

Indian's Foreign Contacts in Ancient Period

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Introduction:

India's intercourse with the west gradually dwindled after the Gupta period. The conquest of Rome by the Goths in A.D. 410 and later the advent of Muhammadanism on the western scene created a growing barrier between India and the West.

India and China:

India's intercourse with China went on increasing. Cosmopolitan settlements which included Indian merchants sprung up at Miran, Kucha, Turfan and other places on the trade-route bordering the Taklamakan desert. Culture here as revealed by frescoes, statuettes and such other finds was mixed and contained Hellenistic, Iranian, Indian and Chinese elements. There is a legend that the Emperor Minh-ti (A.D. 64) dreamt that he saw a "Golden Man" enter his palace and on being told that he was the Buddha, sent men to India for the Buddhist scriptures and was converted to Buddhism later. We have already seen that some of the Kushan rulers sent ambassadors to China in the reign of Emperor Ho – to (A.D. 89-105) and Kanishka conquered Kashgar and Khotan. A Parthian prince translated some of the Buddhist teachings into Chinese in 148 A.D. and in 401 A.D. Fa-hien arrived in India. From then on a continuous stream of pilgrims and scholars flowed between India and China, producing profound effect on the Chinese culture. From then on Buddhism became the Popular religion in China. Some of the important Indian missionaries who visited China were Kumarajiva who translated the Mahayana classic. "The Lotus of the Good Law" into Chinese and Gunavarman the Kashmiri prince-monk who reached Nankin via Ceylon and organized there the first community of the Buddhist nuns (424 A.D.). From China Buddhism found its way to Korea and from there to Japan where it was propagated by Prince Shotoku Taishi in the beginning of the 7th century A.D.

By the middle of the 7th century A.D. however, the land-route between India and China was closed because of the defeat of the Chinese at the hands of the Arabs in 751 A.D., thus ending the struggle between China and the Muhammadans for the supremacy of Central Asia.

Nepal and Tibet:

Buddhism penetrated Nepal at quite an early date; and from Nepal to Tibet in the reign of Srong-tsan-gampo, the founder of Lhasa, in 639 A.D. When the Muhammadans sacked Bihar, the Buddhist monk there fled to Tibet and collaborated with the local monks there to produce the famous Buddhist encyclopedia, the Tang-yur. When the Buddhist works in the monasteries in

Tibet are fully explored, much light may be thrown on Indian contacts with these regions during the ancient period. The Tibetan Buddhism today is a strange mixture of the Mahayana Buddhist doctrines and Mongolian elements like demon worship and so on.

The valley of Nepal was for some time a feudatory of the Gupta kings; it later came under Tibet. It is for this reason that there is considerable resemblance between the arts of Tibet and Nepal. In both the predominance of copper-gilt statues of the numerous Mahayana gods and goddesses inlaid with various precious stones.

Kashmir

Kashmir, as it lay on the route between India and China, was also culturally important. It was part of the Mauryan and the Kushan empires and later on was subject to China for some time. In the 8th century, it became independent and was a flourishing state until it was conquered by the Muhammadans.

Contacts with Burma:

Reference has already been made to early voyages of the Hindu merchants from the ports of Western India to the head of the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. Almost at the same time, similar developments were taking place in the Bay of Bengal. Several Jataka stories refer to merchants from Broach and other places travelling with their stock-in-trade, namely, pearls, jewels and diamonds etc. to the Golden Chersonese, i.e. Pegu and Moulmein. There was at that time brisk trade between Amaravati on the river Krishna and Thatun. Ceylonese chroniclers tell us that Burma was converted to Buddhism by two of Asoka's missionaries; but more probably that task was accomplished by Buddhagoshā, the famous Sinhalese scholar of the 5th century A.D. We find the Buddhist and the Hindu remains at Thatun, Pega and Prome. "Burma took her religion from India, but her ethnic affinities are with the north and the Indian influence was quickly assimilated."

Java and Sumatra:

There was flourishing trade between Gujarat and Malaya Archipelago from an early period. Merchants from Gujarat exported printed cotton goods in exchange for various spices. Fa-hien refers to large ships carrying over two hundred passengers and making frequent voyages between Ceylon and Java. Soon after this Java was converted to Buddhism by prince Gunavarman of Kashmir. I-tsing who visited Java in the latter part of the 7th century A.D. found a number of monasteries and over a thousand monks and was enabled to learn Sanskrit there. Dharmapala, another noted Mahayana scholar from Nalanada, also visited Java. Java was colonised by Hindu settlers in quite an early age.

Sumatra was ruled from the 7th century to the 14th by Sailendradynasty who was Mahayana Buddhists. They were in close contact with Ceylon and Chola kings of Southern India

and thus maintained contact with the motherland. One of them built a fine monastery at the university of Nalanda.

Bali and Borneo:

Later on, Java and Sumatra came under the influences of Muhammadanism. But much of ancient Hindu culture of Java has been fully preserved in the island of Bali which remained untouched by the wave of Islam.

There is reference in Sanskrit literature that about the year 400A.D. Hindu kings ruled in Borneo and that Brahmin priests offered sacrifice. We do not as yet know anything about the Brahmins who went there, the route they followed and what happened later to these Hindu kingdoms in Borneo.

Cambodia: Hindu traders visited Cambodia even before the Christian era. The settlers traced their origin to the marriage alliance between an exiled Indian prince and a Naga princess, offspring's being called Kambujas or Cambodians. In the 6th century A.D. a line of Brahmanical Hindu rulers appeared on the scene of Cambodia. They took the affix "varman" which goes to indicate that they probably were the Pallavars. Srutavarman (A.D.400) appears to be the first king of the line. Cambodian culture reached its elimax under Jayavarman II (A.D. 802-869). Yasovarman a powerful monarch built for himself a magnificent new capital named Yasodarapur or Angor. Angor was sacked in the 14th and 15th centuries by the Siamese kings. "No-where in the world does the jungle obliterate the work of men's hands with such devastating rapidity as in Cambodia, and all the great temples were soon swallowed up and forgotten to be discovered again in 1861, when they were by a mere chance revealed to the astonished eyes of a French naturalist, who stumbled upon the vast pile of ruins rising like a fairy palace on the banks of the Tonla Sap lake".

Conclusion

We may conclude that during the first ten centuries of the Christian era, Indian influence was paramount over the whole of South-East Asia.

Later developments: Later on Indian influence in this region was overlaid by cultures of different types. Islam spread over Malaya Peninsula and also in parts of Annam while Burma, Siam parts of Annam and Cambodia were brought within the Chinese sphere. The sphere of Indian influence was thus getting enclosed between Islam on the wear and China on the East. This process went on developing from the 10th century A.D. onwards for about five hundred years. Just when the ring seemed to be complete by about the 15th century, the arrival of Europeans on the scene altered the whole situation and gave a new direction to the entire history of the region.

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