

Thailand: An Indianised state of South-East Asia

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Unlike their modern counterparts the ancient Indian were a people of great merit. Since the times of the Indus civilization they made great strides in various walk of life. The Indian builders developed different patterns of architecture, the artists introduced new styles and techniques in field of art, sculpture and painting, and the poets. Writer and dramatists enriched the various facets of civilization through their monumental works which generally speak of the Indian view of life. Zealous seekers of love, truth and sincerity, the Indian thinkers speculated upon the various problems of human life in this world and beyond, and in the process they developed great religious of India-Brahmanism or Hinduism and Jainism and Buddhism- to give direction to the Indian way of life. And, all this stock of knowledge, in the course of centuries, got transmitted to other parts of Asia through trade and assimilation of various tribes in the Indian society as well as religious and missionary works of the Hindu and Buddhist preachers.

In spite of the efforts of a section of scholars to minimize, from time to time, the extent of Indian influence upon South-East Asia " the evidence for their importance is three for all to see and cannot be controverted." The countries of South-East Asia and central Asia were so politically and culturally influenced by the Indians in early times that most of the historians in the beginning described those regions as "the extended part of India." "Greater India". "Further India" etc. Though it is difficult to endorse such extreme claims of the so-called Greater India School there is no doubt that such influences did occur and play a significant part in the development of the various cultures of this region.

The migration of the Indians on a large scale to South-East Asia and Central Asia and their subsequent colonization find echo in literary and epigraphic sources, in stories and legends current in India as well as in those countries where the legacy of Indian culture is still to be seen. Though in some places its traces are not pronounced, there is no such notable place in these vast areas which has altogether escaped its impact. This unique phenomenon makes the study of the culture of South-East Asia in general and that of Central Asia in particular much more interesting and fascinating.

Against this background it may be interesting to note that the two Indian religious-Brahmanism and Buddhism- with their many sects and sub-sects played a very significant role in South-East Asia in early times. The numerous inscriptions and art-objects that have been

found in different parts of this region throw considerable light on the various aspects of these religions. Unfortunately these inscriptions have not been studied from religious point of view: they have been chiefly utilized as source of political history. However, on close scrutiny one finds that most of these inscriptions are religious in character, and their chief object is to describe some religious foundations. In this respect, the invocatory stanzas of the Sanskrit inscriptions are particularly interesting from religious point of view as they often express theological and philosophical ideas drawn from various Indian texts.

Thailand ("The Land of Free": Muang Thai) is a country on the mainland of South-East Asia, in the middle of Indo-Chinese peninsula. On the north it is bounded by China and Laos, on the west by Burma, on the east by Cambodia and Vietnam and on the south by Malaysia. It is situated between the sea on the south to the Gulf of Siam, and the China sea to the west of Malay Peninsula and the Bay of Bengal. Topographically it is divided into four areas- the Central, Northern, North-eastern and Southern areas.

The word Thai is a generic name denoting a great branch of the Mongoloid population of Asia who are mainly concentrated in the Indo-Chinese peninsula. It is an interesting land whose habitat extends from Assam (India) in the west to Kwangsi and Hainan in the east from the interior of Yunnan in the north to the southernmost extremity of Thailand (Siam) in the south. No one exactly knows where the Thai people originated but they seem to have lived originally somewhere in the vicinity of the Altai mountains where the Mongols are said to have originated. Gradually they migrated southward and founded a huge settlement in the Yellow River Valley, while the Chinese by this time had scattered over the back of the Caspian Lake. The Thai scholars generally believe that the Siamese constituted a section of the great Thai who enjoyed an extensive territory stretching from the valley of the Yang-tse to the sea-board of South-Eastern Asia. A close examination of all the theories advanced by different scholars, refuting one another, sometimes rather absurdly, would clearly suggest that the early Thai were ruling in Central and Eastern China : in fact the real home of the Thai people rather the region where they developed as a distinct race had been in South-west China more than 5000 years ago. Owing to the ever-increasing pressure of the Chinese and the invading Mongol hordes at a late date, they had emigrated towards the south, south-west, and south-east and spread out invading and conquering the countries of Yunnan, the Shan States, Upper Burma, Assam and Manipur and to the east of south-east up to the island of Hainan, taking finally possession of Upper Tongkin and the present kingdom of Thailand.

From the Pali canons as well as the Chinese annals we learnt that the Thais, although ethnically related to the Chinese, had acquired Indian culture more than the Chinese before they were derived away from their homeland. It was in Northern Thailand (Siam) that the Thais settled first. But, even though it was close to Southern China, we come across no trace of Chinese influence as regards customs and dress, literature and art and religion.¹ Moreover, we have positive historical evidences of Indian settlements in Nan-chao, and the most important Thai kingdom in Yunnan was called Gandhara of which one portion was known as Videharajya.² Its capital was known as Mithila or Tali-fu (a name derived from its counterparts in Bihar, i.e.) North Bihar or Videha or Mithila- the capital seat of the famous Janakas, the philosopher-kings of Mithila),³ and king Maharaja is said to have been a descendant of the great Asoka. The people of Nan-chao used as alphabet of Indian variety and converted the people of Buddhism.

In Thailand the entry of the Sun in the Zodiacal sign of Aries (Mesa) is marked with great celebrations about 13-14th April, which marks the commencement of the new Solar Year, a custom from South India. The Swing festival until recently was observed, and even now on the streets of Bangkok are found two huge timber pillars dug deep into earth with a cross-beam on the top to which the ropes of swings were tied. In Thailand and Laos people are found to be greeting each other with svaddhi which is simply a corruption of the Sanskrit word svasti.

As noted above, the names of many places and individuals suggest Sanskrit Indian origin. In Thailand, Ayuthia is Ayodhya, Thonburi Dhanapuri, Lopburi- Lavapuri, Sokhothaya-Sokhodaya, Phisanpuri-Vishnupuri, Sonkhaloka- Svargaloka, Siri Tammarat- Sri Dharmarastra etc. Similarly in Thai, Lao, Cambodian (Khmer), Burmese, Javanese and other languages of South-East Asia we come across on a very large scale, Sanskrit and Pali words. We have, however, to note the sound-shifting that is carried on a very large scale and certain peculiarities such as abbreviations, or disjoining the members of conjunct consotant in Sanskrit.⁴

The invasion and consequent of their territory by Kublai Khan, the great Mongol Chief, caused the disappearance of their State in 1253 A.D and forced them to migrate en bloc from Nan-chao. And, by the time, the Indianised Thai reached Siam (present Thailand), the country had been close cultural contact with India for more than one thousand years. We have archaeological evidences to suggest that the early Thai culture was considerably influenced by Indian culture. It is true, in the ancient literature of India there is no specific reference to Siam but frequent references to Suvarndvipa do suggest that the ancient Indians were probably familiar with Menam Valley and Malay Peninsula, which is further supported by the

archaeological finds at Pong Tuk and Phra Pathom Chedi (Phra Pathon Pagoda) in Nakorn Pathorn province (Thailand). The finds include the Buddhist symbol, the Dharamcakra, and this suggest that Buddhism had reached Thailand even before the Christian era, because the Dharmacakra belongs to the early phase of Indian art when the Buddha was not represented in human form but only through symbols.

There are evidences to show that north-eastern Thailand (Siam) had come under the influence of the Indianised State of Funan at a very early date and when it was conquered by the Khmers, its Indian character was further strengthend. But the southern part of Thailand (Siam) was directly and continuously in contact with India and a large number of Indian merchants, settlers and teachers went there in successive waves either direct from India or through the Indianised State of Burma. Even now in Southern Thailand we have remains of Indian culture, the most prominent of which is the city of Nakon Sri Dharmaraja.⁵

References:

1. D.P. Singhal, India and the World Culture, Vol. II, Cal., 1972, p. 112
2. R.C. Majumdar, HCFE, pp. 256-57
3. Upendra Thakur, History of Mithila, Chap. II.
4. For details K.S. Lal (ed.) Studies in Asian History, pp. 182-84.
5. For the latest study see Phra Maha Phakhrupalad Dhiravaja, India and Thailand: A Study in Cultural Contacts.