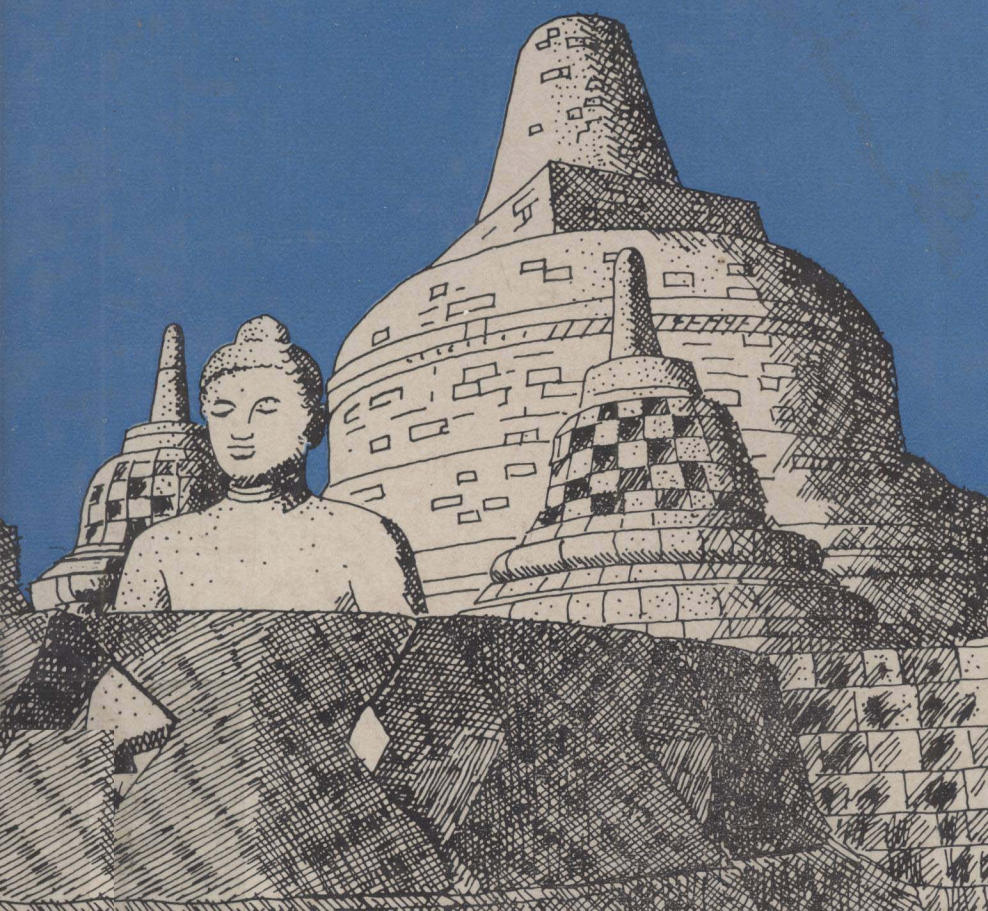


LAOS AND ITS CULTURE

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Introduction

INDIAN culture and philosophy have not assumed the same forms in the South-east Asian States as in India, which is understandable. But their impact over the South-east Asian institutions has been profound, and in some cases spectacular. This influence is seen mainly in South-east Asian religious practices, art and architecture, Buddhism and the two great epics, Ramayana and Mahabharatam. To assess this influence, our approach must, therefore, be to study these media and identify, wherever possible, the impact of Indian culture and philosophy. This is admittedly an indirect method of dealing with the subject but it appears to be the only rewarding course in the prevailing conditions.

It would be best to begin by noting the assessments of scholars and writers in respect of the effect of Indian culture and religion in the region. Indian Council for International Co-operation, while commending India's contribution towards civilisation said that "the whole of South-east Asia received most of its culture from India. Not only does her religion persist but also her literature, language and art of writing bear an intimate relation to that of South-east Asia. India's magnificent art and architecture perhaps contributed most. Indian cultural influence spread north-eastwards through Central Asia to China. The influence of ancient Indian religious literature through philosophy has been very great on the civilisation of the West also. For this India owes more to Max Muller than to any Sanskrit scholar in the West. He, through self-sacrifice and devotion, brought out to the public view the long hidden gems of thought and spirituality to be found in the mine of India's ancient scriptures. Indian philosophy, culture, art and music all have made their contributions to the world but perhaps the greatest contribution was that of her literature.

Professor Arnold Toynbee in his book *One World and India* writes : "On the whole, aggressive militancy is, I am afraid, characteristic of all the religions of the Trans-Indus family, in contrast to the catholicity of Indian religion and philosophy". He went on to say : "This is, I believe, the greatest lesson that India has to teach the present day world. Western Christendom did recognise the virtue of contemplation to some extent in the Western Middle Ages. Since then, we have almost entirely lost this spiritual art and our loss is serious because the art of contemplation is really another name for the art of living. So now we turn to India. This spiritual gift, that makes man human, is still alive in Indian soil. Go on giving the world Indian examples of it. Nothing else can do so much to help mankind to save itself from self-destruction".

A historian like Sir Aurel Stein expressed the view : "Synthetic vision of India has created the cosmic philosophies which embrace in one comprehensive vision, the origin of all things, the histories of ages and the dissolution and decay of the world". He further added : "What distinguishes India from the other nations is not merely its dream of harmonious and united world, not only its striving for a better understanding of the self, rather it is the perception that the realisation of that dream cannot be attained through unmasked and blatant force by war, by connivance, by exploitation, but only through the eternal human qualities of love and sacrifice. India has long been reputed to be one of the world's poorest countries; yet, in this, she is most certainly one of the richest of all".

And here is Professor Basham's assessment of India's contribution from his book *The Wonder that was India* : "The whole of South-east Asia received most of its culture from India. Early in the 5th century B.C. colonists from Western India settled in Ceylon, which was finally converted into Buddhism in the reign of Asoka. By this time, a few Indian merchants had found their way to Malaya, Sumatra and other parts of South-east Asia. Gradually, they established permanent settlements, often, no doubt, marrying native women. They were followed by Brahmins and Buddhist Monks, and Indian influence gradually leavened the indigenous culture, until by the 4th Century A.D. Sanskrit was the official language

of the region, and there arose great civilisations capable of organising large maritime empires and building wonderful memorials to their greatness as the Buddhist Stupa of Borobudur in Java or the Saivite temples of Angkor in Cambodia. Other cultural influences, from China and Islamic world, were felt in South-east Asia, but the primary impetus to civilisation came from India”.

The above is a very strong evidence recorded by persons who are qualified to speak and who have no axe to grind. Their assessment from all accounts is very objective, and impartial. Therefore, it should convince us of the magnitude of Indian contribution towards development of philosophical and cultural relations in South-east Asia.

Despite these complimentary assessments made by reputed scholars, I would like to warn the reader against the insidious tendency to overstress the part played by the imported cultures and to underrate the importance of the indigenous ones of the area. The use of such terms as “further India”, “Greater India” or “little China”—is to be highly deprecated. Even such well-used terms as Indo-China and Indo-Asia are opened to serious objections since they obscure the fact that the areas involved are not new cultural appendices of India and or China but have their own strongly marked individuality. The art and architecture which blossomed so gorgeously in Angkor, Pagan, Central Java, and the old kingdoms of Champa are not different from that of Hindu and Buddhist India. But for a understanding of it one has to study the indigenous cultures of the people who produced them. It may, however, be noted that Indian influence, which unlike that of China, had no political implications, was in the process of absorption by these nations in South-east Asia, transformed just as the influence of ancient Greece did in Western Europe. For, the people who felt the stimulus of Indian culture were as George Colds puts it, “not wild men but communities with relatively high civilisation of their own”.

One thing which has to be noted in the cultural scene beyond India is that in these countries of South-east Asia there is a remarkable genius for synthesis and practical interpretation. As opposed to Indians who are extremely idealistic and prone to seek the ultimate, the Indonesians, Thais

and the Malayas are very practical people. They have not confused religion with culture. They live with both. In the 15th and 16th centuries A.D., Islam was taken to Indonesia by Gujarat traders from Kutch and Surat. The rulers accepted Islam and thereafter were called Sultans but they saw no reason to change the title 'Sri' or their proper names. Thus when I was in Indonesia as India's representative, I was pleasantly surprised to note that the Sultan of Jogjakarta was called Sri Sultan Hemangku Bhuvano (the exalted ruler who has the world at his knees).

II

How were the Indian culture and philosophy, art and architecture transmitted to South-east Asian countries? History gives us a detailed and interesting account of various forms of communication and types of personnel, religious and commercial, that migrated to the South-east Asian countries and made them their homes. We need not, therefore, repeat all the details except a few to throw some light on the problem.

Consider the following interesting story indicating one of the earliest means of communication. It is well-known in India that Rishi Agastya set out on a journey to the South of India crossing the Vindhya mountains which had bent down to pay him homage. And for this act of obeisance, the Vindhya mountains are still short and stunted when compared to the mighty Himalayas. Agastya stayed a long time in the South, giving it principles of grammar and providing phonetic alphabets for the local languages. The Indonesians believe that at some point of time Agastya crossed over to the Indonesian archipelago bringing with him all the gods of the Hindu pantheon and the host of characters from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Now there is a very strong tradition in Indian lore that Agastya had swallowed the sea in order to make a dry passage from the East coast of the South to cross over to the neighbouring countries in South-East Asia.

Some scholars like Prof. R.G. Majumdar, Dr. Radhakumud Mukerji and Prof. Suniti Kumar Chatterji have referred to these countries as Greater India or BRIHATTA BHARATA. They did this because of the many common cultural features

between these countries and India. In fact the very names Sri Lanka, Burma Desa (Burma), Syama (Siam or Thailand), Kamboja (Cambodia), Champa (Vietnam), Malaya (Malayasia) are of Indian origin. Sinhapur (Singapore) was a flourishing sea port in olden times where Ayodhya, the river Ganga, and Varanasi, Madura and Mithila are places in their own countries. President Sukarno used to tell me a story about his naming ceremony. Karna of Mahabharata in his father's eyes, was not a good specimen of humanity having served the wicked Duryodhana. He, therefore, decided to name his son Sukarna (Sukarno) or the good Karna. In fact most of the Hindu names in Indonesia begin with the prefix 'Su' or good. This shows that they have improved upon and modified the cultural heritage received from India to suit their own genius and requirements. The Indonesians and other peoples of the South-East Asian region are our true spiritual brothers having more or less similar beliefs and approaches to life. As opposed to the West, they are more in harmony with the elements of nature and feel that they are in communion with super-natural powers, of which the ordinary man is not conscious. President Sukarno used to believe that he was the incarnation of the Sun and his son was GHATOT (GHATOTYAEHA) reborn. Similarly his daughter born on a rainy day was named MEGHAWATI SUKARNO PUTRI. Soon after independence the great Indian scholar Acharya Raghuvira visited Indonesia. In Bali he was received like an ancient Rishi, another Agastya who had come from India to bless them.

Let us describe in some detail Indian immigration to Indonesia. There are two immigration theories proposed by the Dutch scholars. They are labelled—the Ksatriya Hypothesis and the Vaisya Hypothesis. Much of what we say applies also to the other South-east Asian States.

It is held that Indian penetration was peaceful and that it began with traders who settled and married native women, thereby introducing Indian culture. In this way the Indonesians voluntarily accepted the higher Hindu civilisation. The Lian History asserts that one of Chandan's successors was a Brahman from India, named Kiao-chen-ju, whom a supernatural voice bade to go and rule over Funan. According to this account, he was well received by the people, who chose

him as their King. He then changed all the rules in accordance with Indian methods. His name was thought to be a Chinese rendering of 'Kaundinya', and the story would thus indicate the restoration of the Hindu element in the ruling family against the indigenous clan of the Fan, under whose rule Indian influence had tended to be weakened by contact with the local culture. No date is assigned to the reign of this second Kaundinya, but one of his successors, with a name which may stand for Sreshthavarman, is reported to have sent an embassy to emperor Wen (425-53 A.D.). Northwards Indian cultural influence spread through Central Asia to China. Faint and weak contact between China and India was probably made in Mauryan times, if not before, but only when, some 2000 years ago, the Han Empire began to drive its frontiers towards the Caspian did India and China really meet. Unlike South-east Asia, China did not assimilate Indian ideas in every aspect of her culture, but the whole of the Far East is in India's debt for Buddhism, which helped to mould the distinctive civilisations of China, Korea, Japan and Tibet.

The first Indian immigrants to Indonesia mostly from Gujarat in South-east India, came during the period of the first Christian Era.

The Saka period in Indonesia was marked by the introduction of the Sanskrit language and the Pallawa-script by the Indian Prince Aji Saka (78 A.D.). Besides this Pallawa-script the Devanagari script of the Sanskrit language was also in use as indicated in the ancient stone and copper inscriptions (pracisthies) unearthed in Indonesia. Both the language and scripts were in a later period Indonesianised and called the "Kawi" language which has in its lexicon a number of additional Javanese words and phrases. Early trade relations were established between South India and Indonesia. Sumatra was then named "Swarnadwipa" or the Island of Gold, the island of Java was called "Java-Dwipa" or the Rice Island; while the Hindu kingdom in Borneo Island was called Kutai. Relations with India were not only confined to religious and cultural exchanges which later on developed into diplomatic relations between the Buddhist kingdom of Srivijaya and Nalanda in South India, but grew into well-developed trade relations.

A continuous influx of Indian settlers went on during the 1st to the 7th century A.D. The Hindu religion was peacefully spread throughout the archipelago gradually to all layers of society in Java and to the upper classes only in the outer Islands.

The Period of Hindu Kingdoms

Many well-organised kingdoms with a high level of civilisation were ruled by indigenous Rajas who embraced the Hindu religion or Buddhist religion at a later stage, and it was for this reason that this period in history was called the Period of Hindu Kingdoms which lasted from ancient time to the 15th century A.D. Its culture and civilisation, emanating from the Hindu and Buddhist religions were later synchronised with Indonesia's cultural elements and is therefore also termed as the "Hindu-Indonesian" period.

Indian customs and culture were introduced with regard to the monarchical system of governing, their ancestral genealogical pedigree system, the organising of their armed forces, literature, music and dances, architecture, methods and ritual of worship. Even the "Varna" (Caste) division of labour system was introduced in a less strict division of the "Varnas". The Hindu religious interpretation of the Vedas and the Mahabharata and Ramayana epics, presented through the "Wayang" puppets shadow-plays as its visual media, was introduced and spread all over the country. These are still popular even today in the Republic of Indonesia.

The first Indian Buddhists arrived in Indonesia between 100 and 200 A.D. introducing the "Hinayana" and the "Mahayana" sects. The latter became more advanced in the 8th century A.D.

As Buddhism also spread to China, many Chinese pilgrims went to India, sailing through the straits of Malacca. Some of them on their way to India, did make visits to Indonesia and even stayed for a while to get trained in and to develop their knowledge of Buddhism. In 144 A.D. a Chinese Buddhist Saint Fa Hsien, driven by a storm, landed in Java Dwipa (present Java Island) and stayed there for 5 months. The Northern part of Java was then ruled by an Indonesian Hindu

Raja, Kundunga. Opposite his kingdom, on the island of Borneo, in Kutai region there were the successive rulers of the Hindu Rajas : Devawarman, Aswawarman and Mulawarman.

A manual of singing, named the Chandra-Chana was first composed in 778 A.D.

One of the Pallawa language stone inscription (Pracasthi) of 732 A.D. mentioned the name of the Hindu Raja Sanjaya who was later identified as the Raja of the Hindu kingdom of "Mataram" (replacing Sailendra in Central Java).

The construction of Hindu Sivaite temple complex of Prambanan began in 856 A.D. and was completed in 900 A.D. by Raja Daksa. The capital of this Hindu kingdom of Mataram was Medang Kamolan, in the neighbourhood of the present Semarang city. Earlier, in the year 675 A.D. Hindu Sivaite temples were erected on the mountain plain of Dieng, southwest of the capital Medang Kamolan.

West of the Central Java Kingdoms of Sailendra, in the present West Java Province, were the Hindu Kingdoms of Galuh, Kanoman, Kuningan and Pajajaran. Pajajaran which succeeded an earlier established kingdom of Galuh was founded by Raja Purana with Pakuan as its capital. Later, there were the kingdoms of Taruma Negara, Kawali and Parahyang-Sunda.

At the end of the 13th century, the Srivijaya Empire began to decline as a result of severance by its vassal states as well as due to frequent attacks by the South Indian Kingdom of Chola and by the Kingdom of Majapahit. It was ultimately entirely subdued by Majapahit who, in its subjugation efforts, was supported by Raja Aditiawarman of the kingdom of Malayu. Majapahit first conquered the Jambi kingdom in Sumatra which later extended along the rivers and finally annexed the kingdom of Pagar Ruyung in West Sumatra which completed the entire subjugation of Sumatra under the rule of Majapahit.

Meanwhile, for some unknown reasons, mighty Hindu kingdoms of Central Java disappeared from its historic records and new prosperous Hindu Kingdoms emerged in East Java. Raja Balitung who ruled between 820-832 A.D. had once succeeded in uniting Central and East Java kingdoms. The disappearance of records was presumably caused by a catastrophic natural disaster, or by an epidemic.

At the end of the 10th century (911-1007 A.D.) a mighty Hindu Kingdom of "Singasari" emerged in East Java. Its King Raja Dharmawangsa codified laws and translated the Indian epic of the Mahabharata into the Javanese language and also the philosophical essence of it as contained in the "Bhisma Parva" scripture. Besides, he also ordered the translation of the Bhagavat gita.

Raja Airlangga who meanwhile also ruled over the island of Bali was known for his water works along the Brantas river (which are still in use) and was a wise and firm ruler. Before his death in 1049 A.D. Raja Airlangga divided the kingdom into the kingdoms of Janggala and Daha or Kediri, to be ruled by his two sons. Airlangga was also known as the promoter of literary works. The "Panji" novels produced during this period are known even today and taught at certain university colleges in Thailand, Cambodia and Malaysia.

Raja Jayabhaya of the Hindu Kingdom of Kediri (1135-1157 A.D.) wrote a book in which he foretold the downfall of Indonesia and its being made subservient to the white race (the Dutch), which afterwards would be succeeded by a yellow race (the Japanese), domination. He ended his book by forecasting that Indonesia ultimately would regain her independence under the rule of justice. During this golden period many other literary works were produced, such as the Javanese version of the epic Mahabharata composed by the Hindu Mpu (Saint) Sedah and his brother Mpu Panuluh and published in 1157 A.D.

III

To attempt to describe all the influences of the Indian philosophy and culture in all the South-East Asian states is a colossal task. We have therefore restricted our choice and confined our attention to a few representative cases for examination. These are only illustrative and not exhaustive. We have, for example, considered the influence of Ramayana on the indigenous institutions. As an example of Buddhist architecture the Stupa at Borobudur has been taken.

All of South-East Asia is dotted with Hindu or Buddhist temples, monuments in stone proclaiming to the world the

eternal spiritual kinship and cultural affinity with India. It is well known that 300 years before the Christian era king Asoka had sent his sister and son to Sri Lanka with the message of the Buddha. This message was later carried over to Indonesia and other countries of the Asian mainland known as SUVARNABHUMI. It became crystallised in the famous monument of Borobudur details follow, near the central town of Java known as Jogjakarta. Borobudur is the restatement of the Buddhist philosophy in stone. Fifty miles away from this monument is the famous temple of Prambanan which is dedicated to Siva. In front of the main entrance to this temple a huge Nandi is situated on a stone pedestal. Women come here from all parts of Indonesia to touch the sacred Bull's tail seeking the birth of a child. All around the stone gallery of the temple, more than 40 important episodes from the Ramayana are etched in stone. The series begin with Rishi Agastya sitting in the alcove with his Rudraksha mala in his hand, his water vessel placed near him and his hair still dripping with water. It seems as if he has just emerged from the sea and taken his seat in the Indonesian scene. In Thailand, Laos and Cambodia also the entire Ramyana story is carved or painted on the outer walls of Buddhist temples.

India's culture made a deep imprint on Indonesian society particularly on the islands of Java and Bali. Although more than 90% of the population of Java are Muslims, certain aspects of Indian culture viz., its literature and mysticism—Borobudur (750-850 A.D.) and temples in Prambanan (856-950 A.D.)—stand as eternal witnesses in stone of the close relationship that was brought about between Indian and Indonesian philosophical and cultural relations. Also the great Indian epics Mahabharata and Ramayana remain very popular in Indonesia and they have become the main themes in the Javanese and Balinese Shadow Plays (Wayang) which were enriched by the Indonesian genius.

These two epics have provided the background for popular art forms, song, dance and drama in the whole of South-East Asia. The Wayang theatre of Indonesia dramatises important episodes from the two epics through a highly stylised and popular shadow plays performed by a specially trained 'Dalang' or master of ceremonies. These shadow plays are

performed on all festivals and important occasions like birth and naming ceremonies and marriage and other feasts. A deeply spiritual significance is attached to the Wayang plays and one has to sit through the entire performance which sometimes lasts throughout the night. The Wayang has kept alive the teachings and lessons of the Mahabharata for the Indonesian people. The Mahabharata is truly the national epic of Indonesia.

The Javanese version of the epic Mahabharata called the 'Bharata Yuddha' written by the poet Mpu Sedah and his brother Mpu Panuluh was pulished in 1157 A.D. In Bali, the majority of the people are still Hindus who live side by side with their Muslim brothers indicating without doubt the existence in practice of a truly secular state. Hinduism as found in Bali in all its characteristic manifestation, is another living reminder of the deep contacts between India and Indonesia since the dawn of Indonesian history.

Ramayana, the Epic of Asia

The Ramayana of Valmiki is an immortal epic of great literary value. It has had a profound influence on the life and thought of the people, not only of India but also of the neighbouring countries. And it has been doing so throughout the ages. Its universal popularity has been immense. Dramatists and artists have borrowed plots and themes from it. Poets have written again and again about it. Sculptors and painters not only in India but in far-off lands, such as Cambodia and Indonesia, were inspired by the Ramayana to produce works of great beauty and charm. In a Sanskrit sloka child is blessed by saying, 'As long as the Ganga flows and Kurukshetra exists, as long as the earth is firmly set, as long as the Ramakatha endures, so long may the child live'. The story of the Ramayana is very simple but its theme is truly great and its style very elegant. A number of dramatic and dance traditions have been evolved from the theme of this epic in various countries of South-East Asia. Truly speaking, the Ramayana has not only been a great source of inspiration to people in the past but continues to inspire and influence them even today.

The Ramayana has also been the major vehicle of India's cultural contacts with South-East Asia. Ayodhya in Thailand and Jogjakarta in Indonesia have their origin in the Ramayana's Ayodhya. Near Jogjakarta is the river Saraju named after the Sarju river here.

Other place names taken from the Ramayana and given to parts of South-East Asia were Suvarnadwipa (Golden Island or Peninsula) and Suvarnabhumi (Land of Gold). The Buddhist Jatakas, or birth stories of the Buddha, which enshrine folk tales of early India, often tell of voyages to Suvarnabhumi. The name also appears in other texts, together with a few other names applied by Indians to places in South-East Asia; but the only inference to be drawn from all these references put together is that in India there was a vague idea of the spread of Indian culture eastwards across the ocean. They tell us precisely nothing more about it. There is a statement in Kautilya's *Arthasasthra*, attributed to a King recommending to his people to acquire an old or a new country by seizing the territory of another or deporting the surplus population of his own. This has been taken to indicate an early wave of Indian immigrants to South-East Asia before Christian era.

Ramayana has been very popular in all the South-East Asian countries. A literary curve of sweeping majesty, it has gathered a certain momentum of its own manifesting itself in the narrative arts of recitation by story-tellers, arts of classical ballet, theatre and shadow-plays or featured in the plastic arts of stone sculptures. It has found its place not only in architecture in these countries but also in the performing arts of classical ballet, theatre and shadow-plays or featured in the plastic art of stone sculptures, wood carvings, paintings and has also flourished in creative writing in prose and poetry. In fact it has been a strong movement to translate social patterns, eternity of ideals and to explore realities of human existence and to bring about better means of integration by transcending all barriers to enlarge and intensify cultural understanding in our part of the world. In the 7th century A.D. in Cambodia, Ramayana became a major and favoured epic and its episodes symbolised great historic events in monuments. That the Khemers had been impregnated with Ramayana is evident from the fact that a name or scene