

Buddhist and Culture in India and Thai

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Abstract

India and Thailand have enjoyed a close and mutually enriching relationship for over a millenium and the friendship seems to be growing by leaps and bounds even to this present day. I stand before you today to celebrate and pay tribute to this close friendship. With sincere gratitude I thank Mr. S.D. Supanekar and the Somwar Mandal for me giving me this opportunity to present a brief overview of the historical roots and growth of our friendly relationship. This close and cordial relationship between India and Thailand is rooted in centuries of continuous interaction. The importance of the influence of Indian culture on the development of Thai culture cannot be over emphasized. Thailand's relationship with India spans over a thousand years and understandably this resulted in an adaptation of Indian culture to suit the Thai environment. Evidence of strong religious, cultural and linguistic links abound.

Keywords: - friendship, bounds, Thailand

Introduction

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This close and cordial relationship between India and Thailand is rooted in centuries of continuous interaction. The importance of the influence of Indian culture on the development of Thai culture cannot be over emphasized. Thailand's relationship with India spans over a thousand years and understandably this resulted in an adaptation of Indian culture to suit the Thai environment. Evidence of strong religious, cultural and linguistic links abound.

The single most significant cultural contribution of India, for which Thailand is greatly indebted to India, is 'Buddhism'. Propagated in Thailand in the 3rd Century B.C. by Buddhist

monks sent by King Asoka, it was adopted as the state religion of Thailand and has ruled the hearts and minds of Thais ever since. Presently 58,000,000 Thais, an overwhelming 94% of the total Thai populace adheres to Buddhism. Due to King Asoka's missionary zeal Buddhism quickly spread out through the length and breadth of Asia particularly to China, Japan, Myanmar, Laos, Kampuchea, Vietnam and Thailand. Tradition credits the Indian Bhikkus Sona and Uttara sent by King Asoka with introducing Buddhism into Thailand.

Historically, the cultural and economic interaction between the two countries can be traced to roughly around the 6th Century B.C. However, direct contact can be said to have begun only in the 3rd Century B.C. when King Asoka sent Buddhist monks to propagate Buddhism in the Indo-Chinese peninsula. Besides Buddhism, Thailand has also adopted other typically Indian religious and cultural traditions. The ceremonies and rites especially as regards the 'Monarchy' evidence a strong Hindu, more of which I will deal with a little later.

Buddhism as a religion promotes liberty and freedom. It respects the rights of a person to his/her beliefs and practices. I believe India and Thailand are basically tolerant countries, partly because of the influence of Buddhism. Though Buddhism all but vanished from India, its best precepts have been adopted by and incorporated into Hinduism. Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of Ahimsa or Non-violence echoes the teachings of the Lord Buddha. It is interesting to note that though both countries have one religion, which is adhered to by an overwhelming majority of the total population, both permit and promote all religious communities and beliefs.

At such times we need to direct our attention once again to the teachings of the Lord Buddha. Hence, I present a brief overview of Buddhist doctrine.

Firstly-The 3 common characteristics:

- Do Good
- Avoid evil
- Purify the heart and mind to enable enlightenment.

Secondly – The Four Noble Truths, namely

- There is suffering in the world.
- Suffering is the result of craving or Desire.
- This suffering can be ended or destroyed.
- The Noble 8-fold path or Middle path can end this suffering.

Thirdly – “Nibbane” or “Nirvana”, which is the ultimate purpose that is beyond the control or power of anyone or anything. It is the breaking away from the endless cycle of rebirth,

which binds human existence to its baser instincts. It must be sought with purity of mind and heart. Buddhism exhorts humans to pursue a mortal and ethical life, a life that resonates and reflects peace and compassion, contentment and harmony.

Nirvana can be achieved if one follows the Noble Eight-fold path or Middle Path, which comprises

- Right View
- Right Thought
- Right Speech
- Right Behavior
- Right Livelihood
- Right Effort
- Right Mindfulness
- Right Concentration

Buddhism thus proclaims that selfishness and desire bring only suffering and one must work to eliminate them. Love and compassion towards one's fellow men bring happiness and peace of mind. Through the centuries, Buddhism has been the mainstay of Thai cultural development and has inspired every sphere of Thai life particularly architecture, sculpture, painting and early literature. In fact it is a customary practice for young men above 20 years of age to be ordained into the Buddhist order for a period of approximately three to five months at least. As I mentioned before, Thailand has also been influenced by other typically Indian religious traditions, besides Buddhism. These are Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism.

The Indians who moved into Thailand in the Sukhothai period (1275-1350) were either merchants who came to Siam or Thailand, for the purpose of trading or Brahmans who played an important role in the Siamese court as experts in astrology and in conducting ceremonies. The first group of Indian Brahmans who entered Siam before the founding of Sukhothai as the first capital of Siam (1275 - 1350) popularized Indian beliefs and traditions. During the Sukhothai period Brahman temples already existed. Brahmans conducted ceremonies in the court. The concepts of divine kingship and royal ceremonies are clear examples of the influence of Brahmanism.

The ceremonies of Coronation of Thai kings are practiced more or less in its original form even up to the present reign. The Thai idea that the king is a reincarnation of the Hindu deity Vishnu was adopted from Indian tradition. Though this belief no longer exists today, the

In addition to call each Thai king of the present Chakri dynasty Rama (Rama is a reincarnation of Vishnu) with an ordinal number, such as Rama I, Rama II etc. is still in practice. In the Ayutthaya period (1350-1767), more Indian merchants entered the South of the country by boat as evidenced by the statues of Hindu gods excavated in the South. After the year 1855, the Indians who migrated to Thailand can be classified into three groups according to the religion they believed in, namely, Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism.

Those who practiced Hinduism came from the North and South of India and the Punjab. Few northern Hindus engaged in trade in Thailand. Some who were well educated worked in Indian or British companies while others worked as middlemen between Indian merchants and government agencies or as exporters and importers. The poorer and uneducated ones made a living by selling cow milk or newspapers or by working as servants and watchmen.

The Hindus from the South of India were mostly Tamilians. They became teachers and company officers in Thailand. Those with a good financial status did Jewelry and export business. The temple, which is the center of faith of Thai Hindus, is Maha Uma Devi Temple or Wat Khaek in Silom District in Bangkok.

Those from Punjab traded in textiles in Phahurat and Sampheng Districts. Their religious center is Devasathan or temple in the Giant Swing District, Bangkok. There are many sects in Brahmanism-Hinduism, each having a different supreme god but with the same highest goal to attain salvation. The religion teaches that 'karma', i.e. the totality of a person's actions in his or her former and present life, plays a significant role in the humans' fate, a belief very similar in content to Buddhism. According to this philosophy, both happiness and sorrow in the present life are a consequence of actions in one's past life.

Muslims from India are mixed with those from Persia, the Malay Peninsula and Khmer in Thailand. It is hard to distinguish them from one another. Muslims live mostly in the Southern province bordering Malaysia. Indian Muslims were engaged in trading and agriculture in Thailand. In Bangkok, they mostly inhabited Si Phraya District. Some merchants settled on the west Bank of the Chao Phraya River. Affluent Muslims owned jewelry, stationery and import & export business. The Indian Sikhs migrated from Northwest India, Rajasthan, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and Pakistan-occupied-Punjab. They went to Thailand with the hope of a commercially prosperous life. Today, many of them do textile business in Sampheng and Phahurat Districts. Their religious center is Guru Singh Sabha located in Phahurat. The Sikhs believe in one

supreme God. According to Sikh tradition God's purpose in allowing us to be born into a human form is for the human being to return and become one with God.

Conclusion

Many Indian descendants still zealously retain their customs and traditions, adhering strictly to the religious tenets of their faith. According to the latest statistics of the department of Religious Affairs, there are 21, 125 Sikhs, Brahmans and Hindu is Thailand. Muslims are around 2,977,434 in number. It is unknown though, how many Thai Muslims are of Indian origin.

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