgama, Nillasi Liyanage

A stronger Global South partnership can advance multipolarity, strengthen regional trade, and foster cooperation in technology, climate action, and security.

In Sri Lanka, closer engagement with India and ASEAN offers opportunities to diversify partnerships while safeguarding strategic autonomy. However, diplomacy must deliver tangible benefits through sustainable investment, green industries, skills development, and trilateral cooperation. Regional platforms such as the ASEAN, BIMSTEC, and IORA can further strengthen dialogue and address shared challenges.

The durian's hard shell thus symbolises the barriers that India and ASEAN must overcome. A decade after the launch of the Act East Policy, the challenge is to transform historical connections into enduring partnerships.

By placing people at the centre of foreign policy, India and ASEAN can build a more inclusive, resilient, and equitable regional order — one founded not on dependency, but on trust and shared aspirations.

RESEARCH INSIGHTS: Piyumani Ranasinghe

Ongoing Research Examining Sri Lanka's Strategic Agency and the Concept of "Indo-Pacific"

The following section presents a summary of the key point and arguments expressed by the speaker. It has been edited for clarity and readability.

Ambassador Singh often references the rich historical relationships shared by India and East Asia in *The Durian Flavour: India and ASEAN after a Decade of the Act East Policy*, adding additional depth and context to his analysis of modern day diplomatic relations between India and ASEAN typically missing from the average body of work. Following this example, Sri Lanka's positionality with India, ASEAN, and within the larger Indo-Pacific, is best understood when framed by its history.

The Mahavamsa describes the relationship between King Devanampiya Tissa of Sri Lanka and Emperor Ashoka of India as one of friendship, maintained through envoys, gifts and correspondence across the sea, despite the two rulers never meeting. It also tells us about envoys travelling from Jambukola to Patliputra. Centuries later, the Chinese monk Faxian travelled to Sri Lanka, spending around two years here before continuing his journey across the maritime routes of Asia. Ibn Battuta would later describe his own travels through the Indian Ocean and his encounter with Serendib. This idea of the Indian Ocean as a space of movement is captured, in a very different way, in Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies. The novel follows the Ibis across the Indian Ocean, bringing together people, commodities, migration and colonial power. Ghosh reminds us that the Indian Ocean was never simply a space between places; it was a space through which history itself moved. These episodes locate Sri Lanka as a locus of traversing forces –be it people, ideas, religions, commodities and political interests– debunking the myth of an isolated island.



Piyumani Ransansighe delivering introductory remarks

An island nation in the midst of the Indo-Pacific, there is no denial of Sri Lanka's approachability –both in terms of the hospitality of its people and availability to foreign influence due to its many open ports.

The question then, given Sri Lanka's geographic location, becomes one of strategy and autonomy. Of Sri Lanka's own understanding of its place in the region, both benefits and drawbacks that come with it, and ultimately how the country chooses to engage with the wider international system.

Concrete answers on this matter are yet to be uncovered by the research currently undertaken at LKIIRSS; however, like all good research topics, it has led us to more questions. These four questions give way to a more comprehensive understanding of Sri Lanka's strategic autonomy within the ASEAN and Indo-Pacific context, providing us with a Sri Lankan lens through which one can listen to Ambassador Singh's reflections.

Note that these remarks must also be situate within Sri Lanka's own democratic experience. Sri Lanka's socio-economic and political system has evolved around a strong commitment to democratic governance. In 1931, Sri Lanka introduced universal adult suffrage, establishing a long-standing tradition of representative government. This tradition has been accompanied by commitments to the rule of law, human rights, individual freedoms and media freedom. These values shape how Sri Lanka understands its place in the region and engages with the wider international system.



From left to right: Amb. Gurjit Singh and Piyumani Ransansighe at LKIIRSS library

Question 1: Is Sri Lanka's strategic importance and Sri Lanka's strategic agency the same thing?

There remains no doubt that Sri Lanka is of strategic significance, as our geography situates us along major maritime routes. The island sits southeast of the Indian subcontinent, connecting to both South Asia and Southeast Asia.

However, while geography is a strategic endowment, it does not give us the capacity to determine what happens because of that geography. A recently co-authored op-ed on the Sunday Morning, Geopolitics of Logistics, reveals that a strategic location does not determine who controls infrastructure, how access is structured, how infrastructure is regulated, or how the benefits of that infrastructure translate into the wider national economy.

Sri Lanka's location gives the island strategic significance, but strategic agency depends on the capacity to determine what that significance produces. That capacity, in turn, depends on institutions, policy, regulation and ultimately our ability to shape the terms on which we engage with the wider region.

Question 2: How is Sri Lanka actually engaging with the changing Asia?

Sri Lanka has shown considerable expansion and diversification of our engagement across Asia. This appears to be a result of both the country's recognition of the symbiotic nature of its relationships with nearby nations and as well its capacity to leverage its location and skills to create sustainable change in the region. At the United Nations General Assembly in September, Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister, Mr. Vijitha Herath recalled that Sri Lanka's prosperity is closely tied to the Indian ocean.

Several examples of this include: our relationship with India today that extends across energy, economic cooperation, technology, maritime affairs and people-to-people relations; Sri Lanka acceding to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2007 and maintaining an Ambassador to ASEAN since 2016; Sri Lanka's role as the lead country for Science, Technology and Innovation and its interest in operationalising the BIMSTEC Technology Transfer Facility in Colombo; and through Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), in which Sri Lanka has similarly engaged in maritime security, ocean governance, disaster management, the blue economy, science and technology and other areas of regional cooperation.

These engagements paint a picture of Sri Lanka as a country seeking multiple and overlapping regional spaces, providing equitable contribution proportionate to its power as a small state. Whilst these engagements are still evolving, they suggest a major shift from mere presence in regional spaces to a more role as contributor.

Question 3: Is presence enough? How does participation demonstrate strategic autonomy? OR What is the role strategic autonomy plays in differentiating between passive recipients and active contributors?

This is where the distinction between presence and participation arises. presence alone within diplomatic affairs gives way to a more passive approach to international relations, with a country often limited to taking physical space without necessarily having significant influence over their agendas, rules or outcomes.

In contrast, participation with agency points at having capacity to determine who, when, and how that space is taken up. Such a country takes on to themselves the role of an active contributor, leveraging strategic agency to shape terms and conditions in diplomatic governance.



Amb. Gurjit Singh and family at LKIIRSS library

Therefore, in our research, we understand strategic agency through at least four dimensions:

- **The ability to contribute to regional agendas**
- **The ability to negotiate the terms of cooperation**
- **The ability to develop regional initiatives and contribute specialised capacities**
- **The ability to participate meaningfully in shaping the rules that govern regional cooperation**

Be it Sri Lanka's role in BIMSTEC's Science, Technology and Innovation pillar, our engagement with the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) Centre of Excellence provides, or our role in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), what we are beginning to see is a transition from symbolism to substance, i.e. the capacity to contribute, negotiate and shape.

Strategic autonomy, therefore, is no longer predominantly remaining equidistant from competing powers. For Sri Lanka, defined as a small state in our study, it is more useful to understand strategic autonomy as a capacity: the capacity to engage, negotiate, diversify, choose and regulate. The research questions raised today provide a Sri Lankan lens through which one can digest Ambassador Singh's reflections.

Vital to also note that Sri Lanka does not exercise that capacity in a legal vacuum. The country's regional and international engagements are structured by international law, ranging from the law of the sea to international agreements governing trade, investment, connectivity, environmental protection and other areas of cooperation. Another dimension of international law is its implementation through domestic institutions and domestic law. Strategic autonomy must also account for whether Sri Lanka has the legal and institutional capacity to negotiate partnerships, implement its obligations, regulate their domestic consequences and preserve sufficient policy space to pursue its own interests.

And perhaps, borrowing Ambassador Singh's metaphor, Sri Lanka's own place in Asia has something of the character of the durian. We have a distinctive strategic and geographical character; we have deep historical connections; and we occupy a position that is difficult to overlook; however the value of that position does not reveal itself automatically.



Gavinya Wijesekera delivering vote of thanks

It has to be cultivated through institutions, diplomacy, negotiation and capacity.

Thank you.

BOOK PRESENTATION



Gifting of books by Amb. Gurjit Singh to LKIIRSS

The Durian Flavour: India and ASEAN after a Decade of the Act East Policy
written by Amb. Gurjit Singh

Vignettes From Nehru
edited by Lakhan Lal Mehrotra

The books were received by
Dr. Ranga Kalansooriya, member of LKIIRSS board of management, on behalf of LKIIRSS



Gifiting of book by Dr. Ranga Kalansooriya to Amb. Gurjit Singh

The Youthquake
written by Dr. Ranga Kalansooriya, with Eva Danayanti, Mandana Ismail Abewickrema, Nazia Afrin Monami, Sonia Awale and Betty Han

EVENT GALLERY
















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