

A Survey Of India's Cultural Contacts With Ancient Thailand: With Special Reference To Buddhism During Dwaravati Period

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India has been in touch with its neighboring regions much before the advent of civilization in South Asia. With the rise of civilization, new vistas of cultural contact were opened in which the trade and commerce could be identified as the major background over which the religious and political contacts flourished in later times. This contact has been characterized by mutual respect and adaptation, leaving a lasting imprint on Southeast Asian civilization.

Geographically, due to the strategic location of India, Indian explorers went to far lands of Asia by land as well as sea routes which later became the highways of commercial and cultural exchanges. This ideal location connected the ancient cultures of East Asia, South East Asia, South Asia, West Asia and Central Asia. Moreover, due to the diversity of the natural environment, India has been a significant source of raw materials like cotton and spices, etc. and finished goods in the past that made India has been cultivated and maintain their own rich and high culture.

The cultural relations between any two countries or regions could be defined as shared and interactions both directly and indirectly. Direct interactions include physical confronts with people and objects of another culture. Indirect relations are more subtle, involving such things as a person's ideas, or cross-national influences in philosophy, belief, religion, literature, art, and architecture. The overall outcomes of cultural relations are greater connectivity, better mutual understanding, more and deeper relationships, mutually beneficial transactions and enhanced sustainable dialogue between states, peoples, non-state actors and cultures.¹

Indian contact with neighbors like Southeast Asia could be traced back since the Pleistocene period. Southeast Asia is a region comprised of 11 different countries and is broadly classified in Mainland and Maritime South East Asia. Presently, the Mainland South East Asia consists of Thailand, Myanmar (Burma), Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Malaysia, and Maritime SEA consists of Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, and Timor-Leste (East Timor). Mainland Southeast, in particular, has a geographical connection with India. It is geographically situated between the east of India subcontinent and the south of China. Thus, it is unavoidable for indigenous Southeast Asians to be influenced by the more ancient civilizations of their neighbors like India and China, mainly from India. Culturally and economically, India and Southeast Asia have had prolonged contact in all aspects, which further took shape since the beginning of the Christian era. Direct influence has been manifested by cultural and commercial contacts between Indian traders with the people of Southeast Asia, particular in Thailand.

In the early centuries of the Common Era, some part of present Thailand was subject to the kingdom of Funan, which held power in mainland South East Asia. After the fall of the Funanese, Dvaravati emerged as Huien Tsang refers to as 'To-lo-po-ti'. Dvaravati flourished until the tenth century C.E. The cultural relations between India and Dvaravati in Thailand, in particular, has been evidenced by the representation of the material cultures with Indian style and content, which was embedded in inscriptions, sculptures, architecture, etc. In the case of cross-cultural/transcultural like Dvaravati and India. In India, the Buddha statue was considered the Mahayana; the reason that the Buddha statue emerged after the establishment of Mahayana Buddhism during the third council in the 1st century CE. However, Dvaravati was consider as the region of Theravada Buddhism.

The word Dvaravati is abbreviated from the word "*Sri dvaravati svarapunya*". It meant "meritorious deeds of the lord of Dvaravati", which were inscribed on the silver coins found in Central Thailand's cities. Many scholars have identified Dvarati based on Chinese references.² Coedes's presumption of Dvaravati was To-lo-po-ti,³ the ancient city, which I-Tsing and Huan Zang's travelogues of the 5th and mid-7th century C.E. had been referred that it was located between Srikasetra (Myanmar) in the west and Isanapura (Cambodia) at the east.⁴ Dvaravati was the earliest urban city in Thailand but somewhat lacked its own history because most inscriptions have been mentioned about the Buddhist canon and the donation. Information about the rulers and their chronology remains an enigma. Dvaravati has been known to the scholars of Southeast Asian studied since the second half of the 19th century, although the concepts of state, kingship, Buddhist sects and Mon Dvaravati have also been controversial issues.⁵

Latest in the year of 2019, from the excavation, Dvaravati inscription was found at Wat Phra Ngam, about one kilometer north of the Phra Pathom Chedi in Nakhon Pathom central Thailand. It was the Pallava script of 7th century in Sanskrit language. It consist the words of praise to a king who is victorious in the war in capturing the city name "Dvāravatīvibhūti" in the inscription.⁶

The geography of Dvaravati covers the Central Plain of Thailand, the Khorat plateau and peninsular Thailand. Lower Central Plain of Thailand, until the early Dvaravati dated the 6th-7th century CE, was a palaeo-gulf,⁷ the northernmost shoreline of the Gulf of Thailand was in Ang Thong province and east-west from Chachoengsao to Nakhon Pathom.⁸ The Lower Central Plain of Thailand also called the "Lower Chao Phraya Basin"⁹ is the most fertile area with the siltation from the confluence of the Ping, Wang, Yom and Nan rivers which form Chao Phraya river at Nakhon Sawan province.¹⁰ The four rivers which empty into the Gulf of Thailand are the Chao Phraya from the north, the Mae Klong and the Tha Ching from the west, and the Bang Pakong from the east.¹¹ The Peninsular Thailand is located between Andaman Sea of the Indian Ocean to the west and the Gulf of Thailand to the east. The western coast is mainly limestone, which has been eroded into many steep hills. The main characteristic of the peninsular is the number of mountain chains ranging from the north to the south.

Initial contact between India and Southeast Asia began in the historical period of about 300 BCE. Since then, these contacts have been constant, involving a process continuing even to the present day. The chieftain groups of Southeast Asia were followers of Indian origin religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, which were one of the essential features of a development process called 'Indianization', which took place in the Southeast Asian region over many centuries. Though, the process of 'Indianization' is continuing disagreement among scholars about the term's meaning since there was some prehistoric research proved.¹² Nevertheless, exploring the concept of Indianization is needed for this study to comprehend the continuity of cultural contact between India and Thailand as a whole picture. R. C. Majumdar could assert that "the Hindu colonists brought with them the whole framework of their culture and civilization and this was transplanted in its entirety among the people who had yet not emerged from their primitive barbarism". The ideology of "Greater India" was the derivation of the "Indianization" Theory which George Coedès termed as "the expansion of an organized culture that was founded upon Indian conception of royalty, Hinduism and Buddhist cults and the Sanskrit language"¹³ Also, the theories of the transplantation process like the Vaisya (traders) theory, the Kshatriya (king) theory and the Brahmana (priests) theory, which were proposed that the people in these three groups as the conveyor of Indianization to Southeast Asia.¹⁴ Indianization did not take place with the concept that there was a mass migration of Indians coming into Southeast Asia. Instead, a relatively limited number of traders and priest-scholars brought Indian Culture in its various forms to Southeast Asia, where much, but not whole, of this Culture was absorbed by the local population and joined to their existing cultural patterns.

The initial stage of Dvaravati studies were started with the epigraphical work in the third decade of the 20th century. The essential inscription was *Wat Porang* inscription. It was the oldest Mon language inscription found in Nakhon Pathom Province. Coedes has supported Paul Pelliot's theory that the Dvaravati people were Mon. This theory was based on the relationship between language and race.¹⁵

It is observed by the scholars that the Dvaravati inscriptions from the central part of Thailand and Pyu inscriptions from Myanmar had shown some similarity in the script of the 6th century AD. It might be possible the transmission of the script from Pyu to Dvaravati at that time.

Buddhism was established in Dvaravati in the 6th century CE, dating from the evidence of Buddhist canon inscriptions. It might be spread into Dvaravati directly from the Indian merchant and priest or through Myanmar by land route. The Buddhist canon inscriptions of Dvaravati were written in the Pali language. Peter Skilling mentions that the Pali language has been used in Theravadin.¹⁶ According to him,

Buddhism in Dvaravati is Theravadin because most of the Buddhist canon inscriptions were written in Pali. Historians examined the Pali inscriptions of Dvaravati in Thailand and Sri Lanka. The same verses and formulas of the inscriptions from both ancient cities have been distinguished. Also, Phasuk has found that Buddhist verses and formulas from the inscriptions of these two countries are the same. Peter has linked this area with North India by the evidence of Buddhist canon verse "*ye dhamma or paticcasamuppada*", which was quite rare in South India and Sri Lanka.¹⁷

Wat Phra Men and *Wat Phra Pathon* are the key monuments of Dvaravati architecture. *Wat Phra Men* was only one monument in the cruciform plan. However, the *tri-ratha* ground plan of *Wat Phra Pathon* was the main characteristic of the Dvaravati architectural style, which has spread around the Central plain and Peninsula of Thailand. The significance of their ground plans and forms was similar to the Buddhist University and the temple architecture at the holy places in Bihar during the Pala period. However, their Kumuda mouldings basements resemble the same at Ajanta. The prototypes of these two monuments were also Buddhist pilgrimage destinations in India.

According to Chedha Tingsanchali there is evidence showing that the Vakataka Art of Ajanta in India has also influenced the foliage motifs of Dvaravati Dharmacakras.¹⁸ The significance is that Dvaravati Dharmacakras and monuments have shown their creative talent in Art, making a distinct characteristic of the Dvaravati art style. Moreover, the prototype of the motif on Dharmacakras does not appear as the object brought to Dvaravati but is similar to the Vakataka art motif at Ajanta.

In the Northeastern region of Thailand, the Dharmacakra symbols were depicted on the Sema or the Buddhist Boundary stone, which has been spread along Mun-Chi rivers valleys and their tributaries. It has been related the development of these semas with the Dvaravati period. The style of art and some elements had similarities with the Dvaravati art of central Thailand.¹⁹ The significance of sema in the Northeastern region is not only the strong influence of Buddhism but also the *dharmacakra* were represented as symbols on semas. The last ten episodes of the Buddha's Life are very popular at Muang Fa Daed, the centre of Dvaravati art in the Northeastern region. It is possible to look at the connection between *dharmacakra* and the last ten episodes of the Buddha's Life in the aspect of Chakravartin, the Buddhist Concept of the ideal king whose territory has been controlled by dharma-Vijaya.²⁰ It can be considered a tool for representing the good image of the king as well. The idea of using Jataka can also link to the jatakas stucco panels at Chula Pathon Chedi in Nakorn Pathom province in the central area of Dvaravati.

Dharmacakras can also be seen as the political tool of Dvaravati rulers. The entire state of Dvaravati was parallelly established with Buddhism. So, the number and variety of Dharmacakras have been remarked as the clue for arguing that these were involved in socio-political environment of Dvaravati. However, the evidences for correlating Dharmacakras with the royal lineage are quite weak. Dharmacakras have been distributed all around Dvaravati territory.

Religion and trade were the cause of Cultural Relations between Dvaravati and India, not Political expansion. Instead of the political issue of Greater India and the process of 'Indianization', the local leader plays an important role in the process of this acculturation. Buddhism is the soft power for gathering different groups of communities in present Central Thailand to push up to be the new State called "Dvaravati." The emergence of Dvaravati was caused by the impact of both the compression and intensification of the conflict between the neighbouring State, Funan and Champa. Also, the prosperity from economic mineral resources such as tin and copper mines and maritime trading aroused and motivated the merchant communities, bringing them together for the authority and negotiating in the name of Dvaravati.

The Dvaravati-Indian cultural relationship derived from trade and religion rather than politics. The main argument is that trade and religion were the causes of cultural relations; however, the main significance is the emergence of the Dvaravati State as the catalyst of Cultural Relations between Dvaravati and India. Buddhist evidence like buddha statues and the Buddhist symbol Triratna bead found in Thailand preceded the adoption of Buddhism. It represents a choice to receive for a certain purpose, not an Indian push. Dvaravati art and architecture could be traced to their connection in terms of space and times with the original styles from India.

The relevance of Buddhism in Dvaravati could be seen as how Buddhism was used as a political instrument for uniting and controlling Dvaravati through the identity of Dvaravati art and architecture. The abundance of Dharmacakra sculptures point to the relationship between Cakravartin king and

Dhramacakra. Even Buddhism was appropriated to the economy and trade of Dvaravati both within and without and outside the region, especially with its cultural contacts with India.

Plates:



Plate-1: The Buddha in *Pralambapada Asana* with *Dharmachakra Mudra*, Bhodisat cave, Sraburi, Thailand.



Plate-2: Stone *Dhrammachrakra*, Nakorn Phratom Museum, Thailand.

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