

COMMERCE AND CULTURAL MOBILITY IN THE BAY OF BENGAL: HISTORICAL INTERACTIONS AND EXCHANGES

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Abstract

This study examines the historical and cultural interactions between India and the Pacific world, highlighting the profound influence of Indian art, archaeology, and cultural practices across East and Southeast Asia. By correlating monumental and artistic materials with anthropological and prehistoric contexts, the research traces the evolution of East Asian civilizations from early hominins such as Java man to the periods of modern antiquarian inquiry. The cultural survey of the Indian and Pacific Ocean basins underscores India's role as a cultural ambassador, with its art and traditions shaping the societies of Oceania, including Māori culture, the Polynesian world, and the peoples of Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Significant archaeological and philological evidence, documented by Dutch and French scholars, demonstrates the transmission of Indian cultural elements during pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods, particularly in Java and Sumatra. This expansion of Indian influence into East Asia represents a critical chapter in the shared history of human civilization, reflecting both the depth and longevity of cultural exchange in the region.

Keywords: India, Pacific World, Cultural Exchange, Archaeology, East Asia

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between India and the Pacific world involves correlating the monumental and artistic materials of Pacific culture with their anthropological and prehistoric contexts, tracing the history of East Asian civilization from the Age of Peaking Man to Java man, and the ages of modern antiquarians. The cultural survey of the Indian and Pacific Ocean basins presents a unique opportunity for India to establish itself as a cultural ambassador in the East Asian region. The cultural migrations in Oceania, including Māori land and culture, the Polynesian world, and the peoples and cultures of Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia, reflect the influence of Indian art and archaeology, particularly in Java and Sumatra. The relationship between Indian and Pacific cultures encompasses a vast array of similarities, and India's contribution to this area extends not only to prehistory and history but also to the art and archaeology of these cultures, which significantly contribute to the documentation. The expansion of Indian culture into East Asia is a grand chapter of human history. The whole history of this vast area traces the influence of India with very fresh archeological discoveries and philological analysis by the Dutch and French scholars to prove the fact that, during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when Islam spread to those areas, the life and history of the people were influenced by the Indian culture, and by China in some parts.

The Indian influence on Southeastern Asia is not *prima facie* improbable, as Indian merchants and missionaries reached there by sea route, about the same period that they had explored both the far eastern and western regions

by land route. Ptolemy, in his Geography, also mentioned this region, extending up to Java, in the context of India. The earliest inscriptions of Indo-China bear traces of Indian Brahminic and Buddhist influence from the third century AD. Kalidas Nag's study states that,

According to Prof. Paul Pelliot, apart from the great central Asian route to the Far East, there were two other old routes. One was the land route from India via Assam and Myanmar to China; another was the sea route via the Indo-Chinese coast (Chong-Guan 30).

Early references to trade with Southeast Asia are somewhat ambiguous and passed through many vicissitudes. Close cultural interactions between India and Southeast Asia began in prehistoric times and continued until the onset of colonial rule. Indian maritime activities, one of the most captivating fields of historical study, are as old as the civilization itself and can be attributed to the Harappan era. The study of historical ports, trading emporiums, trade routes, and maritime architecture is only a few examples of the various facets that make up naval studies.

The illustrious Indian civilization was widely dispersed around the world, primarily due to its extensive marine and international trade: Indians, most notably those from the Kalinga region, founded colonies throughout Southeast Asia. The efforts of ancient Indian colonization were unique in several ways. Wherever they traveled, the Indians made themselves at home, assimilated local customs, and adopted aspects of the local civilization. Despite their dominance, they never attempted to dominate politically; instead, they allowed local elements to flourish. The early Indian merchants and migrants had a pragmatic understanding. So, the process of Indian civilizational linkages, cultural assimilation, and social and literary adaptation to Southeast Asia should be described as Indian Internationalization rather than colonization. The Indian commercial spirit, which secured India's control of the seas for many centuries, as well as the daring adventures from the ports of Kalinga, Bengal, and Gujarat on the coast, then spread to the entire Pacific region. The evidence has made it clear that Indian influences are most prevalent in Java, Sumatra, and Bali.

The Kalinga people significantly aided the early settlements of numerous regions in Southeast Asia. For several millennia, Kalinga continued to exist as the "Greater Kalinga", gaining control over several nations and islands in the Indian Ocean. The natives of ancient Odisha are believed to have laid the groundwork for Indian or Indianized monarchies beyond the seas. Numerous significant concerns need to be addressed in this context. The invasion of Kalinga by Emperor Asoka in the third century BC was believed to have prompted an exodus, which is why the departure of the Kalinga people is specifically linked to this event. It is possible that after Asoka's Kalinga War, the Kalinga people fled to Southeast Asia. No traces of such a movement can be found in the past. According to Patnaik, Benudhar Patra's study states that,

As the small kingdom of Kalinga was surrounded on three sides by the mighty empire of Asoka, thousands of young people from Kalinga, experts in navigation, might have preferred to escape into the distant lands through the sea rather than being deported to Magadha as prisoners (11).

Multiple researchers have been advocating various migration hypotheses. An early wave of Indian immigration to Southeast Asia and other countries may be hypothesized from Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, which advises seizing the land of neighboring nations and expelling any surplus population. Some academics also attempt to distinguish between a few distinct waves of migration from India and pinpoint their origins. According to them, the pre-Aryan inhabitants of India were driven out by the Aryan invasion from the nations in the East and Southeast beyond the sea. Consequently, the Hindus were obliged to migrate there in significant numbers due to political events that prompted them to seek refuge in the Southeast Asian region. Early Southeast Asia remained under the influence of Indian culture from very ancient times. In the words of A. Lamb,

By the opening of the Christian era, the civilization of India had begun to spread across the Bay of Bengal into both the island and mainland of Southeast Asia. By the fifth century A.D, great empires dominated the zone between metropolitan India and the Chinese southern border, which has sometimes been described as “Further India” or “Greater India” (442).

Indian civilization, which had its roots in Southeast Asia, developed due to cultural and political developments on the Indian subcontinent and the influence of Southeast Asian heritages. The question that must be addressed is, what part did the native people of Southeast Asia play in the Indian colonization or Indianization process? What kind of civilization before the introduction of Indian cultural features? Did they actively engage in the process, or were they simply the recipients? The proponents of the Greater India idea put forward the passive recipient theory. However, it would be inaccurate to assume that Southeast Asia was just India's cultural annexation.

METHODOLOGY

Collecting data and information from archaeological excavation reports is essential for narrating the relationship between India and Southeast Asia and for reconstructing history over any ancient period. In highlighting the many capacities and attributes of Kalinga and Bengal that were influenced by Indian traditions, this study employed historiographic methodologies and a review of historical writing principles. Most of the sources used were literature, archaeological evidence, contemporary studies, and other archival materials. Books and articles that have been published are also considered secondary sources of information. Although it can be challenging to recreate ancient history due to the unclear quality of primary sources, this study can establish connections with the help of some helpful information from discovered materials.

Cultural Linkages between India and Southeast Asia

In India, historical maritime expeditions are now celebrated and acknowledged through cultural events. For example, the people of Odisha celebrate Bali Yatra on the full moon day in October or November. They gather at the neighboring lakeshores, beach areas, and riverbanks on this day with votive boats and light candles, symbolizing a safe trip for merchants to Bali. This festival honors the spirit of exploration that led to transoceanic journeys for trade, business, and cultural interaction with Bali, Java, Malay, Sumatra, and Thailand. Ancient ports

are no longer present, but these yearly events continue to keep the memory of earlier customs alive. For instance, sacred boats are floated during the festival known as *Loy krathong* in Thailand.

The archaeological evidence supports the idea that maritime connections to Southeast Asia began during the fourth and third centuries BC. These relationships were multifaceted and involved representatives, traders, artists, and monks journeying together. In all of South Asia, Buddhism had a significant impact on trade and society. Over the course of more than 2,000 years, ancient Indian maritime workers engaged in maritime exchanges with Southeast Asian nations, utilizing the monsoon winds and currents. These mariners are likely the first to have employed monsoon winds and currents in marine trade.

Diverse religious groups, as well as local and institutionalized religious organizations, can be found throughout the Indian coast. So, the question is, how are these shrines connected to wider marine networks? Buddhist monks who traveled between China and India, along with recent works, have emphasized the interconnectedness among the Southeast Asian regions. This study aims to explore the connection between comprehending the intricate web of historical relationships and engaging more deeply with the symbols of maritime cultural landscapes and the populations that inhabited these areas, particularly in the Indonesian islands.

Additionally, it is asserted that the Brahmanas were responsible for the transfer, which took place at the court level. The role of the Brahmana priests was to facilitate the merging of local sects, transform kings into avatars of Hindu gods, create magnificent royal ancestries, and ultimately establish Hindu literature, law, and political structures. The Indonesian dynasties, or at the very least both the Indonesian and Indian hierarchies, took the initiative for the arrival of Indian culture. The activities effectively invited Brahmin priests and Indian court artisans to Indonesia. Because of its widespread reputation for the magical, supernatural authorization of dynasty ambitions and the domestication of people, the Indian priesthood was undoubtedly called eastward. In corroboration of this, W.F. Wertheim, a Dutch scholar, has summarized this view as follows,

The so-called Hindu colonization process is reduced, in the modern conception, to the presence at the Javanese courts of a comparatively small number of very influential Indian Brahmins.... and acting at the same time as advisers in affairs of Government and things sacral (275).

Indonesia inherited India's three major religions: Hinduism from ancient times, Buddhism in the Medieval period, and Islam from the twelfth century forward. Islam was brought to Sumatra by Indian traders, primarily from Gujarat. Islam had swept over Java by the fifteenth century. The socio-cultural traditions have contributed to India and Indonesia's distinctive and active relationships. Throughout the wider Southeast Asian area, these structures are being modified from Bengal (current-day West Bengal and Bangladesh), Gujarat, Andhra, Kalinga, and Assam to Vietnam and Indonesia. The earliest inscription found dates back to 508 CE and describes the offering of land to a Buddhist institution in the Lamai hill region. From the coasts of Kolkata, Puri, and Chittagong, Bengal and Kalinga have made the most significant contributions to Indianization in Southeast Asia.

Kalinga and Bengal in Southeast Asia

Before undertaking a formal procedure of Indianization, Indians, mainly those from the ancient Indian provinces of Kalinga, Odisha, and Bengal, made a steady stream of trips to Java and other Southeast Asian islands. Odisha and Bengal shared a boundary; at some periods, these two territories shared a border, while at other times, they existed as independent geographical entities. Since pre-Indianization was so greatly expedited during Indianization, the people of Kalinga and Bengal traveled to and from these ports through *Paloura* and *Tamralipti*. The Krishna and Godavari riverbanks were inhabited by people from India's eastern coast (Odisha and Bengal), who played a crucial role in establishing Indian influences in Southeast Asia. They built homes in the Irrawaddy River's delta and its surrounding regions, which eventually accelerated the flow of travelers into Java. Therefore, Bengal has had the power to connect India and Southeast Asia since prehistoric times, serving as a route for people from other parts of India.

One of the key factors in the early interactions between India and Southeast Asia was the trade activity headquartered in the Ganges Valley. This link is extensively mentioned in the *Jataka*, the *Arthashastra*, the *Ramayana*, the *Puranas*, the *Kathasaritsagara*, and *Greek and Roman* literature. According to Glover, "numerous archaeological studies demonstrate that the connection materialized since 400 BCE" (1-5). Although Indianization became apparent in the first century CE, archaeological evidence suggests that Bengal had been interacting with this wave of foreign migration long before the Christian era.

One of the oldest monuments to have survived is the enormous Borobudur shrine in Java. It is a monument rather than a structure in the Buddhist Stupa tradition. With themes showing the stages of Buddhist enlightenment, the stupa was adorned and rose from the center of a sizable, stepped pyramid foundation. According to legend, the name Buhmian Bhara Budhara (mountain of accumulation of the states' qualities) is a translation of the Sanskrit phrase. The confluence of two rivers, traditionally revered in India, is where Borobudur was constructed. Southeast Asia has also been influenced by Bengali architecture through its religious institutions. Artists and art experts have discovered that Bengali artists collaborated with the Kalinga and Gujarati people to build the early civilization, as evidenced by the spectacular sculptures of the Borobudur temple. According to the study of Akhtar & Idris,

From the Buddhist architecture of Mainamati and Paharpur in Bengal, the crucified plan of the temple took inspiration from and used in the religious buildings built in Ananda Vihara in Myanmar, Chandi Sivu in Java, and Borobudur in Palembang in Sumatra that complied with to the style of "Sarbatavadra", which was Bengal's patented style and was only used in the architectural establishment in Bengal" (28-57).

The socio-cultural and political circumstances catalyzed the Indian cultural expansion. In addition to the marine trade, Indians, mainly from the Ganges Valley, reached the royal families of Southeast Asia, particularly in Java, and introduced them to Indian practices. According to Coedes,

They were introduced to the royal family's associations with natural herbal remedies with Indian origins, humanitarian norms, a wealth of knowledge, and amulets. Indian traders and explorers were able to get a royal welcome as a result (22-23).

Southeast Asian dynastic conflict was an almost constant process that gradually altered the number and composition of competing kingdoms. As an illustration, consider how the Khmer realm shrank due to Thai pressure in the fifteenth century, when Phnom Penh replaced Angkor as the new capital to the south. During the first and second millennia of this era, the Indian subcontinent had a significant cultural impact on both Java and Sumatra. Hindu kingdoms developed, with *Majapahit* being the most significant. Numerous Hindu temples were also constructed, notably the Prambanan temple near *Yogyakarta*, which has been designated a World Heritage Site.

Majapahit, the most powerful Hindu state, extended its dominance over the Malays from Singapore to Kedah and Terengganu, as well as Palembang and Pahang in Sumatra. The *Majapahit* emperors expanded their realm and wiped out surrounding kingdoms. Controlling and increasing their share of the foreign trade passing through the archipelago had been their main priority. Buddhism, Shaivism, and Vaishnavism were all prevalent in *Majapahit*, which later came to represent its previous glory. During the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the new Sultanates grew, and the old Hindu kingdom of *Majapahit* collapsed. Hinduism eventually lost its position as the predominant official religion of Java. Muslims started moving into the area as traders and missionaries. At this point, a brand-new, strong force had arrived in the area. A new religion called "Islam" has formed that is like Buddhism and Hinduism. Once more, India was its principal source. Islam began to prevail in Java after the beginning of European colonization, while Hindu culture continued to thrive in Bali. Shaivism, Vaishnavism, the lesser vehicle of Sanskrit Buddhism, and Mahayana Buddhism had all vanished; nevertheless, due to the introduction of Islam in Java and among other Cham communities. On the other hand, Sinhalese Buddhism, which, through the missionary efforts of its monkhood, had become more deeply ingrained in the hearts of ordinary people than the older Hindu cults had ever been, had been introduced to Cambodia, Siam, Laos, and Burma. Indonesian connections with the Hindu Brahman had gradually transformed into Islam.

Islam spread across the Malay Peninsula and the islands of Sumatra and Java in the 15th and 16th centuries. Hindus, with their Brahman priests, military rulers, and caste structure, were restricted to Java's eastern tip by the seventeenth century. They were quickly expelled even from there. They traveled to Bali, where they were able to maintain their customs. By this time, the mainland nations of Myanmar to Cambodia had finally decided on Buddhism after decades of debating between Hinduism and Buddhism. The tiny island of Bali has evolved into and remains the region's sole Hindu stronghold. The rest of Southeast Asia is split between Buddhism and Islam. However, a significant portion of ancient India's literary legacy remains alive. The *Puranas*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, and other epics and legendary literature continue to serve as inspiration for dances, ghost plays, shadow puppet shows, and classical drama throughout India, Southeast Asia, Malaysia, and Java. Additionally, Hindu law has had a significant impact. Sanskrit has significantly enriched the lexicons of local languages and

introduced participles to their grammar, providing a degree of flexibility that was previously unachievable from their linguistic foundations. The usage of the Indian script was crucial in harmonizing the languages, and the shared ancestry of the Javanese, Balinese, Thai, and Khmer scripts can still be distinguished.

In the earliest phases of Indian migration, Bengal and Southeast Asian territories were linked politically. A unique political relationship existed between the Ganges region and Funan from the mid-fourth century until the sixth century. Even in the year 250 CE, the King of Funan dispatched an ambassador to the King of Bengal to investigate the viability of a horse trade between the two countries. "Four horses were among the presents the ambassador brought back to Funan, which caught the attention of the Funan king" (Mukherjee 9-39). At that time, the horse trade that was shipped from Northern India to various regions of Southeast Asia and China used the *Tamralipti* port as a transit route.

Bengal was significant due to its rich religious and cultural heritage. Although it only covered a small portion of Eastern India, this religious movement with Bengali roots continued to play a crucial role during the Indian migration process. It served as a shining example of Bengali culture. Bengal has identified itself as a distinctive territory with a "regional personality" since ancient times, thanks to its economic prosperity, advantageous geographic position, fertile soil, and the excellent craftsmanship of its people. Through architectural ideas and other forms of culture, these blending forces of Bengal influenced Southeast Asian regions. According to Chakrabarti,

Bengal's religious architectural concepts also began to be implemented in the Buddhist and Hindu religious structures.... that evolved from Bengali architecture include scale, regularity, layout, ascending in receding verandas to a central temple, and the enormous central yard encircled by a monastic cell line (115).

This had a significant impact on the Indianization process as a whole and the religious architectural ideals of Bengal. Several sources suggest that Kalinga and Bengal were involved in the annexation of Southeast Asia and Ceylon. It is said that the bold spirit of Kalinga and Bengal served as the first impetus for India's historical activity and geographic expansion. The Oriya people have been referred to as *Kalingah Sahasikah* (the bold Kalingans) in Sanskrit literature because of their extraordinary sense of adventure and initiative in earlier times. They loved the idea of establishing colonies in far-off places. Recent studies on Indianization have shown that Kalinga had a significant role in the migration and growth of the world.

Some key aspects of capacity and individuality have been drawn from the multifaceted elements of Bengal that were interrelated with Indianization. According to Akhter and Khondekar,

The tactical location of Bengal when it was used as a corridor for the people of India's other regions besides its maritime trade activities. The position of this world's largest Delta as an eastern coastal part of India made Bengal strategically significant (28).

It is surrounded by hills on three sides, except the southern side, which is flanked by the Bay of Bengal. Due to their international connections, two ports, the Tamralipti and Ganges (Chandraketugarh) made Bengal's strategic location increasingly prominent in antiquity. A study on aspects of ancient society states that,

Southeast Asia and Far-East bound journey was comfortable directly or sailing through the Indian Ocean using these ports. The Bengal's uniqueness in cultural individuality and synthesis has expedited Indianization (Chowdhury 148-160).

Indeed, the process of Indianization in Southeast Asia is not like the European colonial invasion. Indians never grabbed the local power to rule over the territory; instead, they influenced Southeast Asia in every possible Indian way. The local ruler accepted and promoted Indian culture, and the local people cordially welcomed it.

CONCLUSION

Kalinga and Bengal indeed made a significant contribution to East Asian culture through their political and cultural expansion into the areas mentioned above. Kalinga had made significant progress in developing a plan for Greater India by disseminating Hinduism and Buddhism, Indian literature and art, and much more, by injecting Indian blood into diverse regions of the Asian hemisphere. The relics of the past are still present now. The natives of Malaysia and Myanmar still use names such as *Talaing*, *Telinga*, *Kling*, *Keling*, and *Kalinga*. Consequently, Bengal's side of the equation was highly active due to its capacity, quality, and the dynamic forces and elements described above. Indianization was born utilizing these characteristics in the womb of ancient India, with Bengal serving as its abdomen. Bengal's origins in trade, culture, and politics facilitated the development of Indianization, which ultimately gave rise to the region's distinct identity.

The explanation highlights the Indocentric thesis that Indian culture was entirely imported into Southeast Asia. Theoretically, interactions between Southeast Asian and Indian cultures led to the overall process of Indian cultural impact. There has been a cultural convergence between these two areas. However, it was not an invasion of another culture. The brilliance of the locals lay in their selection of aspects of a foreign culture that either complemented their own or could be altered to fit their ideals. Many aspects of Indian culture have been retained throughout Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia's traditions, religious practices, and architectural landmarks all bear traces of India's ancient history. The millennia-old link between the two areas has become a key component in forging a new partnership in this era of globalization.

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