

India's Historical Impact on Southeast Asia

By Patit Paban Mishra

India's historical impact on Southeast Asia forms an important component of world history. In this age of globalization, relations between two significant regions are important. The *Look East* and *Act East* policies have become the catch word of Indian foreign relations since the 1990s, where Indian policymakers desired close cooperation with Southeast Asian countries. This is nothing new from an Indian perspective, but an enactment of *déjà vu*.

What we know of today as Indian and Southeast Asian relations began in prehistoric times and continued until Western colonial hegemony was established in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the essay that follows, "India" is defined as the Indian subcontinent up to the end of colonial rule. The contemporary nations of Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), Singapore, Thailand, Timor Leste (East Timor), the Philippines and Việt Nam historically encompass a region profoundly impacted by Indian, Chinese, Islamic and then European civilizations. Southeast Asia has its indigenous particularities and nuances that make the region distinctive, too.

Transference of Indian Traditions

Geographic proximity and Southeast Asia's substantial wealth attracted Indians, and references in Indian classical literature to Southeast Asia document this perception. The *Ramayana*, *Pali Nidesa* and other classical texts include descriptors such as "land of gold" (*suvarnadvipa*), "island of gold" (*suvarnabhumi*), "island of coconuts" (*narikeladvipa*), "island of camphor" (*karpuradvipa*) and "island of barley" (*yavadvipa*). According to the seventh century Chinese source, *Liang shu*, P'an-p'an was a tiny kingdom located in the Malay Peninsula, where a number of Indian Brahmins migrated to in search of wealth. Scholars know based upon the third century Sanskrit stone inscription (known as Vo-Cahn) that Indian Brahmins were present in the areas known today as Vietnam and Cambodia. Buddhist missionary activities also resulted in large number of Indians settling in the region.

Indianization is the term generally used for Indian cultural influence upon Southeast Asia and Indian cultural penetration was generally peaceful and non-political. Southeast Asians voluntarily accepted the Indian cultural elements they liked. There was only one instance of Indian invasion: the naval expedition of Rajendra Chola in 1025 CE against the Srivijaya kingdom. The best way for readers to get more specific examples of early Indian-Southeast Asian interactions is to systematically consider examples of concrete contact between Indians and the peoples who inhabited what are today prominent Southeast Asian countries. As will be seen especially in the case of Islam, intercultural contact between Indians and Southeast Asians was not a one-way process.

Myanmar (Burma)

Geographically close to India, Myanmar was a vital link between India and Southeast Asia. Therefore, the region was impacted by Northeast India and Southeast Asia the most and in turn developed a close rapport with Northeast India. This part of Southeast Asia borders India and a land route, utilized by both Indian and Southeast Asians, through the rugged Arakan Mountains has existed since prehistoric times. The Bay of Bengal, which connects the now-modern nations of India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, also facilitated intercultural contact. Existing local traditions are evidence of Indian immigrants establishing some political authority in Myanmar. The still-existent Mon ethnic group from lower Myanmar to the east of Salween River in Thailand were the earliest people to come in to contact with Indians. The prevalence of Sanskritized names and commercial relations point to this close link. Cultural intercourse between the two regions grew through traders and Buddhist missionaries who reached lower Myanmar and consequently, Indianized kingdoms were established.

The Pyu people, the earliest known inhabitants of Myanmar, established the kingdom of P'iao in the third Century CE and practiced both Hinduism and Buddhism. Theories of kingship, religion, art and architecture from India were some of the elements that influenced the peoples of early Myanmar though they exercised discretion e.g., rejecting the caste system. The Brahmins conducted ceremonies like royal consecration and construction of palaces, and royal authority was derived from sacred mountains like Mount Poppa. The outside influence from India was closely interwoven with ancient beliefs of local people. At the site, where King Thileuin Man's (Kyanzittha, r. 1084-1112 CE) palace was to be built, naga spirits (renowned snake spirits) were propitiated and services of Brahmins were required. The king was proclaimed as an *avatar* (incarnation) of Visnu after his death. Beikthano, near present-day Taungdwingyi in southwest Myanmar, was one of the early cities of Pyu people and was a center

of Visnuite influence. In the city of Sriksetra, south of Beikthano, there was a place for images of Visnu and Laksmi. The image of Hindu Gods such as Visnu, Brahma, Siva, and others are found in different places throughout Myanmar. Whereas in Indian tradition Buddha is an incarnation of Visnu, the reverse is true of Myanmar. Visnu is a *rsi* or sage, who built the city of Sriksetra.

Compared to Brahmanism, the sway of Buddhism was greater in Myanmar. The missionary patronage of Indian Emperor Asoka (reigned c. 265-238 BCE), commercial contact, and visits to Buddhist centers in India all contributed Buddhism's expansion in Myanmar. The Mon countries in the lower Irrawaddy and Menam valley were a vital link for

spreading Theravada Buddhism throughout mainland Southeast Asia. The archaeological excavation in Visnupura has yielded Buddhist monuments with square bases and drum-shaped superstructures dating to the second century CE. There was evidence of Mahayana Buddhism as well in the art of Pyu, which included images of Boddhisattvas and Buddha Dipankara. The Chinese traveler Xuan Zang attests that Sriksetra was a Buddhist kingdom. In the Mon kingdoms, according to tradition, Buddhism came in fifth century CE. The Mahayana Buddhism practiced in the modern states of Bengal and Odisha influenced the spread of tantric Buddhism in Myanmar.

Thailand

People living in what is today Thailand were already producing relatively sophisticated products and artifacts when they came into contact with external influences from Cambodia, China, India, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. India's contact with Thailand could be dated from fourth century BCE as evident from materials like rouletted ware, knobbed vessels, glass beads, semi-precious stones, ivory and others from both regions. There is also a view that contact was made in the sixth century BCE, when Indian merchants came to Thailand by sea routes. When Buddhism came to Thailand, preexisting religious traditions underwent a process of adoption leading to an indigenous form of Buddhism, which was different from both the form and content of Indian Buddhism. For example, Thai Buddhism appropriated indigenous beliefs of animism with ancestor worship. The belief in spirits (*phi*) is still pervasive in contemporary Thai society. The combination of *phi*, an indigenous concept, along with deity (*thewada*) from Hindu-Buddhist cosmology means that the process of merger between different religious traditions had begun. Along with



Avalokitesvara holding a lotus flower. Bihar, 9th century, CE. The Pyu followed a mix of religious traditions. Source: Wikipedia at <https://tinyurl.com/yexhcafs>.

animistic practices, Buddhism also intertwined with other Hindu cultural patterns that had been introduced. Consequently, a single, distinct tradition emerged in Thailand out of animistic beliefs, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Thai society absorbed Indian elements into its cultural patterns and Thai culture has shown a tremendous capacity to harmonize different traditions and yet retain its distinctive nature.

During Emperor Asoka's reign, Buddhist monks came to Thailand to propagate their faith. A huge domed stupa housing Buddhist relics known as Pathom Chedi (*Prathama Chaitya* in Sanskrit) was built to commemorate the event and is located near the Bangkok airport today. The interaction between Indian traditions and Thai Buddhism could be broadly divided into two categories: one operating in royalty and the other present in broader Thai social system, customs, and arts. In the process of Thailand's state formation, Indian concepts of kingship and brahmanical rituals became essential features. Thai kingship was legitimized by taking recourse to consecration formulas and royal proclamations in the priestly language of the Brahmans. The ceremonies performed for royalty are rigidly brahmanical following the rituals enshrined in Hindu texts. In various festivals associated with royalty like initiation, the tonsure ceremony (*Culakanthamangala*) of the crown prince, and the ploughing ceremony (*Piti Raek Na Khwan*), the Brahmans perform certain designated roles.

Many of Thai festivals such as *Loy Krathong* ("the festival of light"), the traditional New Year festival known as *Songkran*, *Loh Chingcha* (swing ceremony), and others have been deeply influenced by Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Some of the features of the festivals may be Indian in origin, but the Thais have sufficiently altered them to give a distinct Thai character. Likewise in the autumn festival known as *bidhi sarada* (*vidhi shraddha* in Sanskrit), instead of

offering food to the Brahmans for deceased ancestors as in India, the heavenly food (*khau dibya*) is offered to Buddhist monks. In the rain festival, a Buddhist image is carried out to invoke rain and not the Hindu water god. Some of the ancient place names of Thailand such as Sukhothai, Ayuthia, Haripunjaya, Lopburi, Dvaravati, Sajjanalaya and others originated from Sanskrit. The influence of India is clearly marked on the names of many Thai Kings: Indraditya, Rama, Ananda, Cakrapat and Trailok. There are also innumerable words in the Thai language originating from Sanskrit such as Akas (Akas), Maha (Maha), Sthani (Sthan), Racha (Raja). The stories from Indian works including *Sakuntala*, *Madanabodha*, and *Savitri* became part of Thai literature. Indian culture also was diffused in Thailand through the *Ramayana*. The Thai version known as *Ramakien* became the basis for many Thai paintings, dances, and dramas. The classical dance of Thailand takes many episodes from the *Ramayana*. In the shadow plays known as *nang*, stories of Rama and Sita are acted out. These Thai characteristics are so prominent in dances, dramas, and shadow plays that few think of them as Indian performing art.

Thai art and architecture have developed distinctive styles. Some concepts were Indian in origin, but in the choice of patterns and other details, the Thai indigenous touch is there. One of the special features of Buddhist art in the Mon (some of the earliest habitants of Thailand) kingdom of Dvaravati is the representation of Buddha descending from heaven with Indra and Brahma. A Visnu temple was in existence in the Si Thep (Sri Deva) area in Menam basin. An inscription of Sri Suryavamsa Rama of 1361 CE speaks of images of Siva, Visnu and Buddha. The Thai wats of Pra Pai Luang and Sisawai in Sukhotai, were built for brahmanical worship as evident from sculptures of Hindu Gods and Goddesses. The icons of Hanuman, Ganesa, Parvati, Indra and Brahma adorn wats in Thailand. Images of Ganesha are installed in newly constructed buildings sometimes and the popularity of Brahma worship at Ervan in Bangkok indicates strong relations between Hindu and Buddhist traditions in Thailand.

Việt Nam, Cambodia, and Laos

The Indo-Chinese region (contemporary Việt Nam, Cambodia, and Laos) comprised the former French possessions of Cochin-China, Annam, Tonking, Cambodia, and Laos. Here, powerful Indianized kingdoms such as Campa, Funan, Chenla, Angkor, and Lan Xang flourished. The people of Campa known as Chams are ethno-linguistically Malay inhabiting the eastern coast of central and southern Việt Nam. They were greatly influenced by the Buddhist-Hindu culture of India as a result of commercial relations between Việt Nam and India. Indian traders crossed the Gulf of Siam to reach the port of Oc Eo in South Việt Nam near the Cambodian border. Oc Eo was a vital port city for trade from the second to sixth centuries CE. Excavations of Oc Eo have yielded beads, seals with Sanskrit inscriptions, gold medallions, and rare pieces of statuary.

Along with commercial relationships, strong cultural relations developed between the people of Việt Nam and India, which was reflected in art, architecture, literature and social life. The social, cultural, and religious institutions of political centers such as Vijaya (Binh-dinh), Kauthara (Nha-trang) and Panduranga (Phanrang) were deeply affected by elements of Hinduism. The Hindu trinity was well known in Campa but with added emphasis on Siva worship. Different Cham rulers made rich endowments to Siva, whose consort or Sakti was also worshipped as evident from temple images in Pro-Nagar. Icons of other gods and goddesses have also been found from different places of Campa. Sanskrit inscriptions show great rhetorical skills indicating that Indian linguistics were in early use outside India. While Cham society remained matriarchal, other cultural practices were affected by Hindu traditions such as cremation and the dispersing ashes in water. The Hindu calendar fixed the dates of important events. Widows did not marry again and self-immolated on their husbands' funeral pyre (*sati*). In royal families, *sati* was prevalent as



Royal Ploughing Ceremony in Bangkok, Thailand, 2019.. Source: *Wikipedia* at <https://tinyurl.com/2vfskxys>.

fourteen wives of Harivarman IV immolated themselves at the time of king's death. Beef eating was taboo. Yogic exercises were practiced. The picture of Cham society in the second half of fourth century CE could be known from the Chinese work, *Wen-hsein T'ung-K'ao*, which states that royal dress, ornaments and rites of mourning were similar to India.

Buddhist missionaries played important roles in disseminating the message of Buddha. The origin of Vietnamese Buddhism could be traced to the third century BCE. After the third Buddhist Council held in Pataliputra under the patronage of Asoka, nine groups of Buddhist missionaries were sent from India. One such group arrived in Gia Chau (Bac Ninh province) in North Việt Nam . One of the important aspects of Vietnamese Buddhism was that there was no attempt to integrate Hindu gods. Images of Buddha images in the Amaravati style pertaining to early centuries of the Common Era have been found near Danang in central Việt Nam. An inscription of the same region describes the installation of a Buddha image in 875 CE and construction of a Buddhist temple and monastery. Sculptures of *dvarapalas* (guards) are dotted round the monastery. In Việt Nam, as in the rest of Southeast Asia, Buddhism spread as a result of interaction between indigenous and imported cultures.

During the pre-Angkorean centuries of Khmer history, there were two successive kingdoms: Funan from the second to the sixth centuries, and Chenla from the sixth to the eighth centuries. Funan was founded by the Indian brahmana Kaundinya, who married the local female chieftain. The coming of Indian cultural influence was convenient for the rulers, who used it to buttress their political authority. This process of cultural interaction later resulted in influencing not only elites, but also common people in their socio-religious life. Jayavarman II became the ruler of a new state called



Angkor Wat. Source: Wikipedia at <https://tinyurl.com/4a9abjkh>.

Chenla (Kambuja) without being subordinate to anybody. The Angkor dynasty was established in 802 CE and the *Devaraja* (king of Gods) cult, an Indian concept, was introduced. Suryavarman II (1113-45 CE) extended his domain to the Malay Peninsula and northern Cham territory. He constructed the famous edifice of Angkor Wat. The three chief deities of Angkor were Siva, Visnu, and Buddha. The Brahmans played an important role in Cambodia's religious life thanks to the chief priest's influence on the royalty. This Brahmanic office passed from uncle to nephew in the maternal line, which was an example of an indigenous matrilineal social system. The Khmers had excelled in the field of art and architecture with their stone vaults, decorative details, pyramidal mass, splendid lintel stones, carved figures, and *bas-relief* depicting scenes from Indian mythology. The Cambodian civilization in the Funan, Chen-la and Angkor periods witnessed a good deal of Indian influence as adapted by Southeast Asian recipients.

Hindu and Buddhist practices came to Laos in the early centuries of the Common Era through Chinese, Khmer, and Thai influences. According to local tradition, a Buddhist shrine was built in Laos during Asoka's time. Fa Nagum (1353-1373), a Lao Prince, founded the first unified state, Lan Xang ("land of a million elephants") in 1353 and helped convert the people of Laos to Theravada Buddhism. Apart from Buddhism, Lao religious life also was marked by a belief in wandering spirits and the souls of departed ones (*phi*). The extent of Indian cultural influence is known from the recurring of word 'Om', while invoking a particular spirit. The indigenous culture of Laos was intermingled with Buddhism, while Sanskrit and Pali made deep inroads into the script, language, and literature of Laos including much of Lao vocabulary. The majority of Lao inscriptions had been in Sanskrit. The *Ramayana* is very popular in Laos. The stories of Rama or *Phra Lak Phra Lam* with its fundamental human values and social ideas have contributed to the cultural life of people. The majority of Lao stories were derived from the Indian fable *Pancatantra*.

Malay World

The Malay Peninsula along with the Indonesian islands are called the Malay world. A considerable number of Indian traders, Brahmans and Buddhists resided in the states of the Malay Peninsulas since the early centuries of the Common

Era. The state of Langkasuka controlled trade routes to the east and ruins of a Siva temple have been found in the state. The peninsula with its ports such as Kedah and Takupa assumed prominence in linking a global trading network connecting Rome, India, and China. One important site is Kuala Selinsing on the Perak coast, which has yielded beads of carnelian, crystal, and a seal dated to 400 CE with Sri Visnuvarman inscribed on it. An inscription in Tamil with reference to a merchant guild known as *Manikkiramam* has been found near Takupa. The peninsula was well-organized politically and administratively. Trade in beads, the discovery of Buddhist votive tablets, and finding of Hindu icons point towards strong Indian influence.

The capital Palembang of the Sri-Vijaya kingdom in the present-day Indonesian island of Sumatra was an important Buddhist center and a flourishing port. In the mid-ninth century, a prince of the Sailendra dynasty became the ruler of Sri-Vijaya and he founded a Buddhist monastery in Nalanda. An expedition against Sri-Vijaya led by Rajendra-coladeva I (1012-1044 CE) of the famous Chola dynasty invaded Southeast Asia in 1025 CE. Though a major expedition, it is the only example of invasion from India. Meanwhile, Buddhism flourished in Sri-Vijaya due to the patronage of its rulers. The Indian motif of a seven-headed cobra as a protector of Buddha was effective as Malay rulers called the power of snakes to protect the domain. An inscription from 775 CE from the east coast of the Malay Peninsula depicted the construction of a monastery at the site by the ruler, who was a patron of the snakes. So, there was a blending of traditional images of power (snake) and external influence (Buddhism). The construction of a monastery was undertaken at Negapattam by Sri Vijayan ruler Cudamani-varmadeva in 1006 CE, which was completed by his son. Apart from Buddhism, Indian influence was there through the Sanskrit language. Some inscriptions were in Sanskrit, which are evidence of its popularity.

There is probable evidence of Buddhist penetration into the Javanese region. Faxian, the famous Chinese Buddhist pilgrim who visited Buddhist sites in Central, South, and Southeast Asia from 399–414, and probably, although unconfirmed, visited Java, discovered four Sanskrit inscriptions on the island. The inscription of Kutei in Borneo (Kalimantan) dated to about

400 CE refers the name of the ruler Mulavarman, who donated 20,000 cows to Brahmans. The cultural legacy of the Sailendras (an Indianized dynasty that emerged in Java in the eighth century) is best remembered by the magnificent Borobudur temple, the world's largest Buddhist structure. The Javanese artisans made changes in the traditional sculptural pattern of India. The faces are of local people engaged in different occupations. Dress, jewelry, musical instruments, furniture and utensils are indigenous. The temple or *candi* is not only a religious shrine of a deity, but a mausoleum housing the ashes of the dead king. The ruins of the Mataram capital at Prambanan bear testimony to many *candis* dedicated to Brahma, Visnu, and Siva. The Sailendras also built brahmanical temples having images of Visnu and Agastya (a revered Indian sage of Hinduism). Syncretism between Buddhism and Saivism (the worship of Siva) could be found in the Jawi Temple of the Singasari period (an Indianized Javanese Hindu–Buddhist kingdom located in east Java between 1222 and 1292) featuring images of Siva with Buddha. Laksmi, the consort of Visnu, was a goddess associated with fertility in rice fields and in west Java. She is still worshipped under the name *Ni Pohaci Sargyang Sri*. From the eleventh century onwards, old Javanese sources mention presence of three religious communities (*tripaksa*): the Saivites, Buddhists, and Rsis (Mahabrahmans, a class of funeral priests).

The island of Bali, situated between Java and Lombok, presents a picture of Hinduism and Buddhism that has survived to the present day. The archaeological excavations conducted in Bali have proved the beginning of Indo-Balinese relations dating to early centuries of the Common Era. Gilimanuk in the western coast of Bali has yielded bimetallic artifacts of both bronze and iron datable to first century BCE. The burial assemblage has produced early metal phase pottery and Indian types of gold foil funerary eye cover. The majority of population of Bali is Hindu and



One of two pairs of dvarapala, 9th century Buddhist temple of Plaosan, Java, Indonesia. Source: *Wikipedia* at <https://tinyurl.com/5vfwkzek>.



Borobudur, the largest Buddhist structure in the world, in Java. Source: *Wikipedia* at <https://tinyurl.com/3p5p8bjf>.

presents a unique social order characterized by four basic divisions of the Hindu caste system. The Hindu-Buddhist religion prevailed in Bali. Siva is the elder brother of Buddha and on ceremonial occasions, four Saivite and one Buddhist priest perform the rituals. To the common people, the saying is: He who is Siva is Buddha (*Ya Siva, Ya Buddha*). The Balinese *Pura* (temple) is dedicated to the Hindu trinity. In Hindu houses, not only small shrines dedicated to Hindu deities are present, but also shrines for the spirit of local hills and great hill. Temples in Bali are temporary abodes of Gods or *Pasimpangan* and they are supposed to free people from cycle of birth and death. The Vasuki temple complex dedicated to Siva was constructed with the belief that Bali is the centre of Universe and Mount Agung on which it was built represented Mahameru of the Universe.

Advent of Islam

The Indianized states of Southeast Asia continued until medieval times. After Islam, there was a change in the situation. The spice and pepper trade by the Gujrati traders from India resulted in new Muslim settlements in Southeast Asia. From Gujarat and Indian Coromandel Coast, traders visited the region and helped in spreading Islam. As these Indian Muslims brought their religion, their practice of Islam was not as orthodox as the Islam of Arabia. The Indian Muslims before the coming of the Portuguese dominated trade in the Indian Ocean and there was a connection between India and Indonesia in the maritime trade of the region. The Southeast Asian ports like Melaka and Aceh had large settlements of Indian traders. Moreover, it was the Hindu-Buddhist kings and princes, who then converted to Islam and spread the doctrine. Consequently, Islam in Indonesia was not of the orthodox kind and retained earlier traditions in a compromising spirit.

From the conversion of the north Sumatra town of Perlak in 1290, Islam percolated through north Sumatra and northeast Java. The rulers of Aceh and Melaka were among the first local rulers who embraced the new faith in the fifteenth century. The rebel prince Paramesvara of Majapahit carved out a small principality at Melaka in 1411 and styled himself as Megat Iskander Shah after conversion. It not only occupied a central position in international commerce replacing the Majapahit, but also the rulers of small kingdoms converted to the new faith by marrying daughters of wealthy Indian merchants or of the royal house of Melaka. The port became the guiding force in the spread of Islam. The people preserved some Hindu-Buddhist characteristics from their earlier contacts with India preserving the connection with the pre-Islamic past. A complex blend of indigenous beliefs, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam emerged. Malaysia retained some of Hindu-Buddhist beliefs. Indra's thunderbolt symbol still adorned the armlets of sultans of Malay. Astrology influenced the construction of the palaces of these rulers. In the shadow plays (*wayang Kulit*), the opening ceremony invokes not only Allah but also Hindu deities. In many modern Muslim miracle (*karmat*) sites, Saivite relics are present. As late as the early nineteenth century, people in Java did not take Islam seriously and some observed the Hindu taboo against beef eating. In the shadow puppet plays, the themes of Indian mythology are still represented. A liberal tradition, although threatened, still prevails in whole Malayo-Indonesian world where Islam is characterized by its catholic nature.

Conclusion

The above account contests the Indocentric view that there was total transplantation of Indian culture. The theoretical premise would be that the whole process of Indian cultural influence was interaction between the culture of India and Southeast Asia. There was cultural rapprochement between these two regions. But, it was not transplantation of one culture upon another. It was the genius of local people, who chose those elements of an external culture that were either consistent with the indigenous culture or could be molded to its own beliefs. Southeast Asia has preserved many Indian

cultural traits. Traces of India's past are found in the customs, religious life, and monuments of Southeast Asia. The age old contact between the two regions has become one of the important contributory factors in forging a new relationship in this age of globalization.

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