

India-Burma Relations in the Pre-Colonial Period

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Abstract—The paper intends to analyse the connections between India and Burma or present Myanmar in the ancient period. The two Indian epics refer Myanmar as Suvarna Dwipa. Even Buddhist texts, Ptolemy's Geography refer this area in their respective texts in different ways. Tamil literature also mentions the South Indian connections with Burma. There were linguistic, commercial, religious as well as cultural connections between these two countries. Thus this paper likes to analyse the nature and the extent of impact of the connections on Burma or the present Myanmar till date.

Index Terms—Asia, Burma, British, India, Southeast

I. INTRODUCTION

The previous name of Myanmar before 1989 was Burma but according to W.S. Desai the original name was *Myanmar pyi*, later corrupted into the term 'Burma' (Desai 1961: 4). Geographical proximity between India and Burma gives these two countries every chance of rapprochement and enmity too. The relationship between the two countries has its historical past and this past is golden more or less. From the pre-colonial period India had extensive contacts with Burma since the time immemorial. Since all the Southeast Asian countries bear the footprints of Indian culture so most of the writers working on Indian influence in Southeast Asia, like Quatrich Wales, have put it 'Indianised Southeast Asia' (Wales 1967: xii). The contact between Burma and India since the pre-historic days in the realm of trade, commerce, religion, law and culture is exclusively significant. 'Burma' is a derivative of the Chinese word 'Mein' and it has nothing to do with the word Brahman according to some scholars. Indian settlers gave the indigenous tribes of the region a name, 'Brahma'. According to the Buddhist sacred books, they were the first inhabitants of the world. In ancient times, it was written Mramma and was generally pronounced Bama (Phayre 1883: 2). Ancient Buddhist and Chinese texts describe Burma as *Suvarna Bhumi* or Golden Land. The Ramayana refers to *Suvarna dvipa* and *Yava-dvipa*, *dvipa* being the Sanskrit for

'land with water on two sides,' i.e. peninsula or islands, while *Suvarna* means gold and *yava* barley. Among the sea-faring people of the east coast of India the countries of Lower Burma and the Malay Peninsula were known as lands of gold and it seems certain from the sixth century B.C. onwards that Indian traders were sailing to those lands through the islands in search of gold and tin (Harrison 1966: 10). Ptolemy in his Geography in the middle of the second century A.D. has referred to the earlier inhabitants of the Irrawaddy delta. He calls them Kirates (Gerini 1909: 28). The Ramayana also refers *Kiratas*, a tribe of rude mountaineers who occupied the region to the east of the lower Brahmaputra even down to the sea coast and the islands of the Gulf of Bengal. Even a century before Ptolemy, Pomponius Mela, Pliny the Elder and Periplus of the Erythraean Sea were aware of a country of old Chryse (Subarnabhumi-Thaton) lying between the mouth of the Ganges (Pradhan 1991: 52). Burmese chronicles say that Thaton in Lower Burma received Buddhism from Sona and Uttara, the two missionaries of Asoka sent forth from Patliputra. All the historians are not ready to believe that with the coming of Sona and Uttara, Buddhism was spread in Burma. According to them the establishment of Buddhism was a result of multifarious contacts with India, Ceylon and Tibet and as well as China (Desai 1961: 10-11). The ruins of Prome, Pegu and the places along the Arakan and Tenasserim coasts indicate a period when Indian Culture was dominant, though never so deeply entrenched in Burma as among the Chams and Khmers of Cambodia and Siam (Ma 1944: 9).

According to some historians, Burmese civilization was a 'Mon-Burmese' civilization. They were the early settlers who had gone to Burma from India during the closing centuries before Christ (Pradhan 1991: 31) but Colonel Gerini says that the Dravidians chiefly Andhras and Kalingas from the opposite coast of the Gulf of Bengal - who forced their way along the littoral as far as the limits of Arakan, and probably even to the Gulf of Martaban established colonies as they proceeded (Gerini 1909: 28). Pliny refers to the Kalingas and Andhras as being situated near the sea and on both sides of the

Ganges in the last part of its course and since a century later in the Peutingerian Tables (A copy of a Roman Map made in A.D. 1265 by Monk of Colmar on 12 sheets of Parchment) the “Andre-Indi” are assigned a position corresponding to the coast between the left bank of the Ganges and the present Arakan river. This area has been named *Airrhadoi* which means *Andhras* (Gerini 1909: 28). Ptolemy’s *Geographia* shows a coastline roughly approximating that of Arakan and Burma as far as the Gulf of Sabara or Martaban. His *Arghyra* fits the situation of Arakan, and he mentions *Chryse* as its neighbour. He mentions a race of cannibals who occupy a river mouth that scholars thought might indicate the Moulmien region (Hall 1950: 152). Two centuries before Ptolemy the Mahabharat mentions in conjunction with the Tamraliptakas and other nations of Lower Burma - the Saivas and Aindras (Gerini 1909: 28). Aindras is the name which in the middle of the eleventh century Bhaskaracharya gives to the eastern portion of Bharatvarsha (Pradhan 1991: 32). These Aindras, Andrae-Indi, Airrhadoi are evidently of Dravidians extraction and probably identical with Andhras of Orissa and Telingana. These people in conjunction with their relative three districts or separate communities called Tri Kalinga, a name from which the term Telingana was deprived and employed to designate the country of Kalinga on the western side of the Gulf of Bengal as the country of the Mons or Telenga or Talaings on the opposite shore which had been colonized by them (Pradhan 1991: 33-35).

According to Tamil literature, the Chola Kings of South India had connections with the countries of Southeast Asia. The merchants went to the seaports of Chadhakam of Sumatra, Kalakam (the ancient name of Kaddaram) of Burma, Srilanka and Bengal. This had commercial relations with Kaveripaddanam (Mukherjee 1999: 143). The Telegu Kingdom situated near the Bay of Bengal conquered Lower Burma so the people of Pegu were known to the Burmese as Talaings (Mukherjee 1999: 143).¹

Burmese Buddhist legends tell of Indian influence coming to Lower Burma by sea. In the Jatakas, the region is referred to as ‘Suvarnabhumi’, the Golden Land. A favourite Burmese story is of two brothers, Tapusa and Palikat, who are said to have been given eight hairs of his head by Gautama. These they

brought by sea to the Golden Land and enshrined under the Shwe Dagon Pagoda² (Hall 1950: 152). The preachers, traders and travellers who had been to Burma had to take the sea route either from the Ganges or from South India. The first evidence of Indian immigration to Burma is the Buddhist religious texts at the end of the fifth century A.D. at Maungun, in Irravati. So far as historical evidence is concerned, however, there is no trace of the penetration of Indian influence earlier than the fragments of the Pali canon found at Hmawza (Srishketra or Old Prome) dating from A.D. 500 (Hall 1950: 152). Mahajanaka Jataka (fourth volume, 32-35, number 539) says that one King from Champa or Bhagalpur went to *Suvarna Bhumi* along the side of the river Ganges with commercial goods (Mukherjee 1999: 175).

Generally, the sea route to the East was favoured by Indians as well as Europeans to reach Burma. The overland route from Bengal via Arakan was also known to these immigrants but it never became very popular since penetration was very difficult through that route (Desai 1961: 10-11). By 500 A.D. Indian traders had established permanent settlements, Hindus or even Buddhists in the towns along the coast. The Russian traveler, Athanasias Nikitin who visited various East Indies colonies between 1468 and 1470 refers to ‘Burma’ in his account. It appears from his account that Pegu was a busy port in the later half of the 15th century and that Indian merchants had monopolized the trade of Pegu (Mukherjee 1975: 21). Ralph Fitch who was the first Englishman to visit Burma, in his description said, from Pegu gold, silver, rubies, sapphires, musk, chillies, tin, lead, copper, lac, rice, rice-wine and sugar were exported to India with whom Pegu had the largest trade (Desai 1961: 78-79). Burma used to import opium from the East Indies, cotton yarn and cotton textiles from India, black pepper, sandalwood and porcelain ware, among others, from Malacca, and gold, timber and various other commodities from Mecca (Mukherjee 1975: 23). The Arakan’s Chandra Kings and their successors between the fifth and eleventh centuries struck a Southeast Asian style silver Bull/ Trident coinage, a type also favoured by Southeastern Bengal’s Harikela rulers (Wicks 2004: 144). It proved the prosperous trading relationship between the two.

¹ To know about the archaeological tour through Ramannadessa (the Talaing country of Burma) see Taw, Sein Ko: Notes on Archaeological Tour Through Ramanedassa.

² Dagon was the name of the village, which later became Rangoon. The Mon Queen Shin Sawbu (1453-1472) gave her own weight in gold to gild the famous spire of the 302 foot tall pagoda.

The Indian diaspora in Burma from the Prehistoric period influenced Burma and other countries of Southeast Asia to a large extent. Among them, the cultural influence was more significant and long-lasting. The most important cultural impact was the entry of Buddhism and its acceptance by the Burmese people from the King to the common people but Indians brought to Burma first Brahmanism³ and later Buddhism. Buddhism appeared to have reached mainstream Burma from the great Theravada Buddhist centre at Conjeevaram in South India, through the Mon Kingdom of Thaton. In the eleventh century, Mon monk Shin Arahan was able to influence the Burmese King Anawratha who conquered the Mon Kingdom of Thaton around 1057 A.D. and brought Lower Burma under his control. But the real victory went to the Mons since they introduced Buddhism at Anawratha's court at Pagan. The Ceylonese Chronicles Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa provide ample proof of the volume of the impact of the Buddhist religion on the different walks of Burmese life. Lower Burma boasted of Hinayana traditions but old landmarks and relics in the region show that religious beliefs and practices were a mixture of both Brahmanism and Buddhism (Desai 1961: 12).

Indianization must be understood essentially as the expansion of an organized culture that was founded upon the Indian conception of royalty, was characterized by Hinduist or Buddhist cults, the mythology of the Puranas and the observance of the Dharmasastras, and expressed itself in the Sanskrit language. It is for this reason that we sometimes speak of "Sanskritization" instead of Indianization (Coedes 1966: 15-16).

They also brought the arts of civilization, the alphabet, Pali literature, customary law etc. which in the process of time produced Burmese civilization. A Chinese pilgrim Hsua and Hsang talked about Tolopoti which was situated between the Khmer Kingdom and the Pyu Kingdom of Srikshetra. This Tolopoti is identical to Dwaravati or Dwarka (Gujrat). An inscription found carved on a pillar at Lop Buri suggests that the people of Tolopoti were originally Mon, so it has been said that during the first centuries A.D., the people who played the role of propagators of Indian culture in the West of the Peninsula were the Mons (Pradhan 1991: 37). Archaeological excavations in Pyu city-state of Shrikshetra, Burma reveal that there are traces of a

massive city wall embracing an area larger than that of Pagan or Mandalay. Close to it are three large Buddhist stupas, 150 feet high. It has also some vaulted chapels, which are prototypes of the later Pagan temples. At the site of Hmawza carved statues in Gupta style silver coins with carved pictures of the sun, the moon, and the stars, which are considered Pyu money (Pradhan 1991: 39). There are numerous stone sculptures of Vishnu, bronze statues of Avalokiteswara and other Mahayanist Bodhisattvas and Pali language and Pali inscriptions showing that Hinayana Buddhism flourished there from an early date (Hall 1981: 154).

In architecture and sculpture, too Indians were in great demand in the country. It was the Indian architects and craftsmen who created the great temples of Pagan during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. For example, Anawratha or King Aniruddha, founder of Burma propagated the Hinayana religion which quickly spread all over Burma and to the mainland of Southeast Asia. He also sent some artisans to the island Kingdom of Srilanka to assist in the restoration of some ancient Buddhist monuments there. In return, the Sinhalese monarch Vijaya Bahu sent to Anawratha a Buddhist tooth replica which was then enshrined in the Shwedagon Pagoda in Pagan (Coedes 1966: 114) but archaeologists attributed it to the reign of Kayanzittha who served as a general under Anawrahta for many years. All his temples were in Mon style. During his time the famous Ananda temple was built (Coedes 1966: 116). Phayre says of the softening influence of Buddhism (Phyre 1967: 2). It is evident from indications in the book that cannibalism with its accompanying horrors was amongst the practices suppressed by the preachings of Buddhism. Apart from Buddhism, Burma received Hinduism too. The influence of Hindu culture can be judged by the fact that in Burma, the old name of Pegu was Ussa derived from Orissa (Coedes 1966: 111). Burma has retained certain traces of Brahmanical rites and rituals, myths and traditions have come to be interwoven into the texture of the social and religious life of Burma. In Burma and other parts of Southeast Asia Buddhism and Brahmanism were assimilated. For example, Tantrayana Buddhism showed Hindu features. Even in states where Hinayana Buddhism prevailed, Brahmans played an important ceremonial part, especially at court in Burma.

Linguistically, the country had certain affinities with India. Pali, the sacred language of Buddhism was the source of so many Burmese words. The Burmese language and the other languages of Burma belonged to the Tibeto-Burman group like Jing-paw, Chin and Naga were extensively spoken on the Indian side of the dividing hills (Pakem 1992: 49).

The early legal system of Burma was also influenced by the legal system of India. The earliest law book in Burma was the Wagaru Dhammathat which is still in exercise. The book dealt primarily with the customary laws brought by the Indians to Burma. Even the first law book in the Burmese language was known as the Manusara Shwemin to indicate that the Indian system of attributing the name of Manu to a law book to make it authoritative (Pakem 1992: 49).

Then commercial contact continued between the ports in Bengal and the Coromandel Coast and the Arakan Kingdom in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Mrauk-U dynasty had a fascination for Indian weapons and jewellery. In 1666, the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb was disturbed by the rivalry among the traders in the region and the Arakan pirates annexed the major ports of Chittagong (today in Bangladesh) (Egreteau 2003: 08). After the fall of the Marauk-U dynasty the Mughal Emperor did not try to extend his frontier beyond Bengal.

Therefore, India and Burma had relations from time immemorial. India's penetration and influence started from the pre historic days. They had a strong commercial contacts as well as cultural contact. From the Greco-Roman accounts to the European accounts refer about the close contacts between the two countries existed. Burma had a great capacity of adaptability therefore their cultural world from linguistics to religion were greatly influenced by the contacts. Most notable impact is the influence of Buddhism which is still relevant and an important aspect in the day to day life in the present Burma (Myanmar). The Buddhist values such as the "stringing by the individuals for one's own enlightenment , the Karmanic concept" are part of the Burmese thought (Kyi 1993: 626). As per Census Report of 2011, Government of India, Buddhist population in India is 0.7% whereas 88% to 90% population are Buddhist in the present Burma or Myanmar. As a result, the dominant religion in the country is Buddhism. Buddhism has lost its popularity in India where it was born as a protest

movement against the Vedic religion in the 6th century B.C.

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