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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE BANGKOK TREATY OF 1909 AS THE BEGINNING TO BRITISH DOMINATION IN THE NORTHERN MALAY STATES: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

The British gained a firm control over the Northern Malay States (Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu and Perlis) through the Bangkok Treaty of 1909, which was initially regarded as a routine diplomatic manoeuvre. The British and Siamese made a political compromise that transformed territorial boundaries, realigned the administrative framework and consolidated colonial sovereignty in the region. This qualitative study aimed to review previous literature on the political and socio-economic developments post signing of the treaty by relying on historical research and content analysis of credible sources. The review shows that scholarly discourse on this issue often revolved around three key areas. First, the historical and political dynamics that led to the treaty's signing were explored to understand what motivated the British and Siamese. Second, terms of the treaty and their effects on the socio-political structure of the Northern Malay States were analysed. Lastly, they focused on how the agreement allowed a more entrenched British dominance in these states. Overall, the literature illustrates how the Bangkok Treaty of 1909 reshaped the political and social landscape of the Malay Peninsula's northern region, thus leading to this study's valuable contribution towards understanding the power struggles and colonial legacy that continue to influence Malaysia's modern history.

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Introduction:-

According to the historical philosophy and power discourse frameworks, the Bangkok Treaty of 1909 was not merely a political document marking the transfer of the northern Malay states from Siamese influence to British colonial control. Conversely, it reflected the realities of power politics, which reflects the existence of the 'dialectics of power' between Western imperialists and Southeast Asian political entities, especially Siam and the Northern Malay States (Mokhtar, 2021). The treaty marked a critical juncture in the region's geopolitical history, signifying physical dominance and epistemic control, which was the management of knowledge systems, cultural values and

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social norms that have long permeated and become rooted in the local society (Ahmad et al., 2019). A broader analysis indicates that this treaty was the product of complex international politics, where compromise and strategic survival formed the core of Siam's diplomatic response. Siam adopted a political intelligence strategy, which is a form of pragmatic rationality aimed at preserving sovereignty, due to the pressure of colonial powers like Britain and France, even at the cost of losing their sovereign territory (Mendiola et al., 2022). Hence, the Bangkok Treaty of 1909 can be viewed as a tactical adaptation to mitigate the rising control of global powers that aligns with a utilitarian state philosophy that prioritizes political survival over the preservation of geographical borders (Kislenko, 2002).

The treaty had far-reaching consequences for the Northern Malay States (Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu and Perlis). It provided an opportunity for the British to restructure the political and social systems according to a colonial design that focuses on centralized authority and resource extraction from the colonised territories (Ahmad et al., 2019). These changes were not only institutional but also cut across deeper layers of Malay social philosophy, shifting the traditional idea of sovereignty and royal authority towards a bureaucratic form of rule that eroded cultural independence (Sulkafle, 2024). This marked a political transition from a spiritual and tradition-based governance system to a colonial structure rooted in administrative control and economic logic.

This study aimed to critically explore how the Bangkok Treaty of 1909 acted as a catalyst for the expansion of British dominance in the Northern Malay States. It also adopted the historical approach and power discourse analysis methods to examine how various political actors, from colonial powers to the Siamese government and local elites, drafted their strategies in efforts to shape a challenging geopolitical landscape. Overall, this study hoped to record historical events and uncover the philosophies behind political decisions and their long-term effects on the socio-political structure and the collective identity of the Malay society in the northern part of the peninsula.

Literature Review:-

This section discusses previous research related to the Bangkok Treaty of 1909 and its impact on the Northern Malay States. The purpose of this literature review was to identify key findings, research approaches and gaps in existing studies to support the analytical framework of this present study, which focused on the historical, political and administrative changes pursuant to the signing of the treaty.

1. The Historical and Political Dynamics that Led to the Bangkok Treaty of 1909

Several key factors that shaped the historical and political dynamics leading to the Bangkok Treaty of 1909 had emerged from a detailed review of scholarly work, such as journal articles, books and historical studies. The focus of this study was to understand how social, political, and economic interactions between Siam, colonial powers such as Britain, and broader international forces triggered this historic event. The Bangkok Treaty of 1909 was not merely a political strategy in this context, rather a diplomatic strategy rooted in power paradigms and early 20th century geopolitical interests.

The Bangkok Treaty of 1909, officially known as the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909, marked a significant moment in Southeast Asia's political landscape, especially when involving the northern Malay states. The negotiation between the British and Siamese governments culminated in a treaty that realigned territorial boundaries and established control over the Malay states without consulting the local rulers. This led to major political shifts, especially in places like Kelantan and Patani, as highlighted by Ahmad et al. (2019) in their study, 'Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909: Its Implications on Kelantan's Political and Delineation Status'. The treaty also served Britain's imperial interests by consolidating their influence over the Federated Malay States (FMS) by creating financial dependency through agreements like the FMS-Siam Railway Treaty, which further consolidated British economic control in the region (Singh, 2019).

Roy (2017), in his book, 'Siamese Melting Pot: Ethnic Minorities in the Making of Bangkok', had offered deeper insight into the role of ethnic minorities in shaping Siam's social and political order. He argued that the presence and influence of these groups reflected complex social interactions and tensions created by external forces. He opined that Bangkok was not just an economic hub but also a 'microcosm' of conflict and power competition. The role of different ethnic communities was crucial in steering Siam's foreign policy. These changes reflect a dialectic phase between tradition and modernity, which eventually became a theme that underpinned the Bangkok Treaty of 1909. As Sulkafle (2024) noted, Siam's national identity was partly formed through its ongoing efforts to create a balance between foreign powers that threatened its sovereignty. Meanwhile, Terwiel (2005), in his book 'Thailand's Political

History: From the 13th Century to Recent Times', provided a broader perspective of Thailand's political development from the Sukhothai period to the modern era. He suggested that the treaty was a direct response to the geopolitical reality faced by Siam, which created a constant tension between being one of the very few Southeast Asian nations to escape colonization and the growing pressure from Western imperialism. Terwiel saw the Bangkok Treaty of 1909 as a clear example of a tactical 'necessity' made by Siam to protect its sovereignty through diplomatic compromise with major powers.

In addition, Mishra (2010), in 'The History of Thailand', viewed Thailand as a nation that managed to remain independent, though it still had to endure the pressures of colonial expansion. Mishra argued that the Bangkok Treaty of 1909 was not just a diplomatic tool, but more of an 'adaptive strategy' used by Siam to navigate threats from major powers, particularly Britain and France. The philosophy behind the treaty reflects a pragmatic approach aimed at preserving national sovereignty in a world increasingly shaped by imperial rivalry.

Meanwhile, Ouyyanont (2018), in his seminal work, 'A Regional Economic History of Thailand', reconstructed the economic discourse between Bangkok and its surrounding regions. He highlighted economy's vital role in shaping Siam's foreign policy. Ouyyanont suggested that the treaty's negotiations were not driven purely by politics, but also by Siam's need to maintain economic balance amid growing foreign influence. As such, the treaty can also be seen as a pivotal moment where economic and political interests converge to uphold internal stability.

Yang (2022), in his study, 'The Historical Dynamics of Chinese Politics', focused mainly on Chinese political history, but also contributed valuable insight into the Bangkok Treaty of 1909. Previous studies often overlooked China's influence on Siamese politics. Yang pointed out that Siam's relationship with China, as a dominant East Asian power, added another perspective towards understanding the treaty. The treaty was the basically the consequence of 'political acumen' that required collaboration between powerful actors to achieve geopolitical stability without the use of coercion. Finally, Mayr (2012), in 'Consciousising Relatedness: Systemic Conflict Transformation in Political Constellations', analysed the resolution of political conflicts achieved through the awareness of interrelationships formed among the involved parties. While his study focused more on conflict theory, it provides a relevant perspective for understanding the Bangkok Treaty of 1909's success. The agreement was not merely the outcome of relative strength or weakness but stemmed from the political maturity of those involved in reaching a mutually beneficial resolution. The 'relational awareness' concept guided Siam's foreign policy, especially when dealings with major powers like Britain and France, and helped shape a diplomatic process rooted in mutual understanding.

Based on these studies, it can be concluded that the Bangkok Treaty of 1909 was the result of a complex constellation of historical, political and economic forces involving Siam and major global powers. The 'dialects of power' and an adaptive strategy in response to an increasingly complex geopolitical environment had eventually led to the treaty. These findings illustrate how Siam was able to maintain its sovereignty while constantly adjusting to the shifting external dynamics that were shaping global geopolitics at the time.

2. Terms of the Bangkok Treaty of 1909 and Its Implication on the Socio-Political Structure of the Northern Malay States

The Bangkok Treaty of 1909, which saw the cessation of the northern Malay states to British control, was not merely a political document outlining new geographical borders but rather a turning point that significantly altered the social and political fabric of the affected states. The treaty's impact went beyond high-level politics and had direct consequences on the social dynamics, economy and class relations that was incumbent in Malay society. Academic studies have examined the Bangkok Treaty of 1909 and its influence on socio-political structures in order provide valuable insight in efforts to understand these changes.

Gullick (1987), in 'Malay Society in the Late Nineteenth Century: The Beginnings of Change', stated that the Malay society during the late 19th century was experiencing a dynamic transformation phase. The presence of external influences had started to introduce new elements into long-standing social structures. Gullick emphasized that these changes were not merely reactions to colonization, but part of a broader effort by the local society to adjust to increasing exposure to the outside world, especially in the aftermath of the Bangkok Treaty of 1909. In this context, Malay communities were navigating a delicate balance between preserving tradition and responding to growing external influences. This study provides a glimpse on how the socio-political order in the northern Malay states evolved, especially when involving the nobility and peasantry, who had to adapt to changes introduced by colonial

rule (Mokhtar, 2021). According to Su-ming (1965), in his literary work 'Kelantan and Trengganu, 1909-1939', one significant change was in the area of religious administration, which was once under the purview of the palace but now was overseen by the British advisor. The appointment of religious officers, as well as the administration of 'zakat' and 'waqf', was placed under the purview of the state government, which was led by colonial officials. Islamic legislation, which is the core of Islamic justice, was gradually replaced by British civil law in matters pertaining to property, family and public administration (Institut Terjemahan Negara, 2008). This led to an erosion of Islamic values and identity in the administration and everyday life of the Malay community.

Falarti (2012), in 'Malay Kingship in Kedah: Religion, Trade and Society', offered a thorough analysis of Kedah's political position following the Bangkok Treaty of 1909. He explored how the Kedah sultans, who had long defended their sovereignty, faced increasing pressure from Siam and other external powers after the agreement. Falarti posited that Kedah's strength lay in its geographic location, economy and its sultan's ability to integrate traditional rule with external influences. This strategic flexibility helped them maintain political stability despite external interference. The impact of Siamese influence and growing ties with Western powers significantly shaped the political landscape of the state. In a later edition of 'Malay Kingship in Kedah: Religion, Trade and Society', Falarti (2013) further expanded on the challenges faced by the Kedah sultanate after the treaty. He noted that although Kedah's political and trade environment came under increasing foreign influence, the ruling class managed to skilfully navigate these pressures. Their ability to adapt to new political realities became crucial in managing the transformations brought about by the Bangkok Treaty of 1909.

One of the studies that highlighted the impact of the Bangkok Treaty of 1909 on the Malay monarchy was by Suwannathat-Pian (2011) entitled, 'Palace, Political Party and Power: A Story of the Socio-Political Development of Malay Kingship'. This study explored changes in the monarchy and how the Malay political system adapted to the Westminster-based democratic model after independence. It describes how the Malay monarchy underwent major transformations following the Bangkok Treaty of 1909 and later, after the country gained its independence, shifting from a central political authority to a more symbolic role. The royal institution continued to hold an important place in Malay political identity despite these changes, an influence that became more apparent in the post-World War II era (Soenarno, 1960). Suwannathat-Pian (2011) showed that the Malay monarchy, once a pillar of political power, had adjusted to new governance systems post-independence and the consequence of the political changes following the Bangkok Treaty of 1909. This study suggested that although the ruler's political role diminished, they remained vital to the construction of national identity and strengthening Malaysia's sovereignty. In this context, Yamashita and Eades (2002), in 'Globalization in Southeast Asia', presented a perspective on how globalization, in tandem with the Bangkok Treaty of 1909, had shaped Malaysia's political and social structures. This study revealed how global forces accelerated socio-economic transformations in the northern Malay states and illustrated the far-reaching effects of the treaty.

The views of Croissant and Lorenz (2018) in 'Comparative Politics of Southeast Asia: An Introduction to Governments and Political Regimes' offer another compelling perspective. Their study examined the evolution of political systems in Southeast Asia, and how the Bangkok Treaty of 1909 significantly affected the relationship between the Malay states and British colonial power. The social and political influence introduced by the treaty led to growing tensions between state sovereignty and foreign control. In this regard, Sultan Zainal Abidin III of Terengganu resisted British interference and attempted to limit the power of British agents, despite the conditions outlined in the treaty (Resad & Jamsari, 2023). In addition, Ganesan (2013), in 'Conjunctures and Continuities in Southeast Asian Politics', firmly connected the Bangkok Treaty of 1909's effects to local and international politics. The study identified the treaty as a key 'conjuncture' or a turning point in Southeast Asian political history that reshaped the Siam-Britain relationship and also had a direct impact on the Malay political system. This study suggested that after the treaty, the Malay states had restructured their level and form of interactions with major powers, which produced long-term consequences that shaped Malaysia's political landscape to this day. These studies provide valuable insight into the socio-political transformations in the northern Malay states following the Bangkok Treaty of 1909. This corpus of studies offer a rich understanding of how the treaty shaped the region's political and social transformation based on shifts in the monarchy and political systems caused by the growing influence of external powers that advocated the ties between Siam, the British, and the Malay states.

3. The Consolidation of British Domination in the Northern Malay States After the Bangkok Treaty of 1909

A thorough analysis of the treaty's impact reveals how the British introduced a system that changed governance and permeated the social fabric of everyday life. They established a more centralized administrative system, introduced

new taxes, and gained control of key economic resources, such as rubber and tin. These initiatives consolidated British dominance in the region and allowed them to influence the relationship between rulers and the people, as well as the aristocracy and the lower classes, who became more marginalized under the new social order.

Reflecting on the ideas of Yaakop (2010) in 'The British Legacy on the Development of Politics in Malaya', British influence in the northern Malay states became more evident after the Bangkok Treaty of 1909, especially after they took over the administrative system and introduced a more centralized governance structure. The British implemented various steps to maintain control, including a taxation system that gave them a tighter grip over the local economy by consolidating authority through the Governor of the Federated Malay States (Jeshurun, 1971). These steps had increased colonial revenue and ensured that the locals remained under strong British influence.

Klein (1968), in *British Expansion in Malaya, 1897-1902*, also highlighted that Siam's influence in the northern Malay states significantly declined after the treaty, thus, creating more space for British expansion. The British acted as political rulers with the transfer of power and also sought to dominate key sectors, like trade and agriculture. They strengthened their hold through diplomacy and ensured that the Malay rulers and elites accepted their influence with little resistance. This explains how they managed to promptly control the region, while still trying to alleviate tensions with the Siamese government. In 'British Influence in Northern Malaya: A Post-Bangkok Analysis', Rosdi et al. (2022) described how the British began a comprehensive social transformation in the northern Malay states after the treaty. One major strategy was the introduction of Western education, which significantly changed the local social structure (Hussini, 2023). Control over education gave the British power to shape the thinking of the younger generation to align more closely with colonial ideology. This strengthened the position of the Malay elite who adapted to the British administrative system, while the lower classes, especially farmers and labourers, became increasingly marginalised in the new social order.

Raja (2015), in 'The Early British Administrators in the Malay States, 1874-1909', discussed how British influence extended into the daily lives of the Malays, especially in administration and economic matters. The study noted that British control in local government matters grew, with numerous key decisions being made by British officers. The Malay sultans and rulers had to compromise with this influence. Consequently, the once-autonomous Malay nobility faced a decline in political power and had to adjust to a more centralized British system. Lastly, Mokhtar et al. (2017), in 'Perkembangan Sistem Perdagangan Merkantilisme Negeri-negeri Melayu Bersekutu (1909-1913)', outlined how the post-treaty economic system focused more on exploiting the natural resources of the northern Malay states. The British introduced a commercial agriculture model centred on rubber and tin, which later became the backbone of the Malayan economy. The tight control over these resources gave the British an opportunity to consolidate their role as economic colonizers in the region. According to Lees (2009) in 'Being British in Malaya, 1890-1940', this dynamic power shift eventually shaped Malaya's socio-political landscape heading into the mid-20th century.

Hence, it can be concluded that the Bangkok Treaty of 1909 was a political-based agreement that facilitated the transfer of power while marking the beginning of stronger British domination in the northern Malay states. The British successfully introduced changes to the administrative and economic structures that gave them full control over these territories. Socially, the shift in power also redefined relationships between the aristocracy and the ordinary people, with the elite growing increasingly dependent on the colonial system to maintain their status. The effects of this dominance were felt in politics and it also vastly influenced the Malay society's social and economic identity in the north of the peninsula.

Conclusion:-

The Bangkok Treaty of 1909 marked a turning point in history that changed the course of politics in Malaya, especially in the northern Malay states. It was a bilateral agreement between Britain and Siam, as well as a clear example of a power struggle in the geopolitical landscape of early 20th-century's modern imperialism (Mendiola et al., 2022). The treaty, from a historical-philosophical perspective, shows that a region's destiny is not solely shaped by internal strength, but also by political actors' adaptability to changing international pressures.

The role of Siam's strategic thinking cannot be ignored in this regard. Siam managed to safeguard its core interests by adopting a pragmatic diplomatic approach and a Machiavellian political philosophy that prioritized power survival and national stability (Trakulhun, 2024). The cessation of Malay territories to Britain was part of a survival strategy in the face of imperial rivalries. However, this treaty had profound consequences on the social, political,

economic and cultural structures of states directly affected by this treaty (Ahmad et al., 2019). Britain's ensuing dominance focused on administration, education system, class structure and power relations between the elites and the common people. The British introduced a form of modern hegemony, based on the power dynamics perspective, that focused on control over knowledge, economy and bureaucracy. This initiative shifted Malay society from a traditional system rooted in royal sovereignty and collective values to a colonial system that was centralized, hierarchical and focused on productivity (Fernandez, 1999). Therefore, the Bangkok Treaty of 1909 became a meeting point between Eastern epistemology, centred on customs and values, and Western epistemology, based on political rationalism and control.

Based on reviews of numerous previous studies, it can be summarised that the Bangkok Treaty of 1909 was a historical event and an important lesson on how power, diplomacy and national identity interact in a complex historical context. It teaches us that in a world driven by interest and imbalance of power, key elements, such as wisdom and the ability to understand surrounding dynamics, are crucial for preserving sovereignty and national dignity. Understanding this treaty helps one to learn from the past as well as trace the intellectual roots and values that continue to shape contemporary political frameworks and identity.

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