

Early Trade Contact between India & South East Asia

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The apparent geographical isolation of India never proved itself an effective obstruction to her contact with the outside world and the ports and passes of this country have been kept busy by indigenous and foreign traders from ancient time.

It is held that an ethnological affinity existed between the people of South East Asian Countries and those of pre-Aryan India but this cannot be properly explained. One theory maintains that an ethnic wave originating in South East Asia flowed into pre-Aryan India; another view postulates that there was an eastward migration from India on the arrival there of the Dravidians or the Aryans; and a third hypothesis is that the original home of the pre-Aryan Indians and Indonesians was somewhere in western China from which both these people migrated.

Even in the historical period our knowledge of the trade and other connections between India and South East Asia remains vague, especially before the days of the Guptas. Mainly on the basis of the literature of China, India and the West it can be assumed that contact between these two regions had begun in the early Christian period, but its precise nature and scope have not yet been determined.

Apart from providing important halting centers in the trade between India and South China, the countries of South East Asia were rich in mineral and agricultural products and this is true even now. For its natural wealth this region came to be called “The land of God” almost universally in ancient times. The *Suvarnabhumi* or *Suvanadvipa* of Indian literature perhaps roughly comprised Lower Burma, the Malay peninsula, and the Indonesian Archipelago. The folk tales of the *Jatakas* describing *voyagas* from the Indian ports like Broach, Sopara and Tamluk to *Suvarnabhumi* suggest an established trade between India and South East Asia, but because of their uncertain time of composition these tales are not very helpful for our purpose. The *Arthashastra* (II. Ch.2) records the importing of aguru (aloes wood) from *Suvarnabhumi*. The *Milindapanha* and the *Mahaniddesa*, attributed to the first or second century A.D. show closer acquaintance with some parts of South East Asia. The later literature based on *Gunadhva's Brhatkatha*, a lost text which was possibly written in the early Christian period also relates trading venture of *Suvarnabhumi*. Attempts have been made to distinguish between *Suvarnabhumi* and *Suvanadvipa*, meaning “Land of Gold” and “Island or Peninsula of Gold” respectively, but it does

not seem that the ancient authors were very conscious of the geography of the places described in these in these glowing terms.

We now review the evidence of India's trade relations with different countries of South East Asia.

Burma

We do not know whether there was any trade between India and Burma during early time. Until 5th century A.D. India's connection with Burma is shrouded in legend. According to the Burmese chronicle, a *Sakya* prince of Kapilavastu founded a kingdom in Upper Burma in prehistoric times and ruled for generations. Another group of *Ksatriyas* came during the time of the Buddha and later moved southwards and founded their capital in *Sri-ksetra* now called Hmwa, near Prome. The earliest epigraphic records of Indo-Burmese relations has also been discovered in this place Paleographically, these Buddhist records are attributed to the fifth and sixth centuries. According to the legends, Indian influence came to Lower Burma by Sea. From these sources we can only surmise the existence of some kind of early trade relations between India and Burma, both by land and sea.

Malaya

The *Vayu Purana* which in its present recession is placed in the Gupta period, refers to *Malayadvipa* as a constituent part of *Jambudvipa*. According to this text there are mountains and rivers in *Malayadvipa* and the *Mlechhas* lived there. It is described as a rich land having gold and silver mines, precious stones and sandalwood. The *Puranic* account fits in with Malaya as well as with certain islands of Indonesia. Some scholars prefer to identify *Malayadvipa* with Sumatra, relying on Chinese evidence. Ptolemy's Golden Khersonese broadly corresponds with Malaya.

Perhaps the traders were using the Isthmus of *Kra* in Malaya as the shortest passage between the Indian Ocean and Indo-Chinese mainland and the South China Sea. This can be inferred from the sailing itinerary between Tongking and Huang-chih, as found in the Ch'ei Han Shu. From a later text, the Liang Shu we know that trade was carried on between India and Tun Sun which was a vassal state of Fu-nan. Tun Sun has been identified with the isthmian part of Malaya. Possibly it was an important entrepot in the northern part of the Peninsula. From Indian and Western literature Takkola was another notable port and this has been located near Trang on Ptolemaic evidence. Archaeological evidence of Indian influence in Malaya cannot be traced before the fourth century.

Indonesia

Legends about early contact between India and the Indonesian Archipelago are not lacking. Of these the one relating to the king Aji-saka and his associates who established themselves in Java is widely known. The *Ramayana* refers to a *Yavadvipa* which literally means

“Island of Barley”. The same meaning is applied by Ptolemy himself to his Iabadios. The Houhan-shu also refers to a Yeh-tiao which was anciently pronounced as Yap-div. All these places are usually identified with Java. We do not know whether barley was grown there in our time. According to a modern geographer, barley will grow on the mountains of Java, but its cultivation has not been taken up. Some scholars prefer to identify *Yavadvipa* with Sumatra, others with Borneo. The earliest inscription attesting Indian connections has been discovered in East Borneo. On grounds of paleography this has been assigned to the fourth century.

From the account of Kang Tai, the Chinese envoy in Fu-nan in the earlier part of the third century we learn that the Yueh-chi merchants regularly supplied horses to the king of Ko-ying. The commercial importance of Ko-ying or Chia-yang is also evident from other Chinese texts of the third century. According to Pilliot Ko-ying was in the southern part of Malaya. In a recent study, Wolter argue that Ko-ying may be located in South Eastern Sumatra. He further suggest that these horses were possible exported from a port called by the Chinese as Ku-nu, which according to its description may be somewhere in India. The Yueh-chih horses were also supplied to Fu-nan from India in the third century.

The *Ramayana* refers to sandalwood coming from the *Rsabha* mountain which has been located in Timor or Celebes in Eastern Indonesia. One of India’s major supplies to the West in our period of this merchandise was collected from Indonesia. But this archipelago was and is famous as a spice growing area. *Kalidasa*, usually attributed to the fifth century, refers to *Javanga* (clove) from *Dvipantara*, which is identified with Sumatra. The medical use of clove, which was not native products, is attested by the *Charaka Samhita*, a text of the first or second century A.D. This suggests the import of clove from Indonesia by the first century. The reputation of Indonesia as a pepper producing area is evident from several Chinese texts, the earliest of which was written in the beginning of the fifth century.

Fu-nan and Champa

The earliest evidence of Indian influence in South East Asia has been found in the lower Mekong valley. Fu-nan and *Champa*, roughly comprising Cambodia and South Vietnam preserve very old Indian tradition in their legends. From a third century account of the Chinese envoys in Fu-nan we learn of local tradition, according to which a Brahman called Hun T’ien (*Kaundinya*) of Mo-fu (Malaya) reached Fu-nan by chance in a trading vessel. Hun T’ien won over this country and its female ruler Lin-yeh without much difficulty. This possibly happened sometime in the first century A.D. From the same text we learn that a diplomatic exchange took place between Fu-nan and the Menlueu (*Marunda*) ruler of Northern India who was possibly of the later Kushana line, during the earlier half of the third century. The Indian ruler sent four Yuch-chih horses as presents to Fan-chen, the ruler of Fu-nan. There is no report of any direct Indian trade with Fu-nan which, however, received merchandise from Ta’chin.

From excavations at maritime town of OC-EO we know more of the early commercial connections between Fu-nan and many countries far and near to it. It seems that OC-EO was an

important centre of trade and industry from the early period of the Christian era. Large number of semi-precious stones such as pearls, rock crystals, onyx, carnelian, amethyst etc. which were exported to the west of India in early times have been found here. Jewellery unearthed here shows either Indian or Roman inspiration. OC-EO's close relations with India get confirmed by epigraphic evidence. The types of scripts in the inscription found on some pieces of Jewellery were used in India between the 2nd and 5th century A.D. Several ancient seals bear script comparable with that of Nasik inscription of *Usavadata* and of *Vasisthiputra Pulumavi*, both belongs to the first half of 2nd century A.D. other inscription recall the Girnar inscription of *Rudradaman* (150 A.D.) and the script used in the *Kalpanamanditika*, the Jaina scripture of about 300 A.D. found in Central Asia. Two Buddhist bronze images in the style of *Gandhara* and a copper image in the style of *Amaravati* have also been found. The other group of objects unearthed in OC-EO bear Roman, Iranian and Chinese craftsmanship of early Christian period. It seems that the mines of Malaya and Indonesia supplied Gold, tin, iron and copper to OC-EO for its industries.

In this connection we like to refer to the discovery of a Buddha image in the style of *Amaravati* and of a Roman lamp, similar to a find in Pompeii, in P'ong Tuk in Siam.

The local adaptation of the events of *Ramayana* is found in the early legends of *Champa* which is now a part of the Vietnam state. The famous inscription of Vo-canh refers to a dynasty founded by king Sri-Mara. He was a Buddhist and Sanskrit was his court language. The dating of this inscription is still a matter of controversy and this varies from the early 3rd to the 4th century A.D.

In the above analysis we find but a meager information regarding India's trade with South East Asian countries in early time. But from various indications we can visualize that some kind of communication had begun between these two religious and this became more brisk from the 5th century onward. The significant question in connection with the trade relation between India and South East Asia in early time is what made India turn towards that region ? In the commerce between India and the Mediterranean countries the initiative usually came either from the recipient countries or from the Arabs and Axumites who acted as middlemen. But in the case of trade with South East Asia it seems that mostly the Indians coast and trading there has not been properly substantiated. The *Jatakas* refer to a trader from *Suvarnabhumi* coming to *Bharukachchha*, but as has been pointed out by Wolters it is possibly the case of an Indian trader returning home.

There are different views with regards to the reasons behind the Indian trading ventures to the countries of South East Asia. It has been suggested that during the last centuries before Christ India could not procure gold from Siberia because of political troubles in central Asia. Afterwards the situation became worse when the emperor Vespasian totally stopped gold from going abroad. Being unable to get gold from the North and the West India turned towards *Suvarnabhumi*. We do not accept this view fully. India's gold situation in the pre-Christian time is not known. But we believe that in the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D., the Kushanas imported gold from the Altai and the

Ural regions. The stoppage of Roman gold, which is also a doubtful question, could have forced the south Indians to turn to South East Asia.

The development of Buddhism, which broke the rigid restraint against going abroad, has also been held to be a factor encouraging Indians to go abroad. It does not seem that this restraint ever had any practical effect on the coastal people and in early time only affected the *Brahmanas*.

The Main reason for the Indians going towards South East Asia seems to be that the growing demand by the West of the eastern luxuries could not be met from India alone. The profitable trade with the West probably encouraged the Indians to look forward to a region like South East Asia, rich in minerals, spices and aromatics. If these commodities were brought to India, part of them was possibly consumed at home also. Though we believe that Upper India itself did not have much direct trade with the west, that would not have deterred the people of that region from taking part in the Indo-South East Asian trade.