

Explorative Study on South India between South East Asia It's Cultural Contributions Historical Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

India played a dominant role in spreading trade between the East and West. Along with the trade, Indian languages, religious beliefs, statecraft, social beliefs and customs also spread to South East Asia. There are certain specific south Indian features visible clarity in the domains such as Art, architecture, mythology, south Indian Buddhist images are modeled on Amaravati style and Gods which are dominant in Southeast Asia. South Indian has nearly 2000km coastline facing Southeast Asia. It has good sea port. The west coast also has good number of ports. So, these sea ports played a significant role in spreading the Indian way of life in Southeast Asia. South India and southeast Asia are closely related from very ancient time. Historical evidences prove that the South Indian ports played an important role in the East-West trade. The recorded evidences from the beginning of the Christian era prove that the Romans were active in the eastern trade. Several South Indian ports served as entrepot for the exchange of goods of various countries.

Keywords: Inscriptions – statues-Varman suffix – transmitted – Coedes-geographical setting – highmountains – isolation – trade – commodities-art-religion – literature - indigenous cultures.

INTRODUCTION

This paper delineates how the trade contacts contributed to the spread of South Indian culture to the countries of South East Asia. The geographical setting of India bounded by high mountains in the North and sea on the East, West and the South made her Isolated from the rest of the world. However, contrary to its geographical isolation India had developed contacts with people of other countries of the world from the ancient times. India had brisk trade with both the east and the west. Along with the commodities Indians have carried their art, religion, literature and other elements of culture to several countries over the land and across the seas. As a result of these contacts there was cultural interaction. Certain elements of Indian culture have been absorbed by the people of the countries and Indian influence played a significant role in the blossoming of indigenous cultures in the countries with which it had established contacts. One such area to which certain elements of Indian culture were carried and influenced the native culture is South East Asia.

Objectives of the paper:

- To trace the significance of the historical background of in spreading of South Indian culture to Southeast Asia through the establishing commercial and cultural connections.
- To analyze the historical development and evolution of maritime trade routes and commercial interactions between South India and Southeast Asia.
- To investigate the dynamics and patterns of trade relations between kingdoms and port cities in South India and various regions of Southeast Asia during the ancient and medieval periods.
- To discuss the Socio-cultural and religious exchange between India and Southeast Asia.

METHODOLOGY

To conduct an explorative study on the cultural contributions of South India to Southeast Asia, it aims to employ a combination of historical, descriptive, a mixed-methods methodology involving a comparative analysis of historical texts, archaeological evidence. The present study will look into different parameters and paradigms of explorative study on South India between Southeast Asia it's Cultural Contributions Historical Perspectives. The methodology would involve identifying key areas of cultural exchange, such as religion, art, and language, and using both qualitative and quantitative methods to collect and analyze data, including textual comparison, and analysis of historical records. For this study use the literary sources, primary and secondary sources have been used, in order to examine the different facets of historical background of the cultural contribution of south India to southeast Asia.

The geographical term South East Asia came into use during the Second world-war when South East Asia Command was constituted to supervise the Allied military operations in the region. It consists of Burma, Thailand, Kampuchea, Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei and the Philippines. India's contacts with South East Asia started around first millennium BC. These contacts were mainly commercial in nature. Tamil Sangam literature refers to busy streets of the cities with number of people belonging to various nations most of them having come on commercial and other business.¹ To quote J.C. van Leur...

"Trade was a perennial influence in the historical development of South East Asia. In association with agricultural resources, commercial currents influenced the rise and fall of political units, institutional changes and the appropriation of alien religions and art forms."²

Before the advent of the Hindu colonists to South East Asia there were two main elements in the culture complex of the region one a late Neolithic element and the other of a late Bronze Age, both developing in Indo-China and spreading south and southeast. So it is wrong to think that the population of these lands were utter savages and civilisation came to them from the Hindu colonists.³ George Coedes has noticed the following elements of culture in the region.

Material Life:

- The cultivation of irrigated rice fields
- Domestication of ox and buffalo
- A rudimentary use of metals
- Skills in navigation

Social Life:

- Importance of woman and of descent from maternal line
- Social organisation resulting from cultivation irrigated rice

Religious Practices:

- Animism
- Worship of ancestors and the God of the soil
- Location of shrines on high places
- Burial in jars and at dolmens
- A mythology imbued with a cosmological dualism of mountain versus sea
- winged beings versus water beings
- men of the mountains versus men of the sea coast.⁴

In addition to the above there was Wayan (puppet shadow play), the gameleon orchestra and Batik work in Java. Thus the people of the countries of South East Asia had attained certain levels in their material life, social organisation, religious beliefs and entertainment. Indians when they established commercial contacts with South East Asia they came into contact with a population not of savages but a people with their own social organisation, material and spiritual life perhaps similar to that of pre-Aryan culture in India.

As a result of interaction with Indians certain changes took place in the existing traits of their culture. Many early scholars who studied this aspect described the phenomenon that took place in the region as Indianisation.⁵ The "Indianization must be understood essentially as the expansion of an organised culture that was founded upon Indian conceptions."⁶ This transformation took place not by force or political domination but by peaceful commercial contacts and religious activities.⁷ Indian influence can be seen, according to Coedes, in the form of a conception of royalty characterised by Hindu or Buddhist cults, literary expression by means of the Sanskrit language, a mythology taken from the Ramayana and Mahabharatha, the Puranas and other Sanskrit texts, and the observance of the Dharmasastras.⁸ There are no clear evidences to indicate from which part of India the first 'Colonists' came and where they settled. Most of the inscriptions which give an idea of Indian influence are in Sanskrit.

Sanskrit is the scholarly language used in all parts of India. So it is not easy to distinguish which region of India influenced the blossoming of South East Asian culture. However, certain features of South Indian Culture can be clearly identified by careful analysis of the available evidences.⁹ South India with its long coast line and numerous ports, big and small, is better positioned to establish contacts with the countries of South East Asia in general and island part of it in particular. The author of the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea records that very large ships, called Colandia, sailed to Chryse from the ports on the eastern coast of South India.¹⁰ Itsing's travel from India to Ceylon and there to Sumatra, in a merchant vessel of India further collaborated South India's commercial contacts with the countries of South East Asia. The sea route from coromandel coast to the straits of Malacca is comparatively short and during the favourable season of the year it is easy and safe even for small vessels.¹¹

It is safe to conclude that the position of South India on Coromandel coast had given some advantage to have commercial contacts with the Indonesia Archipelago and then to reach the mainland South East Asia. "Examination of sources at our disposal (Indian sources concerning navigation, accounts of Chinese and Mediterranean travellers and geographical and topographic, Paleo-graphic and archaeological evidence) does indeed show that south of India and in particular the region of Kanchi played a predominant part in Indianization of indo-China, but also indicates that all other regions of India, including Deccan, the Ganges Valley and even North-west India and Iranian frontier, contributed in varying degrees towards the spread of Indian culture. The over simplified view according to which they came exclusively from Coromandel ports can only be accepted with some reservation.¹²

With these words of caution by Coedes, I will try to trace certain aspects of Indian culture in ancient South East Asia which can safely attributed to South India. South Indian influences can be traced in the script used in the large number of inscriptions, in the sculpture, genealogy of rulers and also in the names of rulers with suffix of Varman.

Major source for the study of ancient history of the countries of South East Asia in general, for the study of Indian influence in the region in particular, are the large number of inscriptions in Sanskrit found in every region of South East Asia. Many of these inscriptions exhibit scholarship in the language and literature. Various Sanskrit metres were used and Sanskrit verses from Indian literature are also quoted. Similarly Pali is used in inscriptions connected with Buddhism. Here also quotes from Buddhist Pali literature were freely used. Whether it was Pali or Sanskrit language used in the inscription, there are number of inscriptions where the alphabet used is South Indian.¹³

The earliest epigraphical text of Burma is Mauggun inscription discovered in 1897. It contains quotations from Pali Buddhist scriptures in South Indian alphabet of fifth or sixth century A.D. Another Pali inscription discovered in 1910-11 at Hmawaza is also in South Indian alphabet. Another inscription discovered near Kalagan village is in Pyu and Pali. The alphabet used is that of early Telugu-Canarese. The script is very similar to that of Kadambas of Vanavasi and Pallavas of Kanchi. One of the inscriptions on a metal image of Buddha from Prome (old Srikshehtra) says: idam Vanavāsirattha-Vasinam Pūjanathaya which means, this is for the worship of the residents of the kingdom of Vanavasi.¹⁴ This indicated that Srikshehtra had another name Vanavasi the capital of Kadambas. Further a number of Terracotta Plates are also found with the image of Buddha and extracts from Tripitikas or Yedhamma formula. These are also in South Indian alphabet of fifth to seventh centuries A.D.¹⁵ All the above mentioned inscriptions are from Burma and relates to Buddhism. The Krishna valley and Kanchipuram were well known for Pali Buddhism. Dharmapala, contemporary of Buddhaghosha lived in Kanchipuram in fifth century AD. Further the Mons, who had once occupied a major part of Lower Burma were also known as Talaing. The word Talaing may indicate the original home of the Mon people is in the Telugu speaking area of South India. According to tradition Talaings were the founders of Thaton in 543 B.C.¹⁶ The use of South Indian script in most of the Burmese inscriptions may be due to the influence of Pali Buddhism which came from South India and also due to Telugu origin of the Mon people.

Another interesting feature of South Indian influence can be traced in the Varman suffix of the names of many rulers covering vast area from Burma to parts of present day Vietnam where ancient kingdoms of Funan, Chenla, Kambujadesa and Champa existed. Funan was the first known great power in ancient South East Asia.¹⁷ Most of the rulers of these kingdoms bore the suffix Varman to their names like Sreshtavarman, Jayavarman, Suryavarman, Bhadravarman, Rudravarman, Purnavarman, Gunavarman, Sambhuvarman, Bhavarman. These names, remind the Pallava rulers of South India who had the suffix Varman. Hence it may not be out of place to refer to an inscription found at Myson in Vietnam where existed the ancient kingdom of Champa.

This inscription presents a legendary account of the union of the Brahman Kaundinya with Nagi Soma. It narrates how the Brahman Kaundinya received a sacred Javelin from Aswathama, son of Drona, threw it in order to mark the site of his future capital. He then married Soma, the daughter of the Naga king and founded a line of kings. The descendants of Pallava rulers also used a similar legend to explain their origin.¹⁸ Another reference to the Pallava rulers of Kanehi comes from an inscription of Jayavarman of Kambujadesa. The context of this reference is not clear due to a broken stone on which it is inscribed.¹⁹ An inscription of the reign of Indravarman I (ruled between 878-887 AD) refers to Bhagavan Sankara, the great south Indian who advocated Advaita philosophy.²⁰

Large number of statues of Buddha discovered in different parts of South East Asia are beautiful works of art in true Amaravathi style. Amaravathi, in Telugu speaking region of South India, was a strong centre of Buddhism. John F. Cady expresses that the successor Pallavan or Andhra state of Telugus (230 BC to AD 225) centering in the Krishna-Godavary valley of the Deccan contributed substantially to early phase of India's cultural influence in South East Asia, which came largely from South India. The characteristic art forms of Amaravathi, both Buddhist and Hindu have been found at widely dispersed points of South East Asia.²¹ A bronze standing Buddha of Dong-duong in the province of Among Nam is a beautiful work of art of Amaravathi school. A statue of Yakshini found at Srideb in Thailand is a master piece of perfection. Coedes has attributed it to Gupta art, K.A. Neelakanta Sastri is inclined to place the art of Srideb as a transition from Amaravathi to the later forms of Pallava art of Mahendravarman and his successors.²² Bronze statues of Buddha of Amaravathi school were found at many places of island parts of South East Asia. Referring to the bronze statues of Buddha found in South Djember and another in Sikendeng on the west coast of Celebes and a

colossal stone Buddha at Bukit Seguntung in Palembang all of Amaravathi style - Neelakanta Sastri says that it is probable that the bronzes were brought from Amaravathi by the colonists, or imported from there by the colonists already established overseas; the transport of large stone Buddha of Palembang must have been difficult, though by no means impossible.²³

The above mentioned inscriptions, statues, the Varman suffix are only few examples of South Indian Cultural influences presented in this paper. These are not the only evidence, to indicate the nature of cultural contribution of South India to the people of ancient South East Asia. If one looks at ancient South East Asia with a view to find elements of South Indian Culture may find many more such examples. However, it is not easy to explain how exactly these elements of Indian culture reached these parts of the globe, who transmitted them - Indians or natives themselves who played an active role in the process there are no clear evidences to give definite answers. Its is better to conclude in the words of Coedes "all the regions of India, ... South India including Deccan, the Ganges valley and even northwest India and the Iranian frontier, contributed in varying degree towards the spread of Indian culture."²⁴

To sum up, it is clear that the Indian culture greatly improved the languages, religion, the polity and traditions of Southeast Asia right from the 2nd BC South Indian contribution is more in transmitting Indian ideas and in influenced the people of southeast Asia. Now, it is evident that the traders played the foremost role for the expansion of South Indian influences in Southeast Asia. It is obvious that the traders were followed by the princes, the Brahmin priests, Buddhist scholars and the literally scholars. Even Islam was carried to Southeast Asia by the Muslims of Cambay region of Gujarat. Hence, traders notwithstanding the level of knowledge helped the spread of Indian culture into Southeast Asia. There is break in the continued interaction between India and southeast Asia as the result of the advent of Europeans and the establishment of colonies. However, the Indian who went to the Southeast Asian countries during the colonial period and in recent times have been making significant contribution for the material prosperity of the countries of their settlement and this is acknowledged by the Southeast Asian leaders themselves.

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