

India- South East Asia Relation: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

This paper analysis India's engagement with southeast Asian nations like Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Thailand etc. in historical time. This paper cover engagement of these countries from pre-christen era to the demise of colonial rule from Indian subcontinent. This paper has given a brief account of cultural, religious, trade relation between India and these countries. It also analysis a reasoned account of circumstances prevailing at that time which made their engagement possible.

Key Words- Pre-Christen era, Demise, Colonial rule, Indian subcontinent and engagement.

Introduction

South East Asia has been an integral part of Indian consciousness throughout history which is manifested in its religion, language and culture. Historical relation between India and South East Asia is sustained by commerce, culture and community for centuries. Footprints of Indian sphere of cultural influence in South East Asia can be traced backed to 290 BC. It is well accepted fact that Hinduism and Buddhism have migrated to South East Asia from Indian subcontinent. Many kingdoms of South East Indian coast like Pallava, Cholas etc. had established trade, cultural and political relation with South East Asian countries like Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines etc. Thus transmission of culture and commerce between India and South East Asia take place through the Southern Indian traders, teachers and priests until about 1500AD when colonial powers like Britain, France, Denmark etc. had started affecting regional politics.

During colonial rule trade between the two regions declined as it was dictated by colonial powers in their own interests. But oppression caused by colonial rule in these countries did create similar political movements against foreign rule. It is because of inspiration from each other freedom movement that almost all these countries got independence in 1950s. Some of the visionary leaders of these countries like Jawaharlal Nehru (of India), Sukarno (of Indonesia) etc. had organized Asian Relations Conference in March-April 1947, which aimed at bringing together the leading men and women of Asia on a common platform to study the socio-cultural and economic problems of the people of the continent and to increase mutual understanding. The then Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had looked to South East Asia as a region whose history, fate and destiny are somewhat linked with India's. On the other hand, most of South East Asian countries regarded India as a natural leader of an impending free and resurgent Asia.

Review of Related Literature :

Ammad Ayoob's book "India and Southeast Asia: Indian perceptions and policies" (1984). Second chapter of this book i.e. 'Southeast Asia's importance in Indian foreign policy: The background' and

third chapter of this book i.e. 'Southeast Asia in Indian foreign policy: Moving into the 1980s'. In this book writer has given an account of India and Southeast Asia relation in pre liberalization era. Here author has analyzed that how despite of geographical proximity and historical linkages the two region has maintained distance between themselves.

Ganganath Jha's book, "India and Southeast Asia: Introspection for Future Partnership" (2010), deals on India's relations with some of Southeast Asian countries like Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos. Here the writer has highlighted close cultural and ethnic ties between India's Northeast and Southeast Asia.

K. Kesavapany, A. Mani, P. Ramasamy (ed.) book, "Rising India and Indian Communities in East Asia" (2008). This is a voluminous book which contains thirty-five chapters. Broadly book discussed the impact of rising India on settled Indian communities and migration in recent years. The chapter eleven of this book titled 'A century of contributions by Indians in Negara Brunei Darussalam' which is written by A. Mani, has highlighted contribution of Indian community in the development of Brunei Darussalam.

Kripa Sridharan's book "The ASEAN Region in India's Foreign Policy" (1996). This book traces India's engagement with ASEAN countries since 1967 the year when ASEAN came into existence. The writer has analyzed continuity and change in Indian foreign policy towards the region during different regimes in power in India. Main focus of this book is to highlight politico-security concern in India-ASEAN relations. The book does not find any mention of socio-cultural dimension in India-ASEAN relations.

Prof. Satish Chandra and Prof. Baladas Ghoshal (ed.) book 'India and Southeast Asia: Cultural, Economic and Strategic Linkages' (2011). This book has been divided into five sections related to history and culture, trade and colonialism, economic development and strategic relations between India and Southeast Asian countries. In this book the writers have traced historical engagement of India and Southeast Asian countries. In chapter four of the book titled 'Society and Culture in Southeast Asia and India's contacts before 1500 AD' which is written by Prof. Himanshu Prabha Ray, the writer has deviled on close cultural connections like popularity of Indian dance and drama in

Southeast Asia. He has highlighted prevalence of various form of Indian epic Ramayana in Southeast Asian countries. Transmission of Indian religion and cultural practices of India to Southeast Asian is well documented in this book. Mrs. Hema Devare has talked about textile as a means of cultural exchange between India and Southeast Asia.

Shyam Saren has written "How India sees the world: Kautilya to the 21st century" (2017). In this book Shyam Saren has wrote on various dimensions of Indian foreign policy. In the first chapter i.e. 'The challenge of proximity', he has given some suggestion to Indian foreign policy maker that how they should take decision in India's extended neighbourhood. He has suggested that India should work on enhancing communication and transportation connectivity in the region.

Research Methodology

In this research work, Descriptive, Exploratory and Historical methods of research are used.

Manifestation of India- South East Asia Historical Relations

India and most of South East Asian nations have deep historical relations. Languages,

religion, name of many locations (like Indonesia) the very culture of South East Asian nations is influenced by India. Such linkages suggest that South East Asia has always been an inseparable part of Indian consciousness. These cultural and spiritual ties were sustained by successive Indian kingdoms particularly from South India. India's influence on Southeast Asia is beautifully explained by Sylvain Levi (a French orientalist scholar, whose main area of study was Sanskrit texts and ancient Indian history). He held that, 'India gave her mythology to her neighbors, who want to teach it to the whole world. She gave to three quarters of Asia a God, a religion, a doctrine, an art. She carried her sacred language, her religion, her institutions to Indonesia, to the limits of the known world and from there they spread back to Madagascar and perhaps to the coast of Africa...

By the first millennium Indian kingdoms were engaged in trade with outside world including Southeast Asia. Indian ruler at that time were sending traders and merchants to foreign trips. These trips aimed at gaining access to market and to buy precious commodities and resources for domestic consumption. Many of Jataka tales found in Southeast Asia talked about maritime

adventures because these were brought by seaman or sea-faring merchants.

Historical evidences suggest that India and Southeast Asian countries had close cultural interactions from Pre-Christian era. It is acknowledged that Indians entered Southeast Asia for commerce and business. People mainly from south India started bead trade with this region, archaeological evidences of which has been found in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. Other evidences includes, Jataka stories (which talked about Pre-Christian era voyages between India and Savarnabhoomi. Kautilya's Arthashastra did talks about India's trade with lower Burma in tailparnika (sandal like-paste).

Transmission of Indian Civilisation to South East Asian countries took place mainly by traders. Historical evidences suggest that Trade between India and Southeast Asian countries was mainly concentrated in forest produce such as camphor, sandal woods, ivory apart from gold and tin. Later on fine spices and unguents became main items of trade. These spices were exchanged for textiles from India. Earliest evidence of trade between Indian and Thailand (a South East Asian country) dates back to as early as 7th- 8th century B.C. Successive, Indian kings and Kingdoms from the first century AD treated South East Asia as vital for their

own strength and security. Their relationship was sustained by mutual trust and interest. The finding of Indian Hindu seal of Cham relics in central Vietnam proves this fact. According to historians, Indians were present in South Vietnam since first century. Mixed with the first of Funan, an Indian after had been becoming a king, modified all the rules as per the India's rules and considered himself the venerable advocate of the Fatherland. Many relics of Indian culture like Indian inscriptions have been discovered by Archaeologists. G. Coedes while analyzing India's influence on South East Asian culture held that, "the influence of Indian civilization is primarily an expansion of an organized, reliant culture". As far as religion is concerned, religion like Buddhism and Hinduism are transmitted from India to South East Asia. Buddhism is the dominant religion in many South East Asian countries like Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. It is officially recognised religion in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. Hinduism is also an important religion in South East Asia. Both Buddhism and Hinduism are carried from India to South East Asia by seafaring traders and missionaries. Indian king the great Asoka (The Maurya Emperor) sent a Buddhist delegation under the leadership of Sonar and Uttara to South East Asian

countries. This kind of royal support resulted in the spread of Buddhism in these countries.

Apart from religion some Indian languages like Sanskrit and Pali are known in South East Asian countries. Historian has acknowledged that by 500 A.D. Sanskrit had become official language of the court in many South East Asian countries. Many words of regional languages of South East Asian countries have been derived from Indian languages like Pali and Sanskrit. For example, earliest law book in Myanmar was the Wagaru Dhammathat of India, which in Burmese known as Manusara Shwemin. Pali language which originated from India was the source of many of Burmese words."

Along with religion and languages, two Indian epics- Ramayana and Mahabharata deserve important position in traditional literature of South East Asian countries. Ramayana is the national epic of Indonesia. In Thailand, Rama's story (Hero of Ramayana) are not only performed on stage but also painted and engraved on rocks. Here it is performed as the royal dance drama. In another South East Asian country i.e. Malaysia, Ramayana is called as Hikayat Seri Ramo (story of Rama). Here oral tradition of Ramayana is famous. In Kampuchea, Ramayana is called as Ramker or Ramkrit. Here Ramayana is available in

both prose and poetry form. In Laos, Ramayana is visible in different form like in visual arts, dance drama and the music.

Many locations of South East Asian countries find mention in ancient Indian text of Ramayana and Buddhist Jataka fables. For example, Java Dvipa and Savarna Dvipa (identified with Sumatra) etc. was mentioned in the Ramayana. Another ancient India text Vayu Purana mentioned a place named Malaya Dvipa and this has been proposed to mean possibly Sumatra and Malay Peninsula.

It is widely acknowledged that maritime contacts between south and Southeast Asia date back to the middle of first millennium BC. Most of the inscriptions found in Southeast Asia are in Sanskrit language. Historical evidences suggests that India has never colonized Southeast Asia but existence of Indic temples constructed after the 7th century in this region suggests that this region was under considerable Indian influence.

Indian influence on Southeast Asia's politics is widely acknowledged. By 5th century AD coastal region in peninsular Malaysia became full-fledged city state on Indian model. These city state reflected diffusion of Indian artistic forms i.e. Vaishnava and Buddhist which is locally called as Oc-Eo.

These city state were sustained by maritime trade.

Archaeologist have found many clusters of Tamil inscriptions on the eastern fringes of the Indian ocean i.e. from Burma to Sumatra. These inscriptions have shown connection between merchant's associations operating out of south India with the temples or other structures used by resident Indian merchant community in Southeast Asia. In India as well as in all Southeast Asian countries except Vietnam had no tradition of history writings. Many Southeast Asian rulers have constructed temples on the pattern of Indian temple style. These temples contained images of Shiva, Vishnu and Buddha. These temples also had accommodation for the monks who lived there. One such temple is Angkor Wat which was built by Suryavarman-II in the 12th century. Indian influence is well reflected in various monuments of Southeast Asia. Monuments of Borobudur (Java, Indonesia), Pranbanan (Indonesia), Angkor wat to name a few. Monuments at Borobudur is similar to stupa located in India. Temple at Pranbanan purely reflect an Indianised Vaishnavite/Shivaite cults. Historian had argued that Angkor wat temple is clearly a replication of Kailash temple of India.

Indian influence to this region is well visible in many forms. There is an Indian Brahmanical concept of a universal God superior to all local deities. Taking note of this concept, rulers claimed themselves to be representative of Supreme God Siva or Vishnu. It was widely acknowledged that temples in the Khmer kingdom served functions similar to temples in South India. These temples acted as centers of investment. Temples supported scholars, astrologers and local artisans. Temple administration worked for strengthening agrarian infrastructure.

Maritime countries of Southeast Asia served as connecting link for trade between east and west. So the control of these seaports linking the growing trade to China seems to be the basis of the series of naval raids by the Chola rulers (from India). This navy sacked and burnt Palembang in 1025, but no attempt was made to establish control over any of the ports or creates a monopoly of any goods. This sustained open sea trade.

Indian textile industry had also influenced textile history of Southeast Asia. Cultivation of cotton in this region traces its roots to India. In textile, amalgamation of Indian and Southeast Asian cultures can be seen in familiar motifs and patterns. Trade in textile between two regions started as early as 2nd century A.D. The Brihat Jataka also find

mentions of trade in cloth. The main objective of this trade was to acquire forest and sea products and mineral resources of the region for sale in China. The Southeast Asian traders were eager to exchange their spices for these textile. The popularity of Indian textile in this region can be assessed by the statement of John Gilow. According to him traders of the spices island of Moluccas were reluctant to take gold or silver in exchange of their spices but were eager to take painted, brocaded or ikkated cotton and silk cloths brought in abundance from Indian coast. The literature of Jain religion in India belonging to 10th-11th centuries did have mention of this maritime trade.

Although Indian textiles arrived in Southeast Asia as an item of trade but because of their attractiveness and also because of their association with royalty, they were absorbed in the very life of people of these countries. Indian cloths found an important in mythology and customary practices of the people of Southeast Asia. A majority of inscriptions found in Southeast Asian countries particularly in Indonesia are in Sanskrit. In Indonesia a large corpus of narrative literature includes a collection of allegorical tables, the Jatakamala and Mahakavya tradition provided by the Indian epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata.

Indian textiles were usually used for display on important ceremonial and spiritual occasions. Indian textile became an important part of the decoration of temples, monasteries and palaces. Ramayana battle scenes for examples against plain white background were popular in Bali (Indonesia). The cloth hangings from Gujarat depicting hunting scenes were meant for ceremonial use in Indonesia. In monasteries, Buddha's image generally rested against imported clothes (i.e. Indian textile).

Indian silk was very popular and considered as luxury commodity for centuries in these countries. It was known as - Sutra in these countries, Tsiuan-Teheon a Chinese inspector of commerce stated that during middle ages the chief exporters of textile to far east were Indians. Different fabrics from different parts of India fascinated different countries of Southeast Asia. Coromandel fabrics also known as 'klings cloths' was very popular in Thai society. The Patolas of Gujarat (locally known as Cinde) was the most sought after cloth by the Southeast Asian royalty.

Various spiritual symbols of Indian iconography like the Naga (the ruler of water kingdom), the Garuda (the mythical bird of Hindi legends) etc. did find appearance on royal textiles of Southeast

Asia. The poteng (the black and white checked cloth in Bali) which was draped around temple deities and temple dancers, symbolized the duality of life, good or evil, a concept traced to Hindu origins.

By the 6th century, many Indianite kingdoms like the Funan in Cambodia, the Champa in Vietnam, the Srivijaya in Sumatra and the Kedah in Malay Peninsula were established. These kingdoms were instrumental in introducing Indian way of life in this region. Close contacts between rulers of Southeast Asia and India facilitated assimilation of Hinduism and Buddhism in Southeast Asian countries.

Evidences from sculptural art and ancient paintings suggests that Southeast Asian royalty were very keen to adopt Indian textiles and dress code. The earliest example of this is found in Mi-Son temple of central Vietnam (earlier kingdom of Champa) where dancing Shiva wear a garment used by Indian kings of the same period. The images of jacket and bodice styles of Khmer kings and soldiers shows that there were similar to the style of Kushan and Gupta images of Indian kings.

Many of statues of Buddha found in Southeast Asia were constructed as per Amaravati school of Indian art and architecture. Not only architectural style but name of many places in this region is

influenced by India. The name Kalinga resembles that of king used by the Malays and the Cambodians to designate Indians. According to Coedes the process of 'Indian Colonization (of Southeast Asia) was very intense in the second and third centuries A.D. and came to fruition in the fourth and fifth centuries.' Many historical account suggests that Indianisation process in Southeast Asia was at its peak during Gupta dynasty of India. But evidences of Hindu-Buddhist influence and Indianisation process in Southeast Asia that has been found in present day Malaysia dates back to second and third century.

Early arrival and residence of Hindu-Buddhist merchants, traders and scholars to this land has helped in development of Hindu-Buddhist styled polity there. Ruler of this region were very accommodative to religious teachers and priestly scholars from India. One such example is of Khmer ruler Yasovarman-I. He opened his court for religious teachers and priests belonging to Vaishnavite, Shivaite and Buddhist traditions.

First wave of Indianisation in Southeast Asia happened when Hindu-Buddhist rulers of India were at the apex of their power and achievements. It was power and glory of Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms of India that has attracted rulers of Southeast Asia. Historian

have noted that decline of Hindu-Buddhist kingdom in India had a corresponding impact on the Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms of Southeast Asia. The invasion of Mongol and Muslim into India resulted into weakening of linkages between rulers of India and their Hindu counterpart in mainland Southeast Asia.

But Indo-Malay kingdoms of maritime Southeast Asia maintained their economic and political contacts with coastal region of northeastern India. Historical evidences show that Indian Muslim were present in Southeast Asia by the tenth century. By the end of 15th century, Islam spread across the whole of Southeast Asia and many of Hindu-Buddhist rulers of the region made their conversion to Islam with the help of Muslim missionaries and scholars from India. It is thus evident that arrival of Islamic religion in Southeast Asia followed same pattern as the arrival of Hindu-Buddhist religion centuries ago.

Seventeenth century is regarded as golden period for Indian overseas trade Indian merchants of different locations enjoyed domination in trade with different region of world. Traders from Gujarat by and large concentrated on western Indian ocean whereas traders from Tamil or Coromandel region were concentrated their trade to the Southeast Asian archipelago. Merchants

from Coromandel region included Chettis and Chulias are known as 'Kling' in Southeast Asia. T.J. Newbold held that the name 'Kling' had been given to traders by the Malays since times of early commercial interaction, the kling was a corruption from Teling or Telinga.

The Volume of trade between Coromandel and Southeast Asia was assessed by John Anderson. He held that cotton cloth was main item of export from India. Betel nuts were another item of trade. He noted that 10 to 12 ships coming every year from the Coromandel coast bringing in goods of all kinds, white and blue cloth, chintz and salt. Thus Indian ocean served as a conduct and transit point for ideas, goods and cultural transmission for south and Southeast Asia. Thus trade along with religion like Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam thrived and prospered across the maritime space.

But with the advent of European powers in this region, the terms of trade between them were changed. Chulias who were the main trader now has become small time shop owners who handles a small proportion of retail trade. British control over Indian economy resulted in the perceptible decline in the trade of Indian textiles. Later on British textiles displaced Indian textiles in Southeast Asia. The amount of cloth exported from Coromandel to Jakarta

dropped steadily from a peak of two million guilders worth in the 1660s to less than eight lakh guilders in late 1680s. One reason of this decline is that by 1684, Javanese started waving clothes for their own use as well as for export. The change in the pattern of use of textiles also led to the decline in textile trade between India and Southeast Asia.

The Colonial masters ruled these countries in their own interest. Colonial powers suspended the continuous interaction that existed between India and South East Asia. Cultural and commercial interaction between India and this region were subordinated to the political and strategic interests of colonial powers. The cultural and commercial interaction came to a halt, but migration of Indian workers to work in rubber, tea and coffee plantation (introduced by colonial power) in Southeast Asian plantation field has increased.

Indian influence on South East Asia was widely accepted by leaders of this region. For example, in 1946, the Indonesian nationalist leader (later on President of Indonesia) Sukarno held that, "In the veins of every one of my people flow the blood of Indian ancestors and the culture that we have is steeped through and through with Indian influences."

India and South East Asian countries were occupied by the colonial powers like Britain,

France, Dutch, Portuguese and Spain for a long time. Britain ruled India, Burma, Malaysia and Singapore. Indonesia and surrounding island were under Dutch control. The Indo-china area that consists of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam was under France control. Spain had control over the Philippines, but after revolt of Filipinos against Spanish rule the United State took over the Philippines and She paid 20 million dollars to Spain for the Philippines. Thus all South East Asian countries except Thailand (earlier known as Siam) were under the colonial rule.

The Oppressive rule of colonial power resulted in rise of many freedom movements in these countries. The Congress of the Oppressed Nationalist which was organised at Brussels in 1927, served as a platform for the meeting of the leaders fighting against colonial rule in their homeland. Here Indian and South East Asian leaders shared their view on colonial exploitation. The then secretary general of International Congress Jawaharlal Nehru has taken keen interest especially in the Indonesian representative Sukarno and later on had developed friendly relation with him.

Conclusion

The above description of India and South East Asian nations suggests that they are related to each other at various level. These

countries are almost similar in various terms like geo-climate condition. Language, culture, religion, living standard of people, form of government etc. Thus relation between India and South East Asian countries has faced many ups and downs. Their relations were influenced by various factors and most importantly from the worth of cold war politics. India and South East Asian countries have supported each other in some area as well as they confronted each other in other area. After end of cold war these countries had new context and new reasons to engage and confront each other, because the end of cold war has affected world politics in a major way.

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