

Cultural Interaction with Asian Countries

India's Relations with the Outside World

Medieval lawgivers and commentators ordained that a person should not cross the seas. This would imply that India shunned all relations with the outside world, but this is not so, for India has maintained contacts with its Asian neighbours since Harappan times. Indian traders went to the cities of Mesopotamia, where their seals dating to the second half of the third millennium BC have been found. From the beginning of the Christian era onwards, India maintained commercial contacts with China, Southeast Asia, West Asia, Central Asia, and the Roman empire. We may recall how the Indian land routes were connected with the Chinese Silk Route, and also India's commercial intercourse with the eastern part of the Roman empire. India also sent its missionaries, conquerors, and traders to the neighbouring countries where they founded settlements.

Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, China, and Central Asia

The propagation of Buddhism promoted India's contacts with Sri Lanka, Myanmar, China, and Central Asia. Buddhist missionaries were sent to Sri Lanka in the reign of Ashoka in the third century BC. Short inscriptions in Brahmi script relating to the second and first centuries BC have been found in Sri Lanka. In the course of time, Buddhism came to acquire a permanent stronghold

in Sri Lanka. In the early centuries of the Christian era, Buddhism spread from India to Burma (modern Myanmar). The Burmese developed the Theravada form of Buddhism, and erected many temples and statues in honour of the Buddha. What is more significant, the Burmese and Sri Lankan Buddhists produced a rich corpus of Buddhist literature not to be found in India. All the Pali texts were compiled and commented upon in Sri Lanka. Although Buddhism disappeared from India, it continued to command a large following in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, and this remains the case to this day.

Beginning with the reign of Kanishka, a large number of Indian missionaries went to China, Central Asia, and Afghanistan to preach their religion. China emerged as a great centre of Buddhism. The Chinese records mention 162 visits made by the Chinese monks during the fifth to the eighth centuries. But the visit of only one Indian scholar called Bodhidharma to China is recorded in this period. All these visits were concerned with Buddhist texts and translations. Thus despite linguistic differences we notice an amazing contact between India and China in the Buddhist context. From China, Buddhism spread to Korea and Japan, and it was in search of Buddhist texts and doctrines that several Chinese pilgrims, such as Fa-hsien and Hsuan Tsang, came to India. Eventually this contact proved fruitful to both the countries. A Buddhist colony arose at Tun Huang, which was the starting point of the companies of merchants crossing the desert. The Indians learnt the art of growing silk from China, and the Chinese learnt from India the art of Buddhist painting.

The two other great centres of Buddhism in ancient times were Afghanistan and Central Asia. In Afghanistan, many statues of the Buddha and Buddhist monasteries have been discovered. Begram and Bamiyan situated in the north of this country are famous for such relics. Begram is famous for ivory work, which is similar to Indian workmanship in Kushan times. Bamiyan had the distinction of boasting of the tallest Buddha statue sculptured out of rock in the early centuries of the Christian era; unfortunately this was recently destroyed by aggressive, fundamentalist Afghan Muslims. Bamiyan has thousands of natural and artificial caves in which the monks lived. Buddhism continued to hold its ground in Afghanistan until the seventh century when it was supplanted by Islam.

A similar process took place in Central Asia. Excavations have revealed Buddhist monasteries, stupas, and inscriptions and manuscripts written in Indian languages at several places in Central Asia. As a result of the extension of Kushan rule, Prakrit written in Kharoshthi script spread to Central Asia, where we find many Prakrit inscriptions and manuscripts relating to the fourth century

AD. Written language was used for official and day-to-day correspondence as well as for the preservation and propagation of Buddhism. In Central Asia, Buddhism continued to be a dominant religious force.

Christianity and West Asian Relations

Though trade with the Roman and Byzantine empires declined, religious relations continued. Buddhism connected India with Central and East Asia, but Christianity linked it with West Asia. In the sixth century, the Alexandrian scholar Kosmos speaks of a thriving Christian community in both India and Sri Lanka. A bishop appointed from Persia served the Christians in Kalyan near modern Mumbai. Thus, the Christians lived in western India along with Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu communities.

Indian Culture in Southeast Asia

Indian culture also spread to Southeast Asia, but not through the medium of Buddhism. Except in the case of Burma it was mostly diffused through the brahmanical cults. The name Suvarnabhumi was given to Pegu and Moulmein in Burma, and merchants from Broach, Banaras, and Bhagalpur traded with Burma. Considerable Buddhist remains of Gupta times have been found in Burma. From the first century AD onwards India established close trading relations with Java in Indonesia, which was called Suvarnadvipa or the island of gold by the ancient Indians. The earliest Indian settlements in Java were established in AD 56. In the second century of the Christian era, several small Indian principalities were set up. When the Chinese pilgrim Fa-hsien visited Java in the fifth century, he found the brahmanical religion prevalent there. In the early centuries of the Christian era, the Pallavas founded their colonies in Sumatra. Eventually these flowered into the kingdom of Sri Vijaya, which continued to be an important power and a centre of Indian culture from the fifth to the tenth century. The Indian settlements in Java and Sumatra became channels for the radiation of Indian culture. The process of founding settlements continued subsequently.

In Indo-China, which is at present divided into Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, the Indians set up two powerful kingdoms in Kamboja and Champa. The powerful kingdom of Kamboja, coterminous with modern Cambodia, was founded in the sixth century. Its rulers were devotees of Shiva, and developed Kamboja into a centre of Sanskrit learning, and numerous inscriptions were

composed.

In the neighbourhood of Kamboja at Champa, embracing southern Vietnam and the fringes of northern Vietnam, it seems that the traders set up colonies. The king of Champa was also a Shaiva, and the official language of Champa was Sanskrit. This country was considered to be a great centre of education in the Vedas and Dharmashastras.

Indian settlements in the Indian Ocean continued to flourish until the thirteenth century, and during this period, their inhabitants intermingled with the local peoples. Continuing commingling gave rise to a new type of art, language, and literature. We find in these countries several art objects that show evidence of a happy blending of both Indian and indigenous elements. It is astonishing that the greatest Buddhist temple is to be found not in India but in Borobudur in Java. Considered to be the largest Buddhist temple in the world, it was constructed in the eighth century, and 436 images of the Buddha engraved on it illustrate his life.

The temple of Angkor Wat in Cambodia is larger than that of Borobudur. Although this temple dates to medieval times, it can be compared to the best artistic achievements of the Egyptians and Greeks. The stories of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are narrated in relief on the walls of the temple. The story of the *Ramayana* is so popular in Indonesia that many folk plays based on it are performed. The language of Indonesia, Bahasa Indonesia, contains numerous Sanskrit words.

Cultural Give and Take

With regard to sculpture, the head of the Buddha from Thailand, the head from Kamboja, and the magnificent bronze images from Java are regarded as the best examples of the fusion of Indian art with the local art traditions of Southeast Asia. Similarly, beautiful examples of painting, comparable to those of Ajanta are found not only in Sri Lanka but also in the Tun Huang caves on the Chinese border.

It would be wrong to think that religion alone contributed to the spread of Indian culture. Missionaries were backed by traders and conquerors. Trade evidently played a vital part in establishing India's relations with Central Asia and Southeast Asia. The very names Suvarnabhumi and Suvarnadvipa, given to territories in Southeast Asia, suggest Indians' search for gold. Trade led not only to the exchange of goods but also to that of elements of culture. It would be

inaccurate to hold that Indians alone contributed to the culture of their neighbours; it was a two-way traffic. The Indians acquired the craft of minting gold coins from the Greeks and Romans, they learnt the art of growing silk from China, that of growing betel leaves from Indonesia, and adopted several other products from the neighbouring countries. Similarly, the method of growing cotton spread from India to China and Central Asia. However, the Indian contribution seems to have been significant in art, religion, script, and language. Nevertheless, no culture which developed in the neighbouring countries was a replica of the Indian culture. Just as India retained and developed its own identity in spite of foreign influences, similarly, each country in Southeast Asia developed its own characteristic culture by synthesizing Indian elements with indigenous elements.

Chronology

(BC)

3 M Indian traders went to the cities of Mesopotamia, where their seals have been found.

3 C The Buddhist missionaries sent to Sri Lanka in the reign of Ashoka. India began commercial contacts with China, Southeast Asia, West Asia, Central Asia, and the Roman empire.

(AD)

56 The earliest Indian settlement in Java.

Early Christian centuries Buddhism spread from India to Burma (modern Myanmar). Indian Buddhist missionaries in China, Central Asia, and Afghanistan in Kanishka's time and later. The tallest Buddha statue sculpted out of rock at Bamiyan. The Pallavas founded colonies in Sumatra.

4 C Many Prakrit inscriptions and manuscripts found in Central Asia.

5 C Fa-hsien visited Java.

5–11 C Sri Vijay as an important power and a centre of Indian culture.

6 C The kingdom of Kamboja, coterminous with modern Cambodia, founded.

7 C Buddhism in Afghanistan supplanted by Islam.

8 C Construction of the largest Buddhist temple in the world, the Borobudur temple, in Indonesia.