

Kalinga and Siam : A Study in Ancient Relations

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India has a glorious maritime heritage. With a big peninsula, surrounded by an expanse of seas- on the south-west by the Arabian Sea (*Ratnakara*), on the east and south-east by the Bay of Bengal (*Mahodadhi*) and on the south by the Indian Ocean- a hub of seafaring activities, India, in ancient times was bound to consider the sea as vital as its land mass. India possessed all the potentialities and requisites to be a great maritime power. Geographical proximity between India and its neighbouring littoral countries led to multifaceted maritime interactions and exchanges. Along with a favourable geographical location, the early growth of her shipping and ship-building techniques, the genius and energy of her merchants, the skill and daring –vibrant spirit of her seamen, the enterprise and enthusiasm of her colonists, and the zeal and passion of her missionaries secured to India the command of the sea for ages. Odisha, an Indian state, commonly known in ancient times as Kalinga, being situated on the western coast of the Bay of Bengal (on the east coast of India) had close maritime contacts with the countries located on the eastern shore of the Bay of Bengal and played a conspicuous role in the maritime activities of India. (Map.1) It had close maritime contacts — commercial, cultural and political with the countries of South-east Asia

in ancient times. Odia culture, customs, beliefs, ideas, language, script, art and manners were popularised in those lands where settlements were established by the Odia merchants, missionaries, and political adventurers. In the present paper, an endeavour has been made to throw some light on the early maritime contacts of Odisha or Kalinga with Siam or modern Thailand in historical perspective.

Thailand (officially known as the kingdom of Thailand), formerly known as Siam, is an important country of Southeast Asia. Its area covers approximately 513,120 square kilometers with a population of 67,959,000 (according to 2015 estimation); according to 2010 census, the population was 64,758,909). Thailand is the 51st largest country in the world and in population its rank is 20th; it is little smaller than Yemen and slightly larger than Spain. Its capital, Bangkok (the city of Angels) is the most populous and largest city of the country. The official language of Thailand is Thai. Theravada Buddhism, which is not only the main prevalent religion but also the state religion of Thailand, constitutes an integral part of Thai identity and culture. According to 2000 census, 94.6% of Thailand's population belongs to the Theravada sect of Buddhism.

Thailand is bordered on the north by Burma (Myanmar) and Laos, on the east by Laos and Cambodia, on the south by the Gulf of Siam (Gulf of Thailand) and Malaysia, and on the west by the Andaman Sea and the southern extremity of Myanmar. Its maritime boundaries include Vietnam in the Gulf of Thailand on the southeast, and Indonesia and India in the Andaman Sea on the southwest.¹ (Map: 2) The geographical location of Siam (Thailand) helps her to be influenced by other cultures, especially by that of ancient Indians who were famous for their culture and overseas expansion. Prior to 1949, Thailand was usually known to the outsiders as Siam or Siem or Syam which has been identified with Sanskrit *Syama*, meaning dark or brown.

The most significant aspect to be discussed here is the influence of ancient India and that of early Odisha on the history, culture and civilization of early Siam or modern Thailand. Thailand, like other countries of Southeast Asia, was heavily influenced by the culture and religions of India. It came in contact with India since very early times. K.K. Basa² tries to trace the antiquity of Indo-Thai cultural relations to the Neolithic period (around the second millennium BCE). He further says that ‘the earliest evidence of maritime contact between India and Thailand is known from the Iron Age site of Ban Don Ta Phet in the Kanchanaburi Province, west-central Thailand, dated to about 350 BCE.’³ However, it is presumed that India and Thailand have enjoyed a close, deep, diverse and cordial historical and cultural relationship for more than 2000 years.⁴ Even today, the life style of the Thai people indicates a strong influence of Indian culture and religion upon them. There are plethora of evidences regarding the strong religious, cultural, linguistic, economic, social, art and architectural impact of India on Thailand. The archaeological

evidence for early Indo-Thai maritime trade and exchange comprises glass beads, etched agate and carnelian beads, knobbed vessels and high-tin bronze artefacts.⁵ Indian influence on Thai culture, however, was partly the result of direct contact with Indian settlers and partly brought indirectly via the Indianised kingdoms of Dvaravati, Srivijaya and Cambodia. The concepts of state and kinship in Dvaravati show Indian ideas. Dvaravati was heavily influenced by Indian culture, and played an important role in introducing Buddhism, particularly Buddhist art to the region. It is believed that the earliest Indians went to Siam by sea from the Amaravati region of the east coast of India in the early centuries CE.⁶ However, it seems more probable that Buddhism flowed into Thailand from India during the time of Mauryan Emperor Ashoka (c. 3rd century BCE), after the third Buddhist Council which was convoked at Pataliputra, the capital of the Mauryan Empire.⁷ Bachchan Kumar,⁸ has written that “Tradition places the date of the introduction of Buddhism in Thailand as early as the time of Buddha himself and by the Buddha himself. It is a common belief in Thailand, even now, that the Buddha visited the country at least once and on that occasion impressed his footprint on a hill in the present-day Saraburi about 150 km north of Bangkok... According to popular belief, the Buddha not only visited Thailand but actually attained *Mahaparinirvana* at Pra Ten, a little to the north of Pra Pathom (Nakhon Pathom) on a spot marked by a slab of rock under great tree.”⁹ But these assertions and interpretations appear to be mere legends, devoid of historical content and evidence. The official calendar in Thailand is based on the Buddhist Era (BE) which is 543 years ahead of the Gregorian or Western calendar; hence, the year 2017 is equivalent to the Buddhist Era (BE) 2560 in

Thailand. Buddhism perhaps is the single most significant cultural contribution of India, for which Thailand is greatly indebted to India. It is believed that Emperor Ashoka sent Buddhist *Bhikkus* (saints or followers of Buddhism) - Sona and Uttara to *Suvarnabhumi* (Burma or Myanmar) and Siam (Thailand) for the introduction and propagation of the message of Buddhism. The influence of Buddhism, particularly of the Theravada sect was quite conspicuous in the Thai life. Indian culture, primarily through Buddhism, having crossed over the high seas has left permanent imprints in arts, folklore, language, literature, religion and thought of Thailand.¹⁰ The excavations at Pong Tuk and Phra Pathom in Thailand have brought to light the remains of a temple sanctuary, buildings, and a small statue of standing Buddha which refers to Indian influence on Siamese culture, art and architecture.

The *Wai*, the traditional Thai greeting which is a sign of respect and reverence for another is very much similar to the *Namaste/Namaskar* greeting of India. Like India, ancestor worship or respect towards ancestors is an essential part of the Thai spiritual practice. The Thai concepts of divine kingship and royal ceremonies are clear examples of the influence of Indian Brahmanism. The Thai idea that the king is a reincarnation of the Hindu God Vishnu was adopted from the Indian Hindu tradition. The Thai word *Nam-mon* (holy water) has originated from the Sanskrit word *Namamah*. It is customary, both in India and Thailand, that the sacred water after the *arti puja* or the ceremonial worship is sprinkled over the devotees as a blessing from God. (It is believed that the evil spirits are afraid of water and the devotees and worshippers who fear being possessed by spirits would undergo ritual bathing to ward away these spirits). There

is similarity between India and Thailand in the festivals celebrated in the two countries. The Hindu and the Buddhist culture spread to Thailand through traders, priests, missionaries and the adventurous mariners. The Indian Hindu festivals like *Holi*, *Kartika Purnima* and *Deepavali*, *Navaratri* and *Onam* have influenced the Thai festivals such as *Songkran*, *Loy Krathong*, *Thai-Chinese Vegetarian festival*, and the *Long-Boat race*. These festivals are celebrated around the same time of the year in both the countries and the ways of celebration are very similar. Garuda, the national emblem of Thailand is influenced by the Garuda, the vehicle of Hindu God Vishnu (the Thais call it *Phra Khrut Pha*). The practice of *Homa* is common to both the places. The Hindu deities such as Brahma (*Phra Phrom*), Vishnu (*Phra Narai*) and Shiva (*Phra Isuan*) live in the hearts and minds of the common and the elite population of Thailand. Indian elements taken from Hinduism are best reflected in the art, architecture, sculpture, dance, drama, mythology and literature of Thailand. In some of the Buddhist monasteries, where the images of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are worshipped are shown in such a way that they appear to be a part of Buddhism. Ganesha images also appear frequently in Thai art.¹¹ The Khmer temples (*prangs*) in Thailand show Brahmanical cosmological elements. Each *prang* looks like a mountain, the abode of the gods in both Hindu and Buddhist cosmology. The Thai *mondop* resembles closely the *mandapa* of Indian temples.¹² The Thai language is greatly influenced by the Pali and Sanskrit language of India. *Ramakien*, a Thai national epic is derived from the Indian sacred epic the *Ramayana*. The Phahurat Market (a large fabric market) in Bangkok is known as Little India in Bangkok.

Kalinga or ancient Odisha had close overseas contacts with Siam. Dulyapak

Preecharushh,¹³ a Thai scholar, is of the view recently that the devastating Kalinga war of Ashoka was the main factor that 'pushed and stimulated many Kalinga people to emigrate from India to the mainland of South-East Asia.' He said that the people of Kalinga migrated via the Bay of Bengal to Burma and to the land of Siam for 'political asylum and in the hope of a new settlement.' He further said that 'surely, there were many Brahmins from the royal court of Kalinga inside the lands of Burma and Siam' who 'excelled in magical powers and holy rites and tried to establish a close relationship with, native kings or local leaders.' The view of D. Preecharushh, though very significant is not acceptable, as the prime motive behind the Kalingan migration was not for political asylum and settlement, but for trade and prosperity. During the eighth and ninth century CE, there was a wave of migration from the seaports of Kalinga to Siam which helped in the Indianisation of Siam.¹⁴ The recent archaeological excavations in the central Thailand have unearthed tangible indicators of ancient Odishan contacts in the form of bronze bowls and carnelian beads, especially, etched carnelian beads. It has been mentioned that the discovered bronze bowls, some of those with a central knob have much similarity in form with the so-called knobbed ware found from several sites in the coastal Odisha and Bengal.¹⁵ The knobbed ware pottery have been discovered from Shishupalgarh, Dhauli, Jaugada, Manikpatna, Khalkattapatna and some other sites of Odisha. H.P. Ray¹⁶ says that the sources of carnelian ware are rare in Southeast Asia, but prolific in the Deccan Peninsula. Carnelian was also used as an item of trade in the early coastal networks. Ancient Odisha was known for its elephants and its tusks could have been an important item of export. The discovery of an ivory comb with *shrivasta* motif

(dated between c. first and third century CE) from Chansen in the central Thailand, which is similar in design like that obtained from the Hathigumpha Inscription of Kharavela, suggests that the comb was exported from India, especially, from Odisha. The clay ear plugs found from Tha Kae are similar with those from Khandagiri and Udayagiri in Odisha.¹⁷ The Kharoshti inscriptions discovered in the Odisha coast (from Manikapatna), Thailand, Bali and the possible depiction of a horse, on bronze bowl from Don Ta Phet (Thailand), which is taken to be the earliest evidence about horse in South Asia indicates maritime contacts of Odisha with Kharoshti using horse merchants of lower Bengal and Southeast Asia.¹⁸ The Buddhist art of Odisha, particularly the standing Buddha images of Lalitagiri had a profound influence on the stylistic Buddha images of Thailand. I.C. Glover,¹⁹ the excavator of the Don Ta Phet site gives credit for such sculptural transactions between Odisha and Thailand to the Buddhist missionaries. Besides Buddha images, a number of *Lingas* have also been found in Thailand indicating the prevalence of Shaivism there.²⁰

The *Loy Krathong*²¹ or *Loy Brah Prahdi* festival (Fig.1 & 1a), observed in Thailand in the month of October-November, is very similar to the floating of boats ritual in Odisha on the *kartika purnima* day (Fig.2). The people in Thailand call it, the festival of 'Mother Water'. The ceremony of floating of lamps at night on paper boats in Thailand reminds of ancient maritime connection between Thailand and Kalinga.²² The festival probably is being celebrated to commemorate the glorious maritime relation of Thailand with Kalinga in imitation of the *kartika purnima boita bandana* festival. On the festival day, Thai women prepare small boats, using plantain bark or lotus leaf and putting a

burning candle, some incense sticks, small coins, and betel nut and betel leaf in it, they float it in rivers, canals and tanks. In large numbers, they celebrate this festival with great enthusiasm. The people of Thailand believe in a Goddess named Mae Khongkha (Mother Khongkha or 'Mother of Water'), who is perceived to be greatly pleased, if ladies observe this festival. This mother goddess Khongkha is revered by the Thai people as the goddess of the water ways.²³ A.P. Patnaik²⁴ says that the Thai word *Loi Krathong* might have been derived from the Odia words *Nai Kartika* which means ritual of *kartika* in the river. Further, he also mentioned that the young lady Nophabut who had introduced *Loi Krathong* festival in Sukhothai could have been a princess of Kalinga or daughter of a Kalingan merchant whose actual name was Lobhabati.²⁵

Besides, in Thailand there is a festival observed by the farmers which is similar to the observance of *akshyaya trutia* ceremony in Odisha. The king himself used to plough the land during this festival, thus, people call it the 'Royal Ploughing Ceremony.'²⁶ (Fig.3) Much before this celebration, the Brahmin priest²⁷ of the king selects a day for the celebration of the ritual. This festival generally is observed either during the last week of April or in the first week of May. In Odisha, the festival is also celebrated during the same period. In order to observe this festival, two auspicious bullocks and a decorated plough are kept ready for the king. After a religious ritual the king ploughs the soil accompanied by his courtiers, the Buddhist monks and the Brahmin priests. After Buddhist monk blesses the seed, the king sows it on the ploughed soil. Farmers, in thousands, stand in a row, patiently for several hours, to have a glimpse of this ceremony. In Thai language, the word *purohit* (priest) is very much there as it is in

Odia. As in Odisha, the Brahmin priests in Thailand are highly respected in the society. If the royal ploughing ceremony is observed without a hitch, it is taken as a good fortune for the country and people expect a rich harvest throughout the country. The festival day is declared as a national holiday in Thailand as it is declared in Odisha as well as in the whole of India.²⁸ All these similarities indicate that ancient India in general and Kalinga or ancient Odisha, in particular had a great influence over Siam or Thailand for a very long period. On the other hand, it can be said that the Thais or the people of Thailand were not passive recipients; rather they played an active and vibrant role in the process of Indo-Thai social, cultural and economic interaction and assimilation.

The sailors and navigators from the coast of Odisha, in ancient times, sailed along the coast of Bengal and Burma to reach Thailand (Map 3). In absence of scientific technology, the sailors primarily had to depend on sail; they confined to the coasting voyage and taking the help of the south-west monsoon winds which blow from June to September, plied to the countries of Southeast Asia including Thailand. In ancient times, the coastal route or the *kulapatha* was generally preferred as compared to the *samyana patha* (high sea route). The lack of knowledge of sea and the absence of mariner's compass, fear of pirates, and unsuitability of the ships to traverse the deep sea, etc. must have led them to take up a route along the coast.²⁹ It is believed that the Buddhist mission of Ashoka led by Sona and Uttara to Burma (Myanmar) and probably to Siam (Thailand) was sailed along this route. However, from the Geography of Ptolemy (c. 2nd century CE) and the accounts of the Chinese traveller I-Tsing (c. 7th century CE) it is known that there were direct routes from the ancient Odishan port of Palur and Tamralipti to Southeast Asia.

Notes and References

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2. K.K.Bas, 'Celebrating the Indo-Thai Cultural Heritage: Some Issues and Challenges for the Thai Cultural Centre', Neeru Misra and S. Sahai, (eds.), *Indo-Thai Historical and Cultural Linkages*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2007, p.26.
3. *Ibid*, p.26.
4. Neeru Misra and S. Sahai, (eds.), *Indo-Thai Historical and Cultural Linkages*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2007, p.8.
5. K.K.Basa, *op.cit*, p. 26.
6. D.P.Singhal, *India and World Civilization*, Vol.II, Calcutta, 1972, p.113; D.K.Barua, 'Buddhist Religion, Literature and Art in Thailand', in G.C.Pande (ed.), *India's Interaction with South-East Asia (History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization)*, Vol.I, Pt.3, New Delhi, 2006, p.519. According to D.K.Barua, Buddhist art of the Amaravati School had made its way to lower Central Thailand from India, probably during the first three centuries of the Christian era.
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9. Sir Charles Elliot, *Hinduism and Buddhism*, Vol.III, p.98.
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11. Bachchan Kumar, *op.cit*, p106.
12. *Ibid.*, p 107.
13. D. Preecharushh, 'Brahman and Hindu Communities in Bangkok: a Comparative Study of Indian Migrants in Thai History', in Lipi Ghosh (ed.), *Connectivity and Beyond: Indo-Thai Relations through Ages*, Kolkata, 2009, p.14.
14. D.K.Barua, *op.cit*, p.518.
15. H.P.Ray, 'Early Trade in the Bay of Bengal', *Indian Historical Review*, Vol.XIV, No.1-2 (1987-88), p.82.
16. *Ibid*, pp.82-83.
17. K.K.Basa, 'Cultural Relations between Orissa and South-east Asia: An Archaeological Perspective', in P.K.Mishra and J.K.Samal (eds.), *Comprehensive History and Culture of Orissa*, Vol.1, Pt.II) (Early Times to 1568 A.D), New Delhi, 1997, p. 737.
18. K.S.Behera, 'Maritime Contacts of Orissa: Literary and Archaeological Evidence', *Utkal Historical Research Journal*, Vol.V (1994), p.64.
19. I.C.Glover, "Early Trade between India and South-East Asia: A Link in the development of Ancient world Trading System", *Occasional Paper*, No.16, The University of Hull, London, 1990, pp.1-45; K.K.Basa, 'Celebrating the Indo-Thai Cultural Heritage: Some Issues and Challenges for the Thai Cultural Centre', *op.cit.*, p.34. Glover emphasized the significance of the knobbed-base vessels from Thailand and India and argued that they were associated with Buddhist rituals.
20. K.S.Behera, 'Glimpses of the Maritime Activities of Kalinga', *Orissa Review*, Vol.XLIX, No.4 (Nov.1992), p.7.
21. D.K.Barua, *op.cit*, pp.554-556. The word *Loy* or *Loi*, means 'to float', and the term *Krathong*, indicates 'leaf-cup' usually made of banana-leaf.
22. K.S.Behera, 'Glimpses of the Maritime Activities of Kalinga', p.7.
23. A.P.Patnaik, 'Kalinga Influence and Colonies in South-East Asia', *Orissa Review*, Vol. XLII, No. 9 (April, 1986), pp.22-23.

24. *Ibid*, p.23.
25. *Ibid*.
26. D.K.Barua, *op.cit*, pp. 548-549. Barua has vividly described about the ploughing ceremony which is as follows. "To perform the ceremony [Ploughing Ceremony], His Majesty the king would appoint as his representative the Ploughing Lord who would be offered pieces of cloth of different sizes worn around the hips for his selection. If he would select the longest one, there would be little rain during the next year; if he would select the shortest one there would be heavy rainfall; and if his selection would be of the medium length, there would be average rainfall. On the day of the Ploughing ceremony a procession would follow him [Ploughing Lord] with a red and gold sacred plough drawn by bulls decorated with flowers accompanied by Brahmans, who would chant, blow conch shells, drummers and umbrella-bearers, and four consecrated ladies who would carry gold and silver baskets full of rice-seeds. Thereafter the bulls would turn a few furrows with the sacred plough and then they would be offered seven different kinds of food and drink: rice-seed, beans, maize, hay, sesame-seed, water and alcohol. If the bulls would choose any one of these items, it would be presumed that that particular item would be available in plenty during the coming year. Now would begin the scattering of rice-seeds by the Ploughing Lord to be followed by actual ploughing. At the end of the ceremony, barriers would be put up to keep back the attending people who would be eager to collect a few grains for good fortune. If a farmer could find even one grain, he would mix it with his own rice-seeds to ensure good crops in that year. The day of the Ploughing Ceremony would give an auspicious signal to the farmers for commencement of the planting season and for ploughing for rice-crops. The Thai Ploughing Ceremony probably has an Indian origin as well."
27. Thais are the Buddhists. Yet they have Brahmin priests in their religion who wear sacred threads and preside over religious functions.
28. A.P.Patnaik, *op.cit*, p.22.
29. Benudhar Patra, *Maritime Trade and Overseas Activities of Early India: Odishan Perspective*, New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2013, p.162.



Map 1: India and Southeast Asia



Map 2: Thailand and its Neighbours



Map 3: The coastal route from ancient Odisha to South-East Asia/Thailand along the coast of Bengal, Bangladesh and Burma.



Fig. 2: Floating of ceremonial banana stem boats with lighted lamps inside on the Mahanadi River at Cuttack on the occasion of *Kartik Boita Bandana Utsava*.



Fig.1: Loy Krathong or Loy Brah Prahdip Festival, Thailand



Fig.3: Royal Ploughing Ceremony, Thailand



Fig.1a: Loy Krathong or Loy Brah Prahdip Festival, Thailand

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